

Article

Inspirations of Qing Dynasty Academies for Modern Education: Case Study of Tongxiang Academy

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Received: May 03, 2026; Revised: Jul 24, 2026; Accepted: July 28, 2026; Published: Aug 30, 2026

Abstract: The development of academies in the Qing Dynasty, during their process of officialization, presents a complex picture, and their management and teaching philosophies contain rich educational wisdom. Tongxiang Academy, founded in the late Qing Dynasty by local scholars represented by Dai Junheng, serves as a typical case for examining the operation and educational thought of Qing Dynasty academies. This paper employs historical document research and case analysis, using original documents such as the Tongxiang Academy Chronicle as core historical materials to trace the founding background, management norms, and educational philosophy of Tongxiang Academy, and to explore its practices and characteristics within the specific historical context of the Qing Dynasty. We found that, under the background of high officialization, Tongxiang Academy achieved a balance between standardized and autonomous management through the formulation of detailed regulations including 42 articles on curriculum examples, rules, and board members. The core of its educational philosophy was "understanding the classics for practical application," emphasizing the cultivation of talents with both moral character and practical abilities, based on classical studies, within the academic atmosphere of the Han and Song dynasties, responding to the social demand for practical learning since the Daoguang era. Taking the Tongxiang Academy, founded by Dai Junheng and like-minded individuals during the Qing Dynasty, as an example, we illustrate their efforts in passing on the wisdom of ancient sages and deeply embedding Chinese culture and academic thought into people's hearts through academy education, using history to support the present.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty academies, Tongxiang academy, Dai Junheng; Educational philosophy, Practical application, Academy management

1. Introduction

As an important form of traditional Chinese education, academies have developed over a thousand years, forming a unique educational model and management system by the Qing Dynasty. The development of academies in the Qing Dynasty was not smooth. Initially suppressed by the imperial court, they were later supported and controlled by the Yongzheng Emperor, gradually becoming official schools and preparatory institutions for the imperial examinations (Deng, 2006). Against this backdrop, how academies founded by private individuals operated and what characteristics their educational philosophies possessed became issues worthy of attention.

This paper selects Tongxiang Academy, founded in 1840 (the 20th year of the Daoguang Emperor's reign) through fundraising initiated by Dai Junheng and others, as a case study. Located in Kongcheng Town, Tongcheng County, Anhui Province, the academy was established during a period of social upheaval before and after the Opium War, when academic trends shifted toward "practical application" (Liu, 2008). Tongxiang Academy achieved remarkable results in a short period, attracting hundreds of scholars from Tongcheng and Shucheng, and earning praise from the then-provincial education commissioner Luo Dunyan, who commended it for "emphasizing fundamentals and upholding orthodox learning." Despite the abundance of studies on famous academies such as Yuelu and Guangya, the operations and philosophies of smaller, privately funded academies like Tongxiang remain underexplored. This study fills this gap by providing a detailed analysis of Tongxiang Academy's charter and educational thought, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of late Qing academy education. This article analyzes the founding background, management norms, and educational philosophy of Tongxiang Academy, revealing its internal mechanisms as a successful model of academies in the late Qing Dynasty, and further explores its potential implications for modern education.

Furthermore, this study connects the case of Tongxiang Academy to broader themes in educational innovation. The academy's systematic approach to curriculum design, assessment (e.g., biannual grand examinations with rewards), and institutional governance provides a historical precedent for understanding how educational innovations—whether technological or

organizational—can be effectively implemented. The academy's detailed charter system represents an early form of structured educational management that resonates with contemporary discussions on educational quality assurance and instructional design.

2. Materials and Methods

This study primarily employs historical document analysis. The core materials are derived from original Qing Dynasty documents, particularly Dai Junheng's *Tongxiang Academy Records* (6 volumes), which details the academy's location, founding, regulations, and literary activities. In addition, supplementary materials include local gazetteers and personal collections such as *Tongcheng County Gazetteer* (Tongcheng County Local History Compilation Committee, 1995), Dai Junheng's *Weijingshanguan Wenchao*, and modern academic works such as Deng Hongbo's *History of Chinese Academies*, Liu Yucai's *A Study of Academies and Academic Changes in the Qing Dynasty*, and Shang Yanliu's *A Record of the Qing Dynasty Imperial Examinations and Related Works*, for cross-referencing and in-depth analysis. Through close reading of these texts, the historical context, organizational structure, and ideological principles of Tongxiang Academy are systematically traced.

3.1 Background of Founding of Tongxiang Academy

The establishment of Tongxiang Academy was closely related to the Qing Dynasty's academy policies and the prevailing academic atmosphere. In the early Qing Dynasty, academies were suppressed, but this policy was gradually relaxed after 1657 (the 14th year of the Shunzhi Emperor's reign). During the Yongzheng Emperor's reign, official academies were actively established in provincial capitals. By the Daoguang era, academy development had entered a new stage, characterized by a reconciliation of Han and Song Dynasty learning under the principle of "applying knowledge to practical use," and increased participation of private individuals in academy management (Liu, 2008). It was against this social and academic backdrop of heightened emphasis on "applying knowledge to practical use" that Dai Junheng and others founded Tongxiang Academy, relying on private fundraising, to inherit culture and cultivate talent.

