

# The Social Roles and Cultural Influence of Late Qing Huxiang Scholars: A Study Centered on the Chronological Biography of Tang Peng

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## Abstract

The Huxiang scholars of the Late Qing period played a crucial role in China's transition to modernity. Their social engagement and cultural practices profoundly shaped the course of history. Focusing on the Chronological Biography of Tang Peng, a Huxiang scholar active during the Daoguang reigns, this paper employs case study and documentary analysis to systematically examine his life trajectory, intellectual networks, ideological system, and political practice. The study reveals that Tang Peng's Fuqiuzhi (Master of Floating Hill) articulates a comprehensive philosophy of statecraft, while his proposals for administrative and salt policy reform embody the pragmatic spirit of Huxiang culture. His political conduct as Censor demonstrated the moral agency of Confucian intellectuals yet also reflected the structural dilemmas that constrained reform in the Late Qing. Positioned as a transitional figure between Tao Shu, Wei Yuan, and Zeng Guofan, Tang Peng's intellectual legacy provided theoretical groundwork for the rise of the Xiang Army. He stood at a critical juncture, where Chinese intellectual discourse began to shift from a reflexive critique of its own traditions toward the active exploration of modern frameworks. His life and thought illuminate both the historical value and inherent limitations of traditional literati during China's modern transformation. This study offers a new micro-level perspective for understanding the role of Huxiang culture in the social changes of the Late Qing period.

## Keywords

Huxiang Scholars, Social Roles, Cultural Influence, Tang Peng, Late Qing Intellectual History

## 1. Introduction

The Late Qing era marked a watershed moment in Chinese history, often characterized as “a transformation unprecedented in three millennia.” The tensions and interplay between tradition and modernity, conservatism and reform, became the dominant themes of the age. As one of the cradles of Chinese traditional culture, the Huxiang region (present-day Hunan) exhibited distinctive cultural vitality and social influence during this period, nurturing a group of scholars whose ideas and actions profoundly shaped China’s path toward modernization.

Huxiang scholars, known for their erudition, acute social awareness, and strong sense of public responsibility, actively participated in diverse dimensions of reform and social reconstruction. Generations of Huxiang intellectuals took pride in being nurtured in the “land of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi,” and regarded serving the world and caring for the people as their moral obligation. They thus became a major driving force for social progress (Zhang, 2022). Representatives such as Wei Yuan, Zuo Zongtang, and Tan Sitong achieved outstanding accomplishments in politics and the military, while also playing pivotal roles in China’s intellectual and cultural transformation (He, 2024). The characteristic spirit of Huxiang culture—marked by broad-mindedness and a pioneering ethos—was continuously embodied and renewed through the practices of these scholars, forming a tradition that combined cultural inheritance with social reform (Tang, Chen, & Zhou, 2025).

Tang Peng, a key figure in the Late Qing current of “statecraft thought” (*jingshi sixiang*), exemplified the Huxiang spirit of practicality and commitment. Serving as both a transmitter and innovator of Huxiang culture, Tang linked the intellectual lineages of Tao Shu, Wei Yuan, and Zeng Guofan, and exerted significant influence on the ideological landscape of the late nineteenth century (Li, 2023). His *Chronological Biography* provides a valuable micro-historical source for exploring the social roles and cultural influence of Huxiang literati (Li, 2012).

To date, most scholarly research on Huxiang scholars has concentrated on prominent figures or macro-level analyses of the group’s collective characteristics, while in-depth case studies of individual intellectuals remain insufficient. In particular, few studies have systematically analyzed a scholar’s thought and practice through the lens of biographical or chronological documentation.

Taking Tang Peng’s *Chronological Biography* as its core, this study examines his life events, intellectual networks, and writings to pursue three main objectives: to uncover the multiple roles and patterns of action of Huxiang scholars in a period of social transformation; to analyze how Huxiang culture was transformed into tangible social influence through the practical engagement of literati; and to explore the methodological value of chronological biography in the study of modern Chinese intellectual history. This research deepens the understanding of the Late Qing Huxiang scholar community and offers a new regional-cultural perspective for examining China’s modern social transformation.

