

How Traditional Chinese Elementary Schools Organized Time: Investigating Entry Age, Annual Cycle, and Daily Schedule Through School Rules*

Xiaowei Wu
School of Education
Shanghai Normal University (China)
wuxiaowei@shnu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT: Elementary school rules reflect the evolution of traditional Chinese elementary education and embody rich educational insights regarding childhood learning. Initially established at eight years during the Qin and Han periods, the school entry age was gradually reduced to five or six in some Ming and Qing dynasty elementary school rules. The annual cycle of traditional Chinese elementary education was primarily based on the lunar calendar, and its holiday schedule reflected two key characteristics: breaks during major lunar festivals and adherence to the customary ten-day monthly break system. During the Ming and Qing period, each school day was typically divided into four sessions: early morning reading, forenoon study, afternoon recitation or review, and a relatively short study period before dismissal, with the majority of time devoted to reading, reciting, and writing.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Elementary School Rules; Time Arrangement; Traditional Chinese Elementary School; Children Education; XVII Century.

In traditional Chinese society, the educational philosophy of «nourish the correct nature in childhood» [蒙以养正], which originates from *Books of Changes*[周易], a pre-Qin canonical text, played an instrumental role in shaping approaches to childhood education. Under the guidance of this traditional educational philosophy, Chinese children's education – whether in familial

* This work was supported by Shanghai Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science [Grant Number: A2024009].

or elementary school settings – prioritized the cultivation of moral conduct alongside foundational knowledge acquisition. Regarding the emphasis on elementary education, adults have established certain rules for children's learning and daily behavior. Especially during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing periods, with the development of the traditional school management system, many schools and academies worked on the precepts for pupils' learning and the rules for daily management. Many elementary schools also implemented some rules governing both instructional practices and student management, called elementary school rules[蒙学规].

From the perspective of educational history, current research on elementary school rules in ancient China primarily focuses on two dimensions: the historical evolution and substantive content of these rules¹, as well as prominent examples such as *Pupils' Duties*[弟子职], *What Children Must Know*[童蒙须知], *The Contract of Teaching*[教约], and *Teaching Rules for Community Schools*[社学教条]. Building upon these studies, we may categorize the content of traditional Chinese elementary school rules into three core components: behavioral cultivation of pupils, instructional organization, and institutional administration². One scholar has further proposed that the disciplinary rules in elementary schools during the Ming and Qing dynasties can be categorized into three domains, which are physical training, social etiquette cultivation, and academic discipline³. Regarding children's learning and institutional management in traditional elementary education, the organization of daily, monthly, and annual schedule – what we might now term the «school calendar» – has been insufficiently analyzed in existing research. More significantly, the temporal structures of elementary education, as designed by both teachers and famous educators, embodied pedagogically significant experiential knowledge. These institutionalized schedules require systematic hermeneutic analysis to uncover their underlying cultural values and educational ideologies regarding children education.

The pre-Qin period was the birth period of elementary education in Ancient China. There has been growing discussion among adults about the optimal age for children to enter elementary school and the appropriate learning content for various developmental phases. From the Qin and Han Dynasties, the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Tang and Song Dynasties, it was the development period of elementary education. Zhu Xi's[朱熹] thoughts on children's education during the Song Dynasty and his practice of

¹ X.W. Wu, *On the Rules of Private Schools and Influences upon the Children of Ming and Qing*, «Journal of Hebei Normal University (Educational Science)», n. 5, 2011, pp. 32-34.

² X.W. Wu, *Three Types of Hsüeh-Kuei Tradition in Ancient Chinese Schools*, «University Education Science», n. 1, 2013, pp. 79-84.

³ Q.Z. Liang, *Stability in Change: Enlightenment Education, Charity and Poverty Alleviation from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to Modern China*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2017, p. 16.

establishing educational rules for children exerted profound influence. After the Yuan Dynasty government ordered the establishment of the community schools, an elementary education institution, elementary education in ancient China flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Elementary school rules during the Ming and Qing periods systematically established enrollment age, annual academic cycle, and daily schedule. These rules and regulations not only standardized elementary education but also embodied sophisticated pedagogical philosophies regarding child development.

1. *The enrollment age of traditional Chinese elementary education*

Already in the pre-Qin period, the Guan Zi[管子] has a chapter called *Pupils' Duties*[弟子职], which illustrates the duties and study and especially the ritual of respecting teachers. This chapter was considered one of the earliest school rules in ancient China⁴. At the same time, more systematic consideration was given to children's schooling ages and learning stages. The *Records of Ritual Matters by Dai the Elder*[大戴礼记], in which there is a chapter called Bao Fu [保傅], records that during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the children from royal families started elementary school at the age of eight, where they learnt reading, arithmetic and other skills, as well as some of the etiquette of dealing with people and things. *The Book of Han* [汉书] confirms the view that Children start elementary school, called the Elementary Learning [小学], at the age of eight and move on to the stage of Great Learning [大学], at the age of fifteen. Bangu [班固], the author of *The Book of Han* [汉书], explained the reason for the children's school age in terms of both physical and intelligence in *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall* [白虎通]: children begin to replace their milk teeth at the age of eight and are also capable of truly autonomous behaviour and especially learning; slightly older children at the age of fifteen often have clear ambitions to enter the stage of Great Learning and study the Confucian classics⁵.

