



How Many Expectations of Chinese Mothers Does a Bowl of Congee Carry? Starting from “Congee of Imperial Examined Champion”

Ganhong Chen

School of Finance and Business, Guangdong Meizhou Vocational and Technical College, Meizhou, Guangdong, China.

How to cite this paper: Ganhong Chen. (2024) How Many Expectations of Chinese Mothers Does a Bowl of Congee Carry? Starting from “Congee of Imperial Examined Champion”. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(2), 462-465. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.02.027

Received: February 5, 2024

Accepted: March 3, 2024

Published: March 29, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Ganhong Chen, School of Finance and Business, Guangdong Meizhou Vocational and Technical College, Meizhou, Guangdong, China.

Abstract

The imperial examination system in ancient China utilized rigorous examinations to select officials, thereby broadening the ruling foundation with a focus on fairness and justice, enhancing centralization, and dismantling the dominance of aristocratic families in the bureaucracy. It also promoted a widespread and enduring learning trend, which is beneficial for fostering a learning culture in society. "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" is one of the traditional snacks in the Guangzhou area of Guangdong Province, China. It is said that this congee originated in the Ming Dynasty and was associated with the honor of being the champion in the imperial examination. This congee was developed from related historical stories and legends and is very popular in the Guangzhou area due to its auspicious meaning. In preparation for the college entrance examination in China, Chinese mothers hope their children will be admitted to a top-tier college. They cook or buy a bowl of congee for their children every day, believing it will bring good luck and wishing for their children to excel in the exam.

Keywords

Congee of imperial examined champion, Imperial Examination, Dietary Culture, College Entrance Examination

In ancient China, the imperial examination system selected officials through examinations. The imperial examination lasted for more than 1200 years from its inception until the last imperial examination was held in 1905. Every three years, the imperial examination system was held regularly. The imperial examination was usually divided into local township examinations, central provincial examinations, and palace examinations. The champion in the township examination is "Jieyuan", the champion of the central provincial examination is "Huiyuan", and the champion in the palace examination is "Zhuangyuan" (Xu Yangyang, 2023).

The imperial examination system was disinterested in talent selection that could be adopted in the feudal era. It expanded the social level of talent introduction in feudal countries and absorbed a tremendous amount of people from the middle and lower classes into the dominant hierarchy. Especially during the Tang and Song dynasties, at the initialization of the imperial examination system, it showed a vibrant progressiveness, formatting a golden age for the development of ancient Chinese culture (Su Feng, 2022).

1. Concerns of ancient Chinese mothers

The imperial examination system corroborates that the elected officials have certain levels of talent. Before the emergence of the imperial examination system, China's bureaucratic system was controlled by aristocratic families, and officials were appointed based on clan asylum. Until the Tang Dynasty, the selection of talents was still a great

emphasis on family background (Li Shuo, 2020), and one of the focuses in the Niu-Li (Niu Sengru group vs Li Deyu group). Party debate was whether to rely on background or exam results for selecting officials.

After the Song Dynasty, this problem as Niu-Li Party debate basically did not exist, because even descendants of high-ranking officials had to pass the imperial examination to become officials. Although there were still many imperial examination families in the Ming and Qing dynasties who controlled the imperial examination (the imperial examination clan was one person serving as an official, gathering wealth, and then using the power of their clans to train their descendants to participate the imperial examination), however, the impoverished families still had less opportunity to pass the imperial examination (Ge Zhaoguang, 2021). This guarantees that officials have at least passed the level of learning ability, rather than relying solely on consanguinity to promote official position. At this time, the imperial examination system attracted the attention of Chinese mothers, and they desired that their children could enter the official career through the imperial examination.

The imperial examination system was conducive to social stability. This impact can be seen from two aspects. The first aspect is that the imperial examination serves as a conduit for social mobility, providing opportunities for populates to change their social hierarchy and share governing power through the imperial examination. The imperial examination system absorbed all the social elites into the dominant hierarchy, allowing them to serve the imperial power. On the other aspect, due to the different levels of official status after the imperial examination, some officials and scholars who were unable to serve as officials were distributed across various social hierarchies. These people were known as "magistrates", who assisted local officials in promoting a benevolent policy of the Emperor, maintaining local order, mediating civil disputes, communicating with officials and ordinary people, and were the stabilizers of society (Wang Yuanfen, 2022).

The imperial examination system is conducive to popularizing culture, improving literacy rates, and forming a social atmosphere of respecting teachers and valuing education. Therefore, Chinese mothers attach great importance to the imperial examination system. Although the probability of passing the imperial examination was very low (even base scholars such as "Xiucai" were only one in a hundred), there are still many mothers who flock to it, after all, sons who after passing the exam, will become prosperous and wealthy. So many mothers force their sons to spend their entire lives preparing but only pass the exam for a base scholar as "Xiucai", or even fail the imperial examination. These failures do not have the opportunity to become officials and mostly rely on teaching for a living. Therefore, even in remote rural areas, there are still some scholars who are highly respected locally. Text is the carrier of knowledge dissemination, which is also the reason why Chinese culture can be inherited.