## 2. Time and Region: The Dual Context of Tang Peng's Intellectual World

### 2.1. The Great Upheaval of the Late Qing

The Opium War of 1840 marked a watershed in the history of the Late Qing dynasty. Western military aggression not only resulted in China's military defeat but also triggered a profound political and ideological crisis. The signing of the *Treaty of Nanking* symbolized the disintegration of the traditional Sinocentric tributary system, leading to a severe erosion of national sovereignty and compelling the scholar-official class to re-examine China's position in the changing world order. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Qing Empire found itself trapped in a "declining age" characterized by the collapse of the traditional order intertwined with relentless external shocks. This historical context shaped the intellectual environment and practical engagement of Huxiang scholars such as Tang Peng (Wang, Zhou, & Chen, 2025).

Wei Yuan's proposal to "learn from the advanced techniques of the barbarians in order to control them" (*shi yi chang ji yi zhi yi*) broke through the rigid dichotomy between "China" and the "barbarians," providing a theoretical foundation for the subsequent Self-Strengthening Movement and initiating a national quest for understanding the West and seeking self-reliance (Lin, 2025).

At the same time, the Qing government faced deep structural crises. Politically, corruption had become endemic; the popular saying "a clean prefect in three years, a hundred thousand taels of silver" vividly captured the decay of bureaucratic ethics and the resulting administrative inefficiency. Economically, systemic corruption in key areas such as grain transport, salt administration, and river works enriched entrenched interest groups at the expense of public welfare, leading to fiscal exhaustion and widespread hardship among the populace. Socially, the concentration of land ownership intensified, depriving vast numbers of peasants of their livelihoods and ultimately fueling the Taiping Rebellion.

Within this turbulent milieu, the intellectual current of "statecraft thought" (*jingshi sixiang*) emerged from an academic undercurrent to become a mainstream discourse (Duan, 2022). Reform-minded officials such as Tao Shu and He Changling implemented pragmatic reforms in the fields of grain transport and salt policy, while thinkers like Gong Zizhen advanced reformist thought through scholarly critique and public discourse. Tang Peng lived during the Daoguang reign, a transitional era between the old and the new order, when external pressures and internal crises converged. The resurgence of *jingshi* thought, combined with the region's activist intellectual tradition, collectively drove the Huxiang scholarly community to participate in the historical process of social transformation (Wang, 2021).

### 2.2. The Cultural Gene of Huxiang

Situated amid mountains on three sides and bordered by water on the fourth, the Huxiang region (modern Hunan) developed a distinctive regional culture shaped

by its semi-enclosed geography and its strategic position as a crossroads between North and South China (Wang, 2001). This unique spatial configuration fostered a culture that combined inward cohesion with outward openness—deeply rooted in tradition yet imbued with a reform-oriented spirit of innovation. Over the course of its historical evolution, Huxiang culture formed a clear intellectual genealogy whose core characteristics can be understood through three interrelated dimensions.

The first is the **value of statecraft thought** (*jingshi sixiang*), which forms the philosophical foundation of the Huxiang scholarly tradition. Since the Song dynasty, Hu Anguo and his son Hu Hong established the Huxiang School, advocating the principle of “benevolence as essence, the classics as application” (*yi ren wei ti, yi jing wei yong*). In the Southern Song period, Zhang Shi further developed this tradition at the Yuelu Academy by emphasizing the unity of moral enlightenment and practical action—“to manifest heavenly principles through concrete affairs.” This pragmatic orientation evolved into an enduring academic ethos focused on social engagement. By the late Ming and early Qing, Wang Fuzhi advanced a philosophy of “rejecting the empty and the illusory to return to the real,” laying a philosophical foundation for later reformist thought (Jing, 2012).

The second dimension is the **pioneering and reformist spirit** that defines the moral temperament of Huxiang scholars. This disposition originated from the patriotic legacies of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi, who embodied loyalty and moral conscience, and was further strengthened during China’s modern crises. From Wei Yuan’s open-minded advocacy of learning from the West to the entrepreneurial vigor of Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang in founding modern industries, this tradition reflects an enduring commitment to innovation and practical reform.