According to the agricultural book *The Lunar Months for the Four Types of People* [四民月令], written by Cui Shi [崔寔] during the late Eastern Han dynasty, young children between the ages of nine and fourteen go to elementary schools. Older children and even adults aged between fifteen and twenty moved on to the next stage, where they studied *The Five Classics* [五经]. Some

⁴ M.R. Guo, *The Complete Works of Guo Moruo: Historical Compilation*, 8 vols., Beijing, People's Press, 1982, Vol. 7, 387.

⁵ S.J. Huang, *History of Chinese Education*, Fuzhou, Fujian Education Press, 2011, p. 70.

were fortunate enough to study at the Imperial Academy⁶. At the same time, it was common for teenagers and even adults to be educated in village elementary schools during the slack agricultural season.

During the Wei and Jin dynasties, in order to ensure that their lineage did not diminish, the aristocracy usually established family schools to educate their children, while the children of the common people were generally taught in elementary schools by the educated in the townships. In the subsequent Sui and Tang dynasties, with the development of education, especially the imperial examination system, elementary schools such as town schools [乡学], village schools [村学] and folk family schools [家塾] flourished, and more children were given the opportunity to go to school. By the time of the Song Dynasty, the improvement of the imperial examination system, in which no family background was required to take or pass the imperial examination, further contributed to the educational prosperity. Farmers, craftsmen and businessmen all encouraged their children to study, as studying the Confucian classics was the most likely way for children to pass the imperial examination and become government officials when they grew up.

With the development of elementary education, the elementary school rules are constantly being improved. In the Northern Song dynasty, an official rule for the elementary school, which we can now see in its full text, was called *The Elementary School Rule of Jingzhao Fu* [京兆府小学规] and also applied to children over the age of fifteen, enumerated the admission procedures for pupils, the selection and responsibilities of senior pupils, teaching content, three types of learning requirements and standards of pupils behaviour⁷. Most importantly, Zhuxi [朱熹], the famous philosopher and educator of the Southern Song Dynasty, summarized the children's educational thoughts of previous dynasties and proposed the systematic theory of children's education. In accordance with the division between the Great Learning [大学] and the Elementary Learning [小学] stages based on ages eight and fifteen, he clearly outlined the learning content and objectives for these two stages. The aim of the Elementary Learning [小学] stage is to teach children how to do the things of life and society politely, and then to understand the reasons and principles of things during the Great Learning [大学] stage. In order to achieve these aims, he wrote the famous rule called *What Children Must Know* [童蒙须知] for elementary schools and even for every child.

Zhu Xi [朱熹] generalized the outline at the beginning of the rule: «children's education is acquired successively from the knowledge of clothes, hats, shoes, speaking, walking, sanitation, hygiene, reading, handwriting, and many trifles.

⁶ (Han) S. Cui, *Editing and interpreting the Lunar Months for the Four Types of People*, Beijing, Agricultural Press, 1981, p. 2.

⁷ Xi'an Beilin Museum, *The Elementary School Rule of Jingzhao Fu*, <<https://www.beilin-museum.com/INDEX.PHP?m=home&c=View&a=index&aid=3417>> (last access: 12.06.2025).

All these things are listed one by one as follows, which is called *What Children Must Know*⁸. He then illustrated that in the initial stage of elementary school and even children education, attention should be paid to these details of life. The first reason is to make it easier for children to understand and act, which is in accordance with the laws of children's physical and mental development. The second is to take the training of behaviour and etiquette in everyday life as the basis for the cultivation of moral qualities, which has long been the guiding principle and important content of many elementary school rules⁹ in ancient China and the child education ideas that have influenced modern Chinese society. Since then, the aim and content of the Elementary Learning stage, which includes elementary education, and the interface with the next stage of the Great Learning, have been clearly defined. As Wei Xiao [魏校], one of the education commissioners of Guangdong district in the Ming dynasty, wrote in the rule for community schools, which were a type of elementary school from the Yuan to the Qing dynasties: «in ancient times, when children entered elementary school at the age of eight, they would first learn the habits of moral behavior, then learn to read and write, and after being imbued with ritual and music, they would firmly believe in Confucian ethics and morals and be able to put them into practice. When they moved on to the next stage of the Great Learning, they were often expected to become a moral person»¹⁰.

It should be noted that from the Tang and Song dynasties onward, when more people became eligible to take the imperial examinations – including children who could participate in the Child Scholar Examination¹¹ – most families placed greater emphasis on their children's literacy and even mastery of Confucian classics. This led to an earlier start to children's elementary education. As one historian of Chinese childhood has observed, the average age for instructing children in foundational knowledge and skills, such as numeracy, literacy, or agricultural training, demonstrated a secular trend of decreasing by approximately one year per century. An educational activity typically

⁸ (Song) X. Zhu, *What Children Must Know*, in Id. *The Complete Works of Zhu Zi (Revised)*, 27 vols., Shanghai, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, Hefei, Anhui Education Publishing House, 2002, Vol. 13, p. 371.