2. Expectations of Modern Chinese Mothers

Chinese mothers attach great importance to their children's education and extreme desire for their children could stand out in college entrance examinations. Therefore, if there are examinees at home before the college entrance examination, during preparation for the examination, Chinese mothers will always try their best to nourish their children either bodily or mentally (Charissa, Christy, & Nan, 2013). In Guangdong Province of China, there is a good meaning of congee called "Congee of an imperial examined champion". Literally, expectations after congee enjoyment then examinees could be the champion of college entrance examination. "Congee of imperial examined champion" is a blessing from Guangdong's mothers for their children. During the college entrance examination, many examinees in Guangdong will have a bowl of the Congee and then go into the examination hall, hoping to get a lucky omen and then win the title of college entrance examination (Chen Tao & Cao Wanghua, 2017).

The "imperial examined champion" or "Congee of imperial examined champion" meant the No.1 scholar in the imperial examination, and only the No.1 scholar was the champion of examinees in the two generations of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The "Congee of imperial examined champion" meant the "Congee" containing good meaning to be "Imperial examined champion", hoping that after having a bowl of "Congee", the examinee could be the No.1 scholar in the imperial examination. As a result, this Congee became a well-known snack in Guangdong province. By this Congee, Chinese mothers were looking forward to their children's success and passing their examinations (Liu Yong, 2005).

3. Chinese Folklores of "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion"

"Congee of imperial examined champion" was named from according to Chinese folklore, it began with the gifted talent named Lun Wenxu (1467-1513) from Guangdong in the Ming Dynasty. When Lun was a child, their whole

family depended on his father lived by ferry service, and his family had just enough food and clothing, therefore he was unable to enroll in a private school. However, his father concentrated on teaching him in his spare time, was able to recite dozens of poems fluently over one year, and also practiced handwriting skillfully, which made him a habit of diligent study with inquisitiveness. When Lun was at the age of seven, he frequently eavesdropped outside the door of a private school in the village, so the teacher was deeply moved and accepted him as a student for free (Jun Feng, 2009).

As Intelligent and studious, at the age of eight or nine, Lun was able to recite poems and make poetic couplets of Chinese literature and came out on top in every examination. Later, in the case of his teacher at a private school ill died of old age, thus Lun dropped out of school, but he was still concentrating on studying the Chinese classics while as a vegetable vendor in the grocery market (Bi Hezi, 2019). The next stall was a congee seller who pitied this younger and cherished the talent of Lun. In the name of vegetables delivering every noon, Lun sent a load of vegetables to the congee seller's house. After that, the congee seller cooked the leftover pork meatballs, pieces of pig forepart small intestine, and pieces of pig liver into boiling congee, and then added some ginger and scallion were served as lunch for him. Every time according to the remains of the pig's main ingredients, the main ingredients of the congee were different, therefore sometimes congee of pork meatballs, sometimes congee of pig forepart small intestine, sometimes congee of pig liver, and sometimes all three (Zhao Zhi, 2013).

In the twelfth year (1499) of Hongzhi's reign of the Ming Dynasty, Lun achieved first place in both the metropolitan examination and the imperial examination, earning the prestigious title of Champion. To show appreciation for the congee seller's kindness, Lun returned to his hometown after the imperial examination and asked the congee seller to prepare a bowl of congee for him, just like in previous years. Since Lun held the title of Imperial Examined Champion at that time, the congee seller did not dare to neglect his request. He cooked three types of pork ingredients—pork meatballs, pieces of pig forepart small intestine, and pieces of pig liver—in one pot of boiling congee. Since this congee was anonymous, Lun named it "Congee for Passing an Imperial Examination," and there was a horizontal inscribed board with the title "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" written on it (Guo Yemin, 2020). After that, the name "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" spread throughout Guangzhou City, the Pearl River Delta region, Hong Kong, and Macau.

The "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" had three main ingredients: pork meatballs, pig forepart small intestine, and pig liver. Due to Cantonese pronunciation, the "ball" sound of pork meatballs was similar to the "Yuan" in the last sound of "Zhuangyuan" (the champion in the palace examination), and the sound of pig forepart small intestine with pig liver was pronounced as "Za-Di," which also sounded like "Ji-Di" (obtaining an official rank). The imperial examiner personally named the champion "Congee for Passing an Imperial Examination," giving this congee the auspicious meaning of "Imperial Examined Champion." In the old days, pig ingredients were too precious to be easily obtained, so "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" became a nourishing tonic for children before examinations in Guangdong province of China.