The third dimension lies in the **deep moral foundation of Neo-Confucianism**, which endowed Huxiang culture with a robust ethical framework. Yuelu Academy, long regarded as the “orthodox line of the Southern Dao,” cultivated a sense of moral responsibility through its educational code emphasizing “loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and moral purity.” This Neo-Confucian heritage forged two defining moral traits among Huxiang intellectuals: first, the “*mule-like perseverance*” (*luozhi jingshen*), symbolizing resilience and tenacity; and second, a self-conscious sense of moral guardianship, which grounded their pragmatic engagement with the world in the Confucian ideal of achieving the unity of inner moral cultivation (*neisheng*) and external governance (*waiwang*). These traits together formed a distinctive moral idealism that underpinned the intellectual and ethical identity of Huxiang culture.

### 3. Life and Intellectual Network

#### 3.1. Interpreting the Chronology of Tang Peng

Tang Peng (1801-1844), courtesy name Haiqiu, was a native of Yiyang, Hunan. His life represents a paradigmatic case of the intellectual trajectory and existential dilemma of the scholar-official class during the Jiaqing–Daoguang period of the

Qing dynasty. A close reading of his chronological biography (*nianpu*) reveals a life path shaped by the fourfold process of imperial examination success, bureaucratic service, intellectual production, and ultimate political downfall—reflecting both his personal struggle and the structural constraints of the late imperial political order.

Tang's early years exemplify the traditional Confucian ideal of "*learning to become an official*." He achieved rapid success in the imperial examinations, passing the provincial examination in the second year of Daoguang (1822), the metropolitan examination the following year, and being subsequently appointed as a *buji-shi* (junior compiler) in the prestigious Hanlin Academy. This sequence of accomplishments marked his formal entry into the central political and cultural elite of the empire. His tenure in the Hanlin Academy not only consolidated his scholarly foundations but also deepened his commitment to public service and pragmatic governance (*jingshi*), serving as a critical formative period in the development of his political thought (Wang, 2021).

After holding posts in the Ministry of Rites and the Ministry of Revenue, Tang Peng was appointed as *Censor of the Shandong Circuit*. His career vividly illustrates the tension between moral integrity and bureaucratic reality that characterized the censorial office. Known for his moral courage, he was described as one who "spoke out fearlessly and was unafraid of powerful interests." Tang submitted numerous memorials addressing systemic corruption, inefficiencies in grain transport, and malpractices in salt administration, proposing concrete measures for institutional reform—embodying the pragmatic and reformist ethos of Huxiang learning (Liu, 2020). Yet, within the corrupt bureaucratic system of the late Qing, such moral rectitude inevitably invited political risk, revealing the intrinsic tension between Confucian idealism and the constraints of an ossified administrative order.

In 1839 (Daoguang 19), Tang Peng was dismissed from his post as Censor for "offending imperial will through remonstrance," although he later resumed service in the Ministry of Revenue. This episode marked a decisive turning point: his efforts to influence central policymaking through the moral authority of the censorate had effectively failed. Despite subsequent appointments, his political influence waned significantly. Tang died in 1844 at the age of forty-four, disillusioned and marginalized—a personal fate that epitomized the predicament of reform-minded scholar-officials in the twilight of the Qing Empire.

### 3.2. Intellectual and Social Networks

The Huxiang intellectual community wielded considerable influence in both political and academic circles of the late Qing. Tang Peng's interactions with his fellow Hunanese literati exemplify the transmission and renewal of the *jingshi jing-shi sixiang* (statecraft and practical learning) tradition within the regional culture, reinforcing both intellectual collaboration and a shared sense of regional identity (Chen, 2019).