⁹ Such as *Rules of the Thatched Hall* 草堂学则, written by Zhang Yue 张岳; *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools* 申明社学条谕, written by Wei Xiao 魏校; *Convention of Yixue* 义学约, written by Shen li 沈鲤; *The Essentials for Community Schools* 社学要略, written by Lü Kun 吕坤; *The Rules for Home Schools* 家塾规, written by Liu Zongzhou 刘宗周, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, pp. 1224-1235.

¹⁰ (Ming) X. Wei, *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools*, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1229.

¹¹ See Y.K. Jin, *The Children's Section of the Imperial Examination and Children's Education in the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties*, «Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences)», n. 4, 2002, pp. 39-46. S.D. Wang, *The Imperial Examination of Childhood in the Song Dynasty*, «Journal of Literacy, History and Philosophy», n. 6, 2002, pp. 114-118.

undertaken by nine-year-olds during the Song period might become standard for seven-year-olds in the Yuan, six-year-olds in the Ming, and surprisingly, four-to-five-year-olds by the Qing era¹².

Lu Shiyi [陆世仪], who lived during the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties, believed that children could receive outside guidance and elementary education as early as the age of five or six, according to their mental and physical development, as opposed to children in the pre-Qin period who entered elementary school at the age of eight¹³. Typically, in the 17th century in the Jiangnan region, a new technique for teaching young children to read emerged: individual characters were written on blocks of wood or paper, and young children of three or four years of age were expected to recognise them. «This method advanced the beginning age for children to learn to read by approximately two years»¹⁴. In *The Method of Good Guidance by Parents and Teachers* [父师善诱法], Tang Biao [唐彪] suggested that parents could use the technique to teach Chinese characters at home to children as young as three or four, when their speech is clear and their minds are beginning to develop. If intelligent children can recognise one or two thousand Chinese characters within a year, they can enter elementary school at the age of five or six¹⁵. Li Xin'an [李新庵] and Chen Yi [陈彝] developed a more detailed elementary learning plan in *Re-establishing Good Rules for Learning* [重订训学良规]: when children are four or five years old, they are first taught Chinese characters, with a maximum of three thousand and a minimum of two thousand. When they are a little older, they are taught the *Three-Character Classic* [三字经], *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child* [弟子规] and *Elementary Learning in Rhyme* [小学韵语]. They are taught the flat and slant tones of Chinese and how to write couplets at the age of seven or eight. In this way, within a period of three to five years, one can gain a simple understanding of poetry, prose and the Confucian classics with textual explanations¹⁶.

As one history researcher commented: «early enrolment is probably a possible choice for those children with better subjective and objective conditions, whose families have a high level of education, whose parents pay attention to

¹² See B.Z. Xiong, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 82; B.Z. Xiong, *Paediatrics and Enlightenment: The Path of Continuity in Modern Chinese Society*, Guilin, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2021, p. 258.

¹³ (Ming) S.Y. Lu, *A compilation of Lu Futing's Speculative Records*, Beijing, The Commercial Press, 1936, p. 1.

¹⁴ Y. Li, *Character Recognition: A New Method of Learning to Read in Late Imperial China*, «Late Imperial China», n. 2, 2012, pp. 1-39.

¹⁵ (Qing) B. Tang, *The Method of Good Guidance by Parents and Teachers*, in Z. Xu, X.M. Wang (edd.), *The Essential for Elementary Learning*, Taiyuan, Shanxi Education Press, 1991, p. 203.

¹⁶ (Qing) X.A. Li, Y. Chen, *Re-establishing Good Rules for Learning*, in Z. Xu, X.M. Wang (edd.), *The Essential for Elementary Learning*, Taiyuan, Shanxi Education Press, 1991, p. 119.

education and whose children themselves are intelligent»¹⁷. And most interestingly, there is another explanation for the age at which children start school that some researchers have not noticed. Tang Biao [唐彪] went on to say in *The Method of Good Guidance by Parents and Teachers* [父师善诱法] that «people are often influenced by the custom that seven and eight are two numbers associated with doing things incoherently when children get old [七颠八倒], and have recently made the mistake of waiting until children are nine years old before sending them to elementary school». This Han Chinese child-rearing custom, which was prevalent in some areas, affects the age at which children enter in elementary school, with children starting school at five or six rather than seven or eight¹⁸. It was at least under the dual influence of educational development and childrearing custom that the school age was brought forward to five or six in Ming and Qing society.

2. *The annual cycle of traditional Chinese elementary education*

In modern education systems, the «academic calendar» is a familiar and taken-for-granted concept. However, this term is not entirely applicable to elementary schooling in ancient China. Except for a few children from royal families, the nobility, and wealthy households often attended elementary school for most of the year. «The establishment of elementary schools was largely unstandardized, resulting in highly flexible operational arrangements»¹⁹.