Another explanation of the "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" suggests that Lin Zhaotang (1786-1872), a champion of the imperial examination from Guangdong during the Qing Dynasty, returned home to worship his ancestors and developed a liking for a congee made with pig liver, pig kidney, and pig tripe, which he consumed daily (Tang Haiyan & Liu Mohan, 2018). One day, an imperial physician who had retired from Guangzhou came to visit Lin. Coincidentally, Lin was eating congee, so he hurriedly invited the old imperial physician to join him for congee. The imperial physician smelled a tempting aroma and asked Lin what kind of congee it was. Lin knew very well that the imperial physician always hoped that his son would be able to earn the honor of participating in the imperial examination and obtaining an official rank by passing it. Lin pointed at the congee and replied respectfully, "Congee for passing an imperial examination." The imperial physician reveled in the auspicious meaning of this congee, so he ate it with Lin (Li Xiangqun, 2016).

In the era of the imperial examination, the champion (number one scholar), the number two, and the number three were the first three places of the imperial examination, which were collectively known as the ranking top three officials. Lin compared three kinds of pig viscera, namely liver, kidney, and tripe, to the ranking top three officials after the imperial examination. After the imperial physician tasted the congee, he returned home and ordered the home chef to make congee according to the method of Lin. The imperial physician made congee for his son who was indeed a championship in the imperial examination. The imperial physician was overjoyed and talked to everybody about the benefits of congee whom he met. Therefore, the "Congee of imperial examined champion" was widely spread (Duan Qiqing, 2018).

4. Stand Out through College Entrance Examination

Although the imperial examination system has been abolished in modern times, the "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion" still holds a special place in the hearts of Chinese mothers due to its rich nutrition, positive connotations, and high expectations for their children. In ancient times, studying was usually done by aristocrats and gentry, and only families above the middle class could afford it. This mentality led Chinese mothers to believe that their children could change their fate by passing examinations through studying. Every year, the college entrance examination takes place in China, marking a crucial stage in the lives of high school students. Before the college entrance examination, Chinese mothers often employ various methods to boost their children's mental well-being. These methods aim to enhance memory, improve cognitive abilities, and help their children excel in the examination without compromising their health. Before the college entrance examination, Chinese mothers prepare a bowl of "Congee of Imperial Examined Champion," which symbolizes their hopes for their children to excel in the exam and distinguish themselves from others.

Funding

2022 Special Project in Key Fields of Ordinary Universities in Guangdong Province, China (Natural Science) (No. 2022ZDZX4127).

References

- Bi, Hezi. (2019). Guangdong champion: Lun Wenxu. *Guangdong Second Classroom (Reading for Junior High school Students in the second half of the month)*, 10, 36-37.
- Charissa, S. L. Cheah., Christy Y. Y. Leung., & Nan, Zhou. (2013). Understanding "Tiger Parenting" Through the Perceptions of Chinese Immigrant Mothers: Can Chinese and U.S. Parenting Coexist? *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 4(1), 30-40.
- Chen, Tao., & Cao, Wanghua. (2017). A group effect of dietary culture—A case study of the congee of imperial examined champion of Guangzhou Wu Zhan Ji. *Culture Journal*, 11, 44-48.
- Duan, Qiqing. (2018). Kindness is rice. *Thinking and Wisdom*, 21, 35.
- Ge, Zhaoguang. (2021). A Study of the New Cultural History of the Ming and Qing Imperial Examinations. *Dushu*, 05, 3-14.
- Guo, Yemin. (2020). Lun Wenxu: the life legend of the champion in Lingnan. *Make Progress Together*, 10, 56-59.
- Huang, Yunhe. (2020). Introduction to "Research on the Group of Late Scholars in the Tang and Song Dynasties". *Journal of Ancient Book Sorting and Research*, 06, 2.
- Jun, Feng. (2009). The congee of imperial examined champion. *Guangdong Second Classroom (Junior High School Edition)*, 12, 12.
- Li, Shuo. (2020). An Analysis of the Imperial Examination System and Party Politics in the Tang Dynasty. *West Journal*, 15, 102-104.
- Li, Xiangqun. (2016). An analysis of Lin Zhaotang's life and calligraphy couplets. *Calligraphy*, 05, 148-151.
- Liu, Yong. (2005). Origin of "Congee of imperial examined champion". *Medical and Health Appliance*, 08, 44.
- Su, Feng. (2022). Relying on core issues to cultivate a sense of coherence—taking the development of the Tang and Song imperial examinations as an example. *History Teaching in Middle School*, 07, 37-39.
- Tang, Haiyan., & Liu, Mohan. (2018). The congee of imperial examined champion. *Sinology on Children*, 10, 20-21.
- Wang, Yuanfen. (2022). Exploring the Evolution and Development of the Ancient Imperial Examination System. *Time Report (Flowing)*, 11, 89-91.
- Xu, Yangyang. (2023). The evolution and historical logic of the ancient Chinese system of selecting officials. *Yanhuang Geography*, 07, 4-6.
- Zhao, Zhi. (2013). The congee of imperial examined champion. *Love·Marriage·Family (Month end·Health Edition)*, 09, 35.