**Wei Yuan and Tang Peng: Resonance and Complementarity.** Tang Peng and

Wei Yuan, collectively known among contemporaries as part of the “Four Talents of the Capital,” shared a profound concern for national salvation through practical learning. Tang’s major work, *Fuqiūzi*, advocated “adaptive change to remedy the maladies of the age,” complementing Wei Yuan’s celebrated call to “learn from the strengths of the barbarians to control them.” While their intellectual trajectories diverged—Tang focused on institutional reform within the Confucian framework, and Wei emphasized the integration of Western knowledge—their shared concern for national renewal significantly contributed to the resurgence of statecraft thought during the Jiaqing–Daoguang era (Li, 2018).

**The Circle of He Shaoji, Tao Shu, and He Changling.** He Shaoji’s diaries record frequent gatherings with Tang Peng in Beijing, particularly during 1843–1844, when He served in the Hanlin Academy. Tang, Wei Yuan, Zhang Jiliang, and others regularly exchanged poetry, essays, and inscriptions—a form of literary and intellectual fellowship that strengthened the collective visibility of Huxiang literati in the capital. Tang was also deeply influenced by reform-minded predecessors such as Tao Shu and He Changling, whose policies in grain and salt administration set models for practical reform. Although Tang’s writings were not included in He Changling’s *Anthology of Statecraft Writings of the Present Dynasty* (*Huangchao jingshi wenbian*), his views on transport and salt governance closely aligned with the principles of that compendium, reflecting the internal continuity of reformist thought among Huxiang scholars (Zhang, 2017).

**Political Alliances and Reformist Solidarity.** Tang Peng also cultivated political ties with reformist officials such as Lin Zexu and Huang Juezi during the anti-opium campaigns. Although not directly involved in the decision-making of the prohibition movement, Tang’s memorials condemning bureaucratic corruption and fiscal decay echoed the reformist positions of these figures. Lin Zexu’s anti-opium measures during his tenure as Governor-General of Huguang aligned closely with Tang’s proposals in *Fuqiūzi* for “strict governance and purification of administrative corruption.” This intellectual resonance underscores a broader reformist consensus among officials seeking institutional renewal amid internal decay and external threat (Zhang, 2017).

**Literary Society and Cross-Regional Exchange.** Within the vibrant literary circles of the capital, Tang Peng distinguished himself through his poetic talent and became an active participant in numerous cultural salons, positioning himself as a central figure in the literary sphere of the Jiaqing–Daoguang era. Alongside Gong Zizhen, Wei Yuan, and Zhang Jiliang, he formed the literary core of the *Xuannan circle* in Beijing (Li, 2015). Their poetic exchanges and critiques often transcended aesthetics to engage with social and political concerns, as reflected in He Shaoji’s diaries, which described their gatherings as both cultural and civic in nature (Wang, 2016). Tang’s literary connections extended beyond his Hunan compatriots, including poets such as Zhang Jiliang from Fujian and scholars like Yu Yue from Zhejiang. These cross-regional interactions facilitated the integration of diverse intellectual perspectives and expanded the cultural influence of the

Huxiang scholarly tradition nationwide (Wang, 2016).

## 4. Thought and Writings: Achievements and Dilemmas

### 4.1. The Intellectual System of *Fu Qiuzi*: Reform Proposals and Governance Structure

*Fu Qiuzi* (“The Master of Floating Hills”) serves as a comprehensive treatise on statecraft, articulating a systematic framework of practical governance. It encompasses political reform, bureaucratic renewal, people-oriented governance, and frontier defense—together forming an integrated, coherent system of thought (Zheng, 2008).

Tang Peng advocated the principle of “adaptive reform to remedy current ills” (*biantong yi jiu shibing*), calling for systematic transformation of the decaying Qing institutional order. At the core of his thinking lay the concept of “governing in accordance with the times” (*yinshi lizheng*), rejecting blind adherence to antiquated precedents. He criticized the excessive formalism of Qing legal administration—“laws applied by will, precedents by law, and cases by precedent”—and argued for “laws to be concise and appropriate,” restoring governance to the moral foundation of sincerity, openness, and virtue-based rule rather than law-based coercion. His reform logic was grounded in the interaction between *institutions* and *human nature*, seeking to awaken moral consciousness through institutional transformation.