The lunar calendar is used for all aspects of traditional Chinese social life. It corresponds to the 24 solar terms relating to farming and is also used in elementary school education. During the Eastern Han dynasty, children of commoners aged nine to fourteen were enrolled in elementary school in the first month of the lunar year, before the farming season started and the inkstone water no longer froze. This is mentioned in the agricultural book *The Lunar Months for the Four Types of People* [四民月令]. Children can learn to read, write and count, and then read *The Classic of Filial Piety* [孝经] and *The Analects of Confucius* [论语]. They also started elementary school in the eleventh month of the lunar year, after the farming season had ended. Interestingly, when it gets cold, the water in the inkstone can freeze, affecting the way children use ink to write Chinese characters. This means that they can

¹⁷ H.T. Wang, *Early Education, Parallel Couplets, and the Formation of the Literati Personality in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, «The Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology», n. 2, 2023, pp. 369-427.

¹⁸ D.B. Ye, B.A. Wu (edd.), *Dictionary of Chinese Customs*, Shanghai, Shanghai Lexicographic Publishing House, 1990, p. 203.

¹⁹ X.F. Chi, *Study on Elementary Education in Ancient China*, Shanghai, Shanghai Education Press, 1998, p. 342.

read *The Classic of Filial Piety* [孝经], *The Analects of Confucius* [论语], pithy formula for calculation and primers over and over again²⁰. The fact that most children started elementary school during the off-farming season is reflected in the name of a particular type of elementary school: «winter school». During the Southern Song dynasty, Luyou [陆游] wrote a poem mentioning rural families sending their children to winter school to learn literacy textbooks such as rhyming verses and *The Hundred Family Surnames* [百家姓] in the tenth month of the lunar calendar when farming work was not in season²¹.

For rural children, starting elementary school at a time when there is no farm work does not affect the family and prevents idleness. By the Yuan Dynasty, the government ordered the establishment of community schools, enabling rural children to attend school when there was no farm work to be done. The rules of town schools and community schools during the Ming Dynasty show that a three-month study period was very popular in rural areas. For instance, Huang Zuo [黄佐], Guangxi provincial education commissioner in the Ming dynasty, instituted a set of rules and etiquette standards for town schools. It is mentioned that town schools operated between the tenth and twelfth lunar months to coincide with the farming off-season, preventing labor shortages in rural families²². As Lü Kun [吕坤] wrote in *The Essentials for Community Schools* [社学要略]: Local officials should inform the public that children should be sent to community schools once they reach school age. If a family is poor or busy, their children can attend school for three months from the tenth month of the lunar calendar and then return home. If they persist in this way for three years, even if they cannot take the imperial examination, they can still pursue various occupations in the future and become individuals who adhere to Confucian ethics. This is also the main reason why community schools are established in rural areas²³.

The length of the school year and how semesters are arranged are important indicators of the persistence and standardisation of elementary education. The Ming and Qing dynasties are considered to have been the most developed period for elementary education in ancient China²⁴. Examining the school

²⁰ (Han) S. Cui, *Editing and interpreting the Lunar Months for the Four Types of People*, cit., p. 2, p. 104.

²¹ Z.L. Qian, Y.Z. Ma (edd.), *Commentary and Annotation of the Complete Works of Lu You 4: An Annotated Edition of Jiannan's Poetry Manuscripts*, 13 vols., Hangzhou, Zhejiang Education Press, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 9.

²² (Ming) Z. Huang, *The Taiquan Guide to Village Rituals, Vol. III, Community Schools*, in H.S. Lou (ed.), *A collection of Admonitions for Clans in Ancient China 4 (The Ming Dynasty)*, 12 vols., Hangzhou, Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House, 2017, Vol. 2, pp. 2057-2058.

²³ (Ming) K. Lv, *The Essentials for Community Schools*, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1233.

²⁴ D.C. Zhou, *Research on the History of Chinese Education (The Ming and Qing Dynasties)*, Shanghai, East China Normal University Press, 1995, p. 188.

rules from that period reveals that a study period of almost a year was also common in some elementary schools during the Ming dynasty. This trend became even more prevalent during the Qing dynasty. As Wei Xiao [魏校] mentioned in *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools* [申明社学条谕] for the Guangdong district, school starts after the 15th day of the first lunar month each year and ends at the close of the lunar year. On the fifth, twelfth, twentieth and twenty-seventh days of the lunar month, children can practise archery before noon²⁵. Shen Li [沈鲤], a Ming dynasty official and Neo-Confucian scholar who lived a little later than Wei Xiao [魏校], wrote a rule for charitable schools [义学], a traditional Chinese school offering free education to children²⁶. In *The Charitable School Contract* [义学约], the first and fifth days of the lunar month are the days for month examination and grading, while the fifth day of the twelfth lunar month is reserved for the annual examination. Tuition fees are paid four times a year. The second month of each quarter, that is, the second, fifth, eighth and eleventh lunar months, teachers receive their tuition fees on the fifteenth day of these four months²⁷. The time arrangement for the start and end of the charitable schools and community schools, the monthly learning content and examination schedule, and the time for paying tuition fees of the charitable school, all these indicate the institutional design of elementary schools in the Ming Dynasty.

