

Research on the Evolution of China's Master's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy from the Perspective of Historical Institutionalism

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Abstract: This study analyzes the evolution of China's master's recommendation exemption policy since 1949, highlighting its transition from singular selection criteria to a diversified evaluation system. The policy's development is analyzed through the theoretical lens of historical institutionalism, examining influences from macro-level national strategies, meso-level institutional path dependencies, and micro-level actor networks. The research aims to reveal the underlying logic of these policy changes by dividing the evolution into four distinct historical stages: the embryonic stage, the development stage, the maturation stage, and the strengthening stage. The findings indicate that the policy's trajectory is shaped by the interplay of the macro socio-political environment, self-reinforcing mechanisms of path dependence, and the dynamic interactions among key stakeholders, including the government, universities, and students. The study concludes that China's graduate recommendation exemption policy has evolved through a process of gradual, path-dependent institutional change, continuously adapting to serve national strategic goals for talent cultivation.

Keywords: master's graduate, recommendation policy, policy changes, historical institutionalism

1. Construction of the Theoretical Analytical Framework of Historical Institutionalism

1.1 The Theoretical Connotation of Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism, originating from Steinmo Sven et al.(1992)[1], integrates rational choice and organizational institutionalism. It synthesizes macro-level context, meso-level path dependence, and micro-level interactions, overcoming rational choice's micro-level focus and organizational theory's macro-level constraints to form a robust analytical framework[2].

1.2 Construction of the Policy Analysis Framework

Based on the theoretical framework of historical institutionalism, this study distills three core elements—macro-level deep structure, meso-level path dependence, and micro-level actor networks—to construct a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the evolution of China's Master's Student Recommendation Exemption system.

1.2.1 Macro-level Deep Structure

The macro-level deep structure is defined as the broad contextual environment—encompassing socio-economics, politics, and culture—within which institutions are embedded and by which they are influenced[3]. Institutions are directly shaped by socio-economic factors. A framework for operation and adjustment is provided by political institutions. The perception and acceptance of institutions are subtly influenced by cultural factors, thereby affecting implementation outcomes. Therefore, a comprehensive consideration of these fundamental factors is required when institutional change is examined.

1.2.2 Meso-level Path Dependence

The concept of path dependence, which was introduced into institutional studies by Douglass C. North, is primarily shaped by four key factors: set-up costs, learning effects, coordination effects, and adaptive expectations[4]. This theory reveals that policy change is not an isolated event but is deeply rooted in historical contexts. A path for subsequent policy adjustments is often established by early policy designs, making it difficult to alter. This study will examine how this path-dependent effect influences the trajectory and direction of policy change.

1.2.3 Micro-level Network of Actors

Historical institutionalism frames institutions as temporary equilibria from multi-actor interactions, where unequal power distribution shapes change. This study analyzes the government, universities, and students within China's graduate recommendation exemption policy. The framework identifies key historical junctures, examines path dependence's influence, and reveals the underlying adjustment logic by integrating the external environment with actor interactions.

2. The Historical Evolution of China's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy

2.1 The Embryonic Stage of the Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy (1951–1984)

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, graduate education began developing within a rebuilding higher education system. The 1951 "Measures for Summer Recruitment of Trainees and Postgraduates" established a preliminary recommendation mechanism through a multi-tiered review process. This shifted in 1955 when the "Provisional Regulations for Postgraduates of the Chinese Academy of Sciences" mandated entrance exams, limiting exemptions to specific circumstances. The 1958 "Great Leap Forward" simplified admissions to direct recommendation, compromising quality until the 1963 "Provisional Regulations (Draft)" restored exam requirements. The system was suspended during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

2.2 The Development Stage of the Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy (1985–2005)

In 1985, China's graduate education system established a dual-track mechanism combining assessment and recommendation, allowing direct master's admission without entrance exams. The 1990 reforms made recommendation mandatory for applicants, ending the parallel system. Subsequent adjustments included quota restrictions (1% in 1991, raised to 5% in 1994). A 1997 reform introduced a quota allocation system prioritizing key disciplines with ratios up to 30%, while the 1998 "Postgraduate Student Support Teaching Group" created a social service pathway through poverty alleviation participation.