Tang identified bureaucratic corruption as the root cause of governance failure. He denounced the hierarchical pathology wherein “senior officials indulge in prestige and flatter superiors, while subordinates curry favor out of fear,” advocating the principle of “eradicating the private for the sake of the public.” He viewed *private interest* as the fundamental source of administrative obstruction and public alienation. His reform measures included requiring senior officials to “personally oversee state affairs” to curb clerical usurpation of power and promoting the idea that local officials should “govern through classical learning,” thereby cultivating moral discipline and administrative integrity through the Confucian fusion of ethical education and institutional constraint.

In terms of *people-oriented* governance, Tang followed the Confucian ideal of benevolent rule (*renzheng*), emphasizing empathy and moral responsibility (Yang, 2006). He urged that rulers should “share in the joys and sorrows of the people” and condemned officials for “silencing the commoners and suppressing their petitions.” To improve responsiveness, he proposed institutional mechanisms to ensure the upward flow of information, declaring that “the sufferings of the realm are the ruler’s own.” Economically, he prioritized agriculture while recognizing the importance of commerce and industry, reflecting a pragmatic concern for the people’s livelihood.

Facing the mounting crisis along Qing frontiers, Tang proposed reforms in military preparedness (*chuwu*) and fiscal-military integration (*yuxiang*). He emphasized intelligence gathering, strategic analysis, and the development of compre-

hensive national defense capabilities. Although still operating within the traditional “Sino–barbarian distinction,” his approach revealed an emerging awareness of strategic intelligence and national capacity as vital components of modern governance.

#### 4.2. The Progressiveness of His Thought: A Systematic Critique of the Traditional Bureaucracy

The progressive nature of Tang Peng’s thought lay in his systematic diagnosis of the Qing political malaise and the specificity of his proposed remedies (Wang, 2013). He identified the core problem of the bureaucratic system as a *reversal of authority*—where clerks (*yamen runners*) effectively usurped the functions of appointed officials, producing a “perverse cycle” in which officials, trapped in paperwork and ritualized procedures, lost real control over governance. This insight transcended mere moralistic denunciations of corruption, advancing a structural critique of the bureaucratic order itself.

In the “Eliminating Obstruction” (*Qu Yong*) chapter of *Fu Qiuzi*, Tang attributed political stagnation to the arrogance and self-righteousness of those in power, warning that “without excessive entanglement, deliberations will not exhaust the people; without arrogance and competitiveness, authority will not crush integrity.” His critique of bureaucratic formalism and manipulative politics directly targeted the deeper maladies of “absolute monarchy” and “internal bureaucratic exhaustion,” carrying profound implications for political enlightenment.

On administrative and economic reform, Tang proposed concrete measures for the reform of grain transport and salt administration, such as “allowing rest for transport workers,” “preventing warehouse malpractice,” and “abolishing private trade while reducing official pricing.” His systematic analysis of “the advantages and perils of salt policy” reflected an awareness of economic rationality and institutional efficiency that resonated with Tao Shu’s contemporaneous practical reforms in the Jiangnan region (Xia & Yang, 2025).

Tang also redefined the essence of *Confucianism* in response to its hollow institutionalization. He criticized the degeneration of scholars who were “Confucians in name but not in spirit,” opposing the use of Confucian study merely as an “instrument for office” or “a repository of rote knowledge.” He sought to restore Confucianism’s original mission as a practical philosophy of governance, asserting that “Confucianism is as indispensable to society as the sun, the moon, and the grains that sustain life,” exemplifying the Huxiang tradition of “applying classical learning to the needs of the world.”

#### 4.3. The Limitations of His Vision: Traditional Frameworks, Temporal Blind Spots, and Historical Lessons

Tang Peng’s fate embodied not only a personal tragedy but also the collective predicament of reform-minded scholars in late imperial China. His reformist ideals, though incisive, remained confined within the moral and epistemological frame-

work of classical Confucianism. The frustration of his political career and the unrealized nature of his proposals reveal both the structural constraints of the Qing bureaucracy and the intellectual limitations of the *jing-shi* (practical statecraft) paradigm during China's modernization process (Zhang, 2014).