Some of the rules for elementary schools in the Qing Dynasty were more detailed and flexible, particularly with regard to the arrangement of holiday. The yearly schedule of elementary schools was also closely linked to traditional agricultural life and the lunar calendar. In the early days of the Qing Dynasty, an elementary school teacher named Chen Fangsheng [陈芳生] wrote in *The Rules for Moralization and Enlightenment* [训蒙条例]: «The school year starts on the 15th day of the first lunar month and there is a holiday on the 25th day of the twelfth lunar month. Worshipping the ancestors, sweeping the graves and paying the land tax with the family takes about ten days. There are 11 months of school and 10 months of classes every year»²⁸. He went on

²⁵ (Ming) X. Wei, *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools*, cit., Vol. 2, pp. 1229-1231.

²⁶ In many Qing dynasty documents, the terms ‘community school’ and ‘charitable school’ were used interchangeably, with the former referring to Ming-era elementary institutions and the latter to Qing-era institutions. However, this oversimplification obscures fundamental differences in their institutional nature. Unlike the state-sponsored community schools, charitable schools were both more genuinely local in character and fundamentally philanthropic in purpose. See Q.Z. Liang, *Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtze Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in E.A. Benjamin, A. Woodside (edd.), *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*, Beijing, Jiuzou Press, 2023, p. 352, p. 372.

²⁷ (Ming) L. Shen, *The Charitable School Contract*, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1233.

²⁸ (Qing) F.S. Chen, *The Rules for Moralization and Enlightenment*, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chi-*

to explain: «due to their lively nature, children can easily become restless and unable to sit quietly and read after a few days if they go to festivals and other events outside of school with family and friends for a day. This is why it is important to arrange an almost uninterrupted learning process for children»²⁹. This rule clearly defines the duration of semesters and holidays, emphasising the importance of minimising learning interruptions based on children's psychological characteristics.

In the 19th century, Yang Wending [杨文鼎] wrote a rule for free elementary schools in the Luanzhou district which included a more detailed arrangement of holidays. The school year begins on the twentieth day of the first lunar month and ends on the fifth day of the twelfth lunar month. According to tradition, the Qingming, Zhongyuan and Hanyi festivals each have a one-day holiday. The Dragon Boat and Mid-Autumn festivals each have a five-day holiday. The City God's birthday and the temple fair each have a three-day holiday. The hottest days of the sixth lunar month, known as the "canicular days", are a five-day holiday. However, there are no holidays when the days of Chinese opera performances or other recreational activities are held³⁰. Moreover, according to a rule for free elementary schools in eastern Guangdong during the Qing dynasty, teachers' working hours are from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, as is the time when children attend school. The school has three days off per month, based on the ancient practice of people having a day of rest and bathing³¹ every ten days³². At Zongwen Free School in Hangzhou, as well as the three days off each month, there is an additional day off each year for the Qingming Festival, the beginning of summer, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Hanyi Festival, and the winter solstice. It should also be noted that pupils can be requested to grant leave for important matters as appropriate³³.

Chen Weiyan [陈惟彦], a late Qing dynasty statesman whose life bridged late imperial and early republican China, emphasized the pedagogical neces-

nese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1502.

²⁹ (Qing) F.S. Chen, *The Rules for Moralization and Enlightenment*, cit., Vol. 2, p. 1502.

³⁰ W.D. Yang, *The Regular Rules for Free Schools*, in X.F. Chi, *Study on Elementary Education in Ancient China*, Shanghai, Shanghai Education Press, 1998, p. 345.

³¹ This is the ancient Chinese system for officials' holidays. In the Han Dynasty, there was a five-day break for bathing and rest, which was changed to a ten-day break in the Tang Dynasty, commonly known as the ten-day monthly break. See Y. Jinding (ed.), *Dictionary of Chinese Cultural History*, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House, 1987, p. 455.

³² *Rules on Establishing Charitable School for Children in Eastern Guangdong*, in M.Y. Gu(ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1474.

³³ *Rules of the Zongwen Charitable School*, in M.Y. Gu(ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 1476.

sity of periodic rest in *Elementary School Rule* [幼学规]: «*Record on the Subject of Education* from *The Book of Rites* [礼记·学记] emphasizes that learning should be balanced with rest, just as a bowstring cannot remain constantly taut without relaxation. Effective learning requires proper temporal regulation and avoidance of exhaustion»³⁴. Of particular interest is his mention of Sunday rest as a cross-occupational institution in Western societies. Chen Weiyan [陈惟彦] uniquely witnessed the interchange between Eastern and Western social traditions. His comparative observations revealed that both systems – whether China’s rhythmically-structured school breaks or the West’s institutionalized vacation periods – shared fundamental commitments to sustaining individuals’ physiological and psychological well-being.