2.3 The Maturation Stage of the Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy (2006–2013)

The 2006 "Management Measures for Recommending Outstanding Fresh Undergraduate Graduates for Exemption from Examination to Pursue a Master's Degree (Trial)" marked the policy's maturation, transitioning it from guidance to regulation. Subsequent refinements included the 2007 expansion to more universities and the 2010 quota allocation reform that differentiated academic and professional degree tracks, relaxing restrictions on the latter. A 2011 reform added 50 eligible institutions and permitted leading universities to directly enroll exempted students in PhD programs, enriching the policy's approach to cultivating specialized talent.

2.4 The Strengthening Stage of the Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy (2014–Present)

In 2014, abolishing internal placement quotas and degree-type barriers, establishing the Recommendation Service Management System. The 2017 Notice on Newly Added Institutions expanded eligibility to 54 universities. In 2020, implementing the "Plan for Strengthening Basic Disciplines," prioritizing excellence program students in recommendations. The 2023 Notice linked research assistant hiring scale to quota allocation, creating an employment-cultivation mechanism.

3. The Logic of Change in China's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy Based on the Theoretical Framework of Historical Institutionalism

3.1 The Macro-level Structure of Change in China's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy

China's talent cultivation system has evolved through distinct phases since 1949. The initial Soviet-inspired "school recommendation + review" model (1951) addressed talent shortages but was replaced by examination-based selection (1962) to ensure quality. Post-Cultural Revolution reforms expanded recommendation quotas to align with national strategies. Key developments include the 1998 "Postgraduate Student Support Teaching Group" linking enrollment with regional development, the 2010 classified cultivation system creating academic/professional channels, and the 2014/2017 reforms removing degree barriers and expanding institutional eligibility. The 2023 integration of research assistant positions represents the latest adaptation, balancing employment stability with talent cultivation.

3.2 The Meso-level Structure of Change in China's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy

3.2.1 Set-up Costs

High setup costs create path dependence by locking in institutional choices due to sunk investments. Initially borrowing

the Soviet model, China's recommendation system required substantial investment in policy design and implementation. These initial costs created a lock-in effect, leading universities to maintain the system due to the benefits it brought, thereby influencing the policy's phased development and constraining subsequent reforms.

3.2.2 Coordination Effects

The establishment of formal institutions spurs complementary structures, creating an institutional framework. China's postgraduate enrollment system integrates recommendation/exemption with unified examination. Its coordination with funding and degree standards forms a comprehensive structure, whose deep institutional nesting increases reform costs. The 1999 Higher Education Law enhancing university autonomy impacted this system. The 1997 quota management system supported basic/unpopular disciplines, balancing individual choice, disciplinary needs, and resource allocation. Post-1999 reforms expanded eligible institutions and recommendation ratios, addressing quality challenges during enrollment expansion.

3.2.3 Learning Effects

Learning effects reinforce path dependence as stakeholders become accustomed to institutional operations. Within the recommendation exemption system, universities, students, and teachers develop specific behavioral patterns and cognitive inertia after a policy is established. This familiarity creates a tendency to maintain existing institutional frameworks during subsequent reforms.

Specifically, universities form standardized mechanisms for selection and admission, which become internal conventions that guide future institutional adjustments. Similarly, students adapt their learning strategies and expectations to the system, affecting their acceptance of future policy changes and further solidifying the established path.

3.2.4 Adaptive Effects

Positive outcomes from institutions foster adaptive expectations among stakeholders, reinforcing stability and reducing change likelihood. The master's student recommendation and exemption policy initially gained strong cooperation due to its innovation and effectiveness. Universities attracted quality students, while students accessed postgraduate studies easily, creating a cycle of adaptation. Over time, the policy became integral to higher education, with universities emphasizing comprehensive development and students focusing on academic and practical excellence. This widespread adaptation solidified path dependence, making incremental reforms the pragmatic choice for future adjustments.

3.3 The Micro-level Structure of China's Graduate Recommendation and Exemption Policy

The graduate recommendation and exemption policy's evolution involves an actor network of government, universities, and students. The government dominates policy formation, transitioning from direct control during the planned economy to indirect guidance via funding in the market era. This decentralization granted universities autonomy to optimize selection standards, intensifying competition but improving quality. Students exert influence by demanding fair, transparent mechanisms valuing comprehensive qualities over grades, reflecting their growing advocacy in the information age. This tripartite interaction continues shaping the policy's development.

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