**Traditional intellectual constraints.** Tang's reform theories were framed by an idealized return to the "Three Dynasties" model and anchored in the *Yao-Shun-Confucius-Mencius* orthodoxy, reflecting a monistic cultural worldview. This backward-looking epistemology restricted his capacity to move beyond the "using the past to explain the present" mode of reasoning, leading to a delayed understanding of Western modernity. Unlike Wei Yuan's explicit advocacy of "learning from the West to resist the West," Tang's frontier defense proposals remained bound by the logic of "distinguishing between the civilized and the barbarian," failing to articulate a systematic response to external threats. From Tang to Zhang Zhidong, the enduring paradigm of "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for utility" continued to constrain the depth and scope of reform.

**Career frustration and political conflict.** During the Daoguang reign, Tang was dismissed for "repeatedly submitting unsolicited memorials," including readdressing closed cases, and was criticized as "unfit for the office of censor." His uncompromising personality—"believing nothing impossible under Heaven"—collided directly with the autocratic structure of imperial authority. In contrast, reformers such as Zeng Guofan maintained reformist intent through a more strategic balance of restraint and pragmatism, revealing that political reform under autocracy required both conviction and tactical patience. Tang's memorials—such as his call that "senior ministers should not exploit rank to deceive subordinates"—challenged entrenched bureaucratic interests, while his impeachment of powerful princes like Zaiquan provoked collective backlash, leaving him politically isolated. His downfall illuminated the systemic impotence of the censorate under a highly centralized monarchy, consistent with the historical tendency of the imperial censorial system to serve imperial control rather than genuine oversight.

**The disjunction between theory and practice in salt reform.** In *Fu Qiuzi*, Tang argued that "the profit of salt must not be monopolized by officials," advocating the abolition of the exclusive salt merchant system and promoting the reduction of official prices to stimulate market efficiency—ideas that anticipated Tao Shu's later *Salt Ticket Reform* (Hu & Zou, 2025). Yet his reliance on moral exhortation and lack of fiscal realism limited the feasibility of his proposals. Without administrative authority or institutional leverage, his reforms remained rhetorical rather than executable. His opposition to entrenched interest groups controlling salt revenues exemplified the recurring structural resistance that later doomed reforms from the Self-Strengthening Movement to the 1898 Reform.

Ultimately, Tang Peng's thought and fate epitomize the paradox of late Qing *jing-shi* reformers: intellectually prescient yet institutionally powerless. His ideas, while penetrating in diagnosis, remained entrapped within the dual constraints of

a traditional epistemic framework and an inflexible political order, resulting in the classic late-imperial predicament of “eloquent words without effective deeds.”

## 5. Tang Peng and the Formation of the Late Qing Huxiang Scholar Spirit

### 5.1. A Transitional Figure in the Genealogy of Huxiang Scholars

Within the intellectual genealogy of late Qing Huxiang scholars, **Tang Peng** occupies a pivotal position as a transitional figure linking past and future generations. He inherited the intellectual legacy of the *Jia–Dao* practical learning school and served as a bridge to the reform-minded officials of the *Xian–Tong* Restoration. His life and thought reveal a trajectory of transformation from theoretical critique to pragmatic engagement.

**Continuity with the reformist line of Tao Shu and Wei Yuan.** Tang’s reform proposals deeply resonated with the early *jing shi* (statecraft) tradition of Tao Shu and Wei Yuan. In salt administration, his advocacy of “prohibiting private trade and reducing official monopolies” echoed Tao Shu’s *ticket salt system* (Hu & Zou, 2025); in border defense, his strategic emphasis on “thorough knowledge of the enemy” aligned with Wei Yuan’s open-minded call to “learn from the West to resist the West.” This intellectual continuity demonstrates a shared epistemological orientation among Huxiang scholars confronting the crises of their time.