3. *The daily schedule of traditional Chinese elementary education*

Drawing from the previous dynasty’s educational theories and practices, scholars and teachers refined the sequence of learning content and even established daily schedule for children during the Ming and Qing dynasties. A historian summarised the learning content of the community schools during the Ming Dynasty: «textual learning done right led to morality, if ritual was taught. The three components were almost always present, but the emphasis shifted»³⁵. Another historian divided the day at an elementary school in Ming and Qing China into four parts: morning reading before breakfast, a pre-meridian period, a post-meridian period and a relatively short study period before dismissal³⁶. By combining the dimensions of timing and learning content to analyze elementary school rules, we can more clearly observe the daily timetable structure and are inspired to consider why and how these learning contents are arranged.

One of the most famous elementary school rules, as far-reaching as Zhu Xi’s *What Children Must Know* [童蒙须知], is *The Contract of Teaching* [教约], written by Wang Shouren [王守仁], an important ideologist in the history of Chinese education. In 1518, He served as an official in Nangan and issued the rule for all community schools, which generalised the learning contents of a school day: the teacher first asks about the pupils’ moral practice in the family and outside of school, then the pupil reads and recites a book, followed

³⁴ Y.H. Jun, Y.H. Jiao, *Essentials of Traditional Chinese Education: Teaching Methods*, 3 vols., Beijing, Democracy and Construction Press, 2015, Vol. 2, p. 473.

³⁵ S. Schneewind, *Community Schools and the State in Ming China*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 96.

³⁶ Q.Z. Liang, *Stability in Change: Enlightenment Education, Charity and Poverty Alleviation from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to Modern China*, Shanghai, Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2017, p. 24.

by ritual practice or schoolwork, then the pupil reads the book repeatedly and the teacher explains the book, and finally the pupil reads a poem with expression. It is worth noting that he has used almost the same length of article to illustrate the requirements for the learning contents. From an educator's perspective, it can be seen that reading, explaining, and reciting books, practicing rituals, and reading poetry are equally important for a child. As mentioned above, from the Song dynasty onwards, reciting and understanding the Confucian classics became increasingly important if one wanted to take the imperial examination. Nevertheless, Wang Shouren [王守仁] emphasised the principle of gradual progress in children's learning. As he pointed in *The Contract of Teaching* [教约], «considering the pupil's capacity, if they can comprehend two hundred Chinese characters, give them only one hundred. This ensures their mental energy remains ample, sparing them the weariness of overload and fostering the joy of genuine understanding»³⁷. Teachers do not require a fast-learning pace from pupils, but rather that pupils do not feel bored and have enough energy to master the classics and gain meaningful insights. As for practicing ritual and reading poetry, they can preserve the innocent nature of children, so that they love to learn without getting tired and having no leisure time to spend on unorthodox things. «Intellectual discipline was not as harsh as one might think»³⁸. Poems and stories can enrich children's learning and, most importantly, the daily pace of study is not stressful for children if the principles of progressive teaching and learning are followed.

Wei Xiao 魏校 and Huang Zuo 黄佐, mentioned above, both referred to the children's specific daily schedule in the rules they had written for the elementary schools. A rural school day divided into three learning periods by Huang Zuo 黄佐: reading in the morning, writing, math or poetry in the pre-meridian, and revision and ritual in the post-meridian.³⁹ As Table 1 shows, Wei Xiao 魏校 also mentioned the elementary primers, specific learning contents even the frequency in *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools* 申明社学条谕, which corresponded to the daily schedule of the three learning periods in the rural schools of Guangxi district.

³⁷ (Ming) S.R. Wang, *The Contract of Teaching*, in X.C. Meng (ed.), *Selected Writings on Education in Ancient China*, Beijing, People's Education Press, 2003, p. 288.

³⁸ Q.Z. Liang, *Stability in Change : Enlightenment Education, Charity and Poverty Alleviation from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to Modern China*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2017, p. 22.

³⁹ (Ming) Z. Huang, *The Taiquan Guide to Village Rituals, Vol. III, Community Schools*, cit., pp. 2057-2058.

Ta. 1. The learning period and content in the community schools of Guangdong District⁴⁰.

Learning Period	Learning Content
Morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ritual practice – Reading books
Pre-meridian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Explain <i>Xiaoxue</i>小学, <i>Jinsilu</i>近思录 and <i>the Four Books</i>四书 – Write <i>Book of Poetry</i>诗经 and other regulated verse and quatrains, including reading aloud or singing with expression
Post-meridian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Six Types of Chinese Characters六书 – The Nine Chapters (on the Mathematical Art) 九数 – Ritual practice – Playing The Chinese Zither

In *The Charitable School Contract* [义学约] written by Shen Li [沈鲤], the first part sets out detailed learning content and methods, as can be seen in Table 2, while the second part deals with the management of the school, including class duty, regular examination, reward and punishment standards, and tuition fees. The children arrive at school in the early hours of the morning and spend the majority of the day reading and writing, which includes reading and reciting Confucian classics, practicing calligraphy, learning to write couplets and eight-legged essays. Under this approach, children can learn at their own pace, progressing from elementary primers to profound Confucian classics. However, this learning approach also reflects an essential characteristic of traditional Chinese educational thought – the emphasis on learning rather than teaching⁴¹. Traditional Chinese elementary education focused primarily on children’s relatively independent reading, memorization, and writing. When children of different ages, but all under the age of 15, studied in the same space with only one teacher, the teachers’ role in explicating the classics and fostering interaction was often overlooked.

⁴⁰ (Ming) X. Wei, *Rules for Teachers and Pupils in Lingnan District*; (Ming) X. Wei, *Emphasis on The Rules of Community Schools*, in M.Y. Gu (ed.), *Chinese Education Compilation: Educational Systems of All Dynasties*, 2 vols., Wuhan, Hubei Education Press, 2015, Vol. 2, pp. 1228-1230.

⁴¹ C.X. Du, *The Discourse System of Education with ‘Learning (Xue)’ at Its Core: Revisiting the Phenomena of Prioritizing ‘Learning’ in Traditional Chinese Educational Thought from a Linguistic Perspective*, «Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)», n. 3, 2010, pp. 75-80.

Tab. 2. The elementary learning period and content in the charitable schools⁴².

Learning Period	Learning Content
Before the breakfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritual practice - Explain a part of a book and correct characters and pronunciation - Explain an item in <i>Xiaoxue</i>小学 - Read out the part of a book that the pupils have just learnt
Pre-meridian and post-meridian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Calligraphy practice using the calligraphy works of <i>The One Thousand Character Primer</i>千字文 - Couplets writing and Eight-part Essay - Recitation of part of a book from today's lesson
Before after school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tell one story about loyalty, filial piety, and hard study - Read poem with feeling three times (appreciate and recite on the second day)

At the end of the Ming dynasty, Liu Zongzhou [刘宗周], a Confucian master, also wrote a more explicit timetable for pupils in *The Elementary School Contract* [小学约]. From Table 2 and Table 3 we can tell that a relatively short period of study before after school, during which the children can listen to moral stories and read poetry, has become a regular routine. The choice of this time and such a short period of time takes into account the relatively tired state of most children after a day of study, and their psychological state of expecting the lesson to be over as soon as possible. In addition, both moral stories and poetry reading, these relatively interesting learning contents, can preserve the innocent nature of children, as Wang Shouren [王守仁] stated in *The Contract of Teaching* [教约]⁴³. Reading poetry, in particular, can help children to expend the energy they usually spend in jumping or shouting, and release the pent-up emotions and unhappiness, as Wang Shouren [王守仁] pointed out in another famous article focusing on children's education, called *General Principles for Teaching Children: Advices to Liu Bosong and Other Instructors* [训蒙大意示教读刘伯颂等]⁴⁴.

⁴² (Ming) L. Shen, *The Charitable School Contract*, cit., Vol. 2, pp. 1232-1233.

⁴³ (Ming) S.R. Wang, *The Contract of Teaching*, cit., p. 288.

⁴⁴ (Ming) S.R. Wang, *General Principles for Teaching Children: Advices to Liu Bosong and Other Instructors*, in X.C. Meng (ed.), *Selected Writings on Education in Ancient China*, Beijing, People's Education Press, 2003, p. 286.

Tab. 3. Timetable of elementary schools in *The Elementary School Contract*⁴⁵.

Learning Period	Learning Content
Arrival at school in the morning	– Recite the books studied yesterday and recently – Read the part of the book to be studied today 20 to 30 times
After Breakfast	– Read thoroughly the part of the book to be studied today
From 9 a.m. to 11 a.m	– Pupil take turns to explain the part of the book they are studying today. If they come across something they do not understand, the teacher will explain it.
After the explaining of the book	– Calligraphy practice
After the noon	– Recite the books studied recently
Afternoon	– Recite the books studied today – Read the part of the book to be studied tomorrow 20 times
At dusk	– Tell two stories about loyalty, filial piety, and hard study

Based on the four aforementioned Ming dynasty elementary school rules, the daily schedule of elementary school become more clearly discernible. Except for the morning, when pupils have a relatively clear time slot for book explanations, other periods are vaguely referred to as “noon”, “afternoon”, “dusk” and so on. This imprecise time arrangement stems partly from the fact that pupils of different ages are grouped together in the school, but it also reflects adults’ attitudes toward the daily learning process. As one scholar astutely observed: «In traditional agrarian societies, where time had not yet undergone full socialization, people’s habits of time usage, measurement, and observance remained relatively fluid and imprecise»⁴⁶. This phenomenon manifested in daily scheduling of elementary education, yet such temporal fluidity embodied positive pedagogical significance. Time subtly regulated and harmonized childrens’ learning process and life pace. The unhurried rhythm of school life aligned with children’s developmental needs. «Children’s instruction should not be forced or rushed, but cultivated through sustained practice – day upon day, month upon month, year upon year. Neither squandering time nor rushing impatiently, true understanding emerges from steady perseverance, thus awakening the child’s wisdom and vitality»⁴⁷. The organization

⁴⁵ (Ming) Z.Z. Liu, *The Elementary School Contract*. in W.X. Chen, *Chronology of the Imperial Examination System and Literature in the Ming Dynasty*, 3 vols., Wuhan, Wuhan University Press, 2009, Vol. 2, p. 3057.