**Intellectual inspiration for Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang.** Although Tang Peng did not achieve the same political prominence as Zeng Guofan or Zuo Zongtang, his intellectual legacy laid essential groundwork for the rise of the Xiang Army group. His *Fu Qiu Zi* offered an incisive critique of bureaucratic corruption, anticipating Zeng’s reflection on “the corruption of governance and the suffering of the people.” His insistence on “governing through the classics” prefigured the Xiang Army’s unique model of “Confucian generals.” His upright moral courage—marked by “fearless candor and moral integrity”—was later embodied in Zuo Zongtang’s spirit of “caring for the world despite personal adversity.”

Tang’s distinctive value lies in the tension between the *progressiveness* of his ideas and the *lag* in their practical implementation. He inherited the rigorous scholarship of the *Qianjia* philological tradition but redirected it toward social critique; he devised systematic reform schemes but lacked the political platform to realize them. This disjunction between personal destiny and historical transformation makes Tang Peng a quintessential case for observing the intellectual transition of late Qing literati.

### 5.2. Intellectual Legacy: Political Candor and Statecraft Commitment

Tang Peng’s defining moral attributes—his political courage to speak truth to power and his pragmatic *jing shi* ethos—constitute the core spiritual genes of the Huxiang intellectual tradition, which were creatively transformed by later generations.

**From moral admonition to pragmatic engagement.** Tang’s fearless remonstrance as a censor—his refusal to “fear power or favor”—evolved in later Huxiang scholars into a more pragmatic strategy of engagement. Learning from Tang’s frustrations, Zeng Guofan proposed an “enter the arena and act” philosophy, transforming critical discourse into steadfast practice through his doctrine of “fortify positions and fight steadily.” This shift from “discursive resistance” to “practical implementation” marked the maturation of Huxiang statecraft thought.

**The lineage of *jing shi* thought.** The statecraft system outlined in Tang’s *Fu Qiu Zi* provided an intellectual foundation for subsequent Huxiang reformers. His advocacy of “adaptive reform to remedy current ills” was further developed in Guo Songtao’s call to “learn from Western political institutions.” His critique of the petty bureaucratic system anticipated Tan Sitong’s radical argument to “break the web of self-interest and corruption.” His notion of “sharing the people’s suffering as one’s own” was later modernized in Mao Zedong’s doctrine of “serving the people.”

**Cultural consolidation of regional spirit.** Tang’s political setbacks and scholarly perseverance reinforced a defining feature of Huxiang regional culture—the so-called “mule spirit,” characterized by resilience and moral steadfastness. This tenacious and unyielding disposition became a shared spiritual bond connecting figures such as Wang Fuzhi, Tang Peng, Zeng Guofan, Huang Xing, and Mao Zedong, forming a cultural gene transcending individual success or failure.

## 6. Conclusion

Centering on Tang Peng’s chronological biography, this study integrates his personal life with the broader socio-political transformations of the late Qing period. It systematically examines his intellectual trajectory, theoretical system, and political experience, advancing the core concept of Tang Peng’s “*transitional*” identity. The analysis reveals the multiple roles and cultural influences of Huxiang scholars during China’s period of social transformation, offering a new analytical framework for understanding the intellectual transition of the late Qing literati and broadening the methodological horizons of regional scholar studies.

The findings indicate that Tang Peng, as a representative figure of the *Daoguang–Xianfeng* statecraft movement, exemplifies the inner tension and historical limitations of the transformation from traditional Confucian literati to modern reformers. **Intellectually**, his critique of bureaucratic corruption and advocacy for institutional reform embodied the Confucian scholar’s attempt at self-renewal within the tradition. Yet his intellectual framework remained confined to classical paradigms, and his response to Western challenges lagged behind contemporaries such as Wei Yuan. **Practically**, his outspoken criticism as a censor demonstrated the Huxiang scholar’s political responsibility, while his thwarted career revealed the structural constraints of the late Qing political system on reformers. This contrast between ideal and reality embodies, at the micro level, the broader difficulty of China’s transformation from tradition to modernity. Positioned between early re-

formers like Tao Shu and Wei Yuan and mid-century revivalists such as Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang, Tang Peng's intellectual heritage not only provided ideological preparation for the rise of the Xiang Army but also served as a vital link in the spiritual lineage of Huxiang scholars (Li, 2012).

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