⁴⁶ T.W. Wang, S.M. Wang, *Cultural Differences and the Conflict of Time Perception*, «Academic Research», n. 7, 2008, pp. 36-40.

⁴⁷ (Qing) X.G. Cui, *The Instruction for Children*, in X.G. Qu, *Compilation of Historical*

of elementary learning, including the learning period and content, had a direct influence on elementary schools in the Qing dynasty, until “world time”⁴⁸, such as the Western school week system and class schedule⁴⁹, was introduced in late imperial China.

Conclusion

As early as the Qin and Han periods, people established the school enrollment age for children at eight years old and divided learning stages into ages eight and fifteen. This reflects people’s basic observations of children’s physical and mental development. Under multiple influences, including the expansion of elementary education institutions, growing accessibility of the imperial examinations, advancements in literacy teaching methods, and the influence of folk customs, the typical school entry age was gradually lowered to five or six in some elementary school rules. When conditions allowed, some children even began receiving literacy instruction at home as early as three or four years old. Children from different families have varying learning foundations, particularly in literacy levels, and their educational goals usually differ accordingly. By age 15, some would advance higher studies to continue mastering the Confucian classics, while others would prepare to enter various occupations to earn a living. And the earlier enrollment age, to a certain extent, reflects how social changes – particularly the imperial examinations – influenced life rhythms, especially the timing of when one begins formal education.

How to choose appropriate times and how to use time effectively are issues that educators must consider seriously. In traditional China, the annual cycle of elementary education was closely synchronized with agricultural cycle and cultural tradition. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the exception of winter schools that operated on three-month terms, most elementary schools maintained an eleven-month instructional year. Schools structured their holiday periods around major lunar festivals and the customary monthly ten-day break system, which was close to an “agricultural time”.

Zhu Xi’s *What Children Must Know* [童蒙须知] and Wang Shouren’s *The*

Materials on Modern Chinese Education: Education During the Opium War Period, Shanghai, Shanghai Education press, 2007, p. 390.

⁴⁸ ‘World time’ means a popular time modality that China has to accept, even though it does not initially belong to China. See J.L. Huang, *History, Body and the State: The Formation of Body in Modern China, 1875-1937*, Beijing, New Star Press, 2006, p. 148.

⁴⁹ See L. Y. Zhang, *The Change of Timetable in Schools*, Master Thesis, Department of Pedagogy (Supervisor: J.J. Wang), Shanghai, East China Normal University, a.a. 2005-2008. L.Y. Zhang, *The History of the Formation of School Week System in Modern China*, «Peking University Education Review», n. 4, 2022, pp. 140-158.

Contract of Teaching [教约] remain two of the most influential elementary school rules from traditional China. Zhu Xi [朱熹] established detailed regulations for children's daily life, studies, moral conduct, and etiquette, providing a model for the content of many subsequent primary school rules. From a temporal perspective, Wang Shouren [王守仁] organized both the learning content and sequence for children's daily schedule in elementary school. To address the issue of people focusing primarily on children's recitation and memorization of Confucian classics under the imperial examination system's influence, Wang Shouren emphasized that poetry, ritual practice, and reading Confucian classics were equally important. Drawing on another well-known elementary education guideline, *General Principles for Teaching Children: Advices to Liu Bosong and Other Instructors* [训蒙大意示教读刘伯颂等], he argued that both teaching and learning should follow a progressive principle, stressing that elementary education should align with children's nature and nurture their aspirations.

The elementary school rule makers established a sequential and progressive learning process for children, progressing from literacy and elementary primers to Confucian classics, and from cultivating daily behavioral habits to developing moral character. In many subsequent elementary school rules during the Ming and Qing dynasties, children of different ages followed similar annual cycles and daily schedules. Each school day was typically divided into four sessions: early morning reading, forenoon study, afternoon recitation or review, and a relatively short study period before dismissal. Comparing the learning content across these four periods reveals that children spent most of their time reading, reciting, and writing. This not only reflects how the content and methods of imperial examinations influenced elementary school daily schedules but also demonstrates the characteristic teaching approach of traditional Chinese elementary education, which emphasized mainly children's memorization and recitation rather than teachers' explanations. «The reading stages of a child, the sequence of studying Confucian classics, and daily lessons often exhibit significant flexibility depending on regional, social class, and familial differences. Moreover, they are heavily influenced by various unpredictable factors, such as the elementary school teachers' competence, peer influence, and family changes»⁵⁰. In the annual, monthly, and daily schedules outlined in elementary school rules, children could progress at a "personalized pace". However, this approach posed challenges to their learning foundation, motivation, and particularly their self-directed learning abilities.

⁵⁰ Y. Lu, *From "Recitation" to "Lecture"?: "Lesenrevolution" in Late Qing China*, «The Qing History Journal», n. 4, 2018, pp. 102-122.