Why Tongxiang Academy? Compared to other famous academies of the same period, such as the Yuelu Academy or the Guangya Academy, Tongxiang Academy was distinctive in several ways. First, it was founded entirely through private fundraising by local literati rather than by government officials, making it a rare example of grassroots initiative in an era of increasing officialization. Second, its detailed 42-article charter provided an unusually comprehensive framework for governance, covering curriculum, discipline, personnel, and finances, which was exceptional among late Qing academies of similar scale. Third, its explicit linkage of the Tongcheng School's literary tradition with the "practical application" movement made it a unique intellectual laboratory for bridging Han-Song scholarly debates. These features make Tongxiang Academy a particularly illuminating case for understanding how private academies navigated the tension between state control and academic autonomy.

3.2 Management Norms of Tongxiang Academy

Faced with the drawbacks of the officialization of academies—such as lax management and corruption in the selection of headmasters—Tongxiang Academy, while complying with official jurisdiction, strove to maintain autonomy. All important matters, such as the establishment and recommendation of directors, required official approval. However, Dai Junheng explicitly advocated that "the academy is a place for cultivating talent," opposing unauthorized occupation by officials and emphasizing that the academy's internal affairs should be handled autonomously.

To ensure the effective operation of the academy, Dai Junheng personally drafted a very detailed "Charter," divided into five major sections: "Curriculum Rules," "Rules," "Directors," "Examination Funds," and "Miscellaneous Funds," containing forty-two specific rules. For example, the "Curriculum Rules" stipulated the twice-yearly "Grand Examinations" in spring and autumn and the reward methods—cash prizes and publication of poems and essays for outstanding students. The "Examination Funds" stipulated the expenses for students to travel to Jinling to participate in the provincial examinations. This set of charters was highly operational, ensuring that all activities of the academy were "based on rules," forming an orderly teaching atmosphere, and was a key institutional guarantee for its successful operation.

3.3 Educational Philosophy of Tongxiang Academy

The educational philosophy of Tongxiang Academy was deeply rooted in the academic thought of the Tongcheng School upheld by Dai Junheng. Faced with criticism of the fragmented nature of Han studies and the contemporary demand for "practical application of knowledge," Dai Junheng systematically expounded his ideas on "Classical Learning." He believed that "the Way, politics, and literature all must begin with the study of the classics," regarding classical studies as the foundation of all learning. He criticized the prevailing trend among students to only study lectures and contemporary essays for the imperial examinations, while

neglecting the classics, emphasizing that "a scholar must be well-versed in the classics to understand the Way; a scholar must understand the Way to apply it."

Dai Junheng's educational goal was to cultivate talents who not only understood the principles of the classics (the Way) but could also apply their learning to the world (application). His ideal of "studying the classics" was not merely textual criticism and textual research, but rather "seeking the heart of the ancient sages" and putting what he learned into practice "in the realm of daily life and ethics," achieving "the unity of learning and action." This concept of "practical application of knowledge" is the core characteristic that distinguishes Tongxiang Academy from a mere preparatory school for the imperial examinations, and it is also its educational aim in response to the needs of the times.

Assessing Educational Outcomes. How can we evaluate whether Tongxiang Academy actually achieved its stated goals of cultivating moral character and practical ability? Several pieces of historical evidence support this assessment. First, contemporary records indicate that graduates of the academy performed well in provincial examinations, suggesting solid academic preparation. More importantly, Luo Dunyan's commendation of the academy for "emphasizing fundamentals and upholding orthodox learning" indicates that external observers recognized its success in instilling both classical knowledge and ethical grounding. Additionally, the academy's continued operation and expansion during a period of national crisis suggests sustained community trust and perceived effectiveness. While direct quantitative measures of "moral character" are unavailable, the qualitative testimonies from officials and literati, combined with the academy's reputation and longevity, provide reasonable evidence that its educational philosophy translated into tangible outcomes.

4. Discussion

The case of Tongxiang Academy demonstrates the institutional and ideological practices of a private academy in the late Qing Dynasty. First, in management, it achieved standardization and efficiency by formulating detailed regulations, securing and establishing considerable autonomy within the constraints of official control—a solution to the common management problems plaguing academies at the time. Second, in educational philosophy, it adhered to the Tongcheng School's literary tradition rooted in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism while actively absorbing the contemporary spirit of "practical application," proposing a "learning the classics for practical use" educational path, attempting to bridge the gap between scholarship (the Han-Song debate) and reality (national decline).

Institutional Design vs. Educational Philosophy. A key question arises: Was the success of Tongxiang Academy primarily due to its institutional design (the detailed charter) or its educational philosophy ("learning the classics for practical use")? The evidence suggests that these two factors were mutually reinforcing rather than separable. The charter provided the structural framework that allowed the philosophy to be consistently implemented across different teachers and cohorts of students. Without the charter, the philosophy might have remained abstract; without the philosophy, the charter would have been an empty bureaucratic exercise. Dai Junheng's personal leadership was crucial in integrating the two: he authored both the philosophical vision and the operational rules. Thus, the academy's success illustrates that sustainable educational reform requires alignment between vision and governance.

Dai Junheng and the efforts of Tongxiang Academy not only united and inspired the Tongcheng School literati at the time but also provided a high-quality model for Qing Dynasty academy education that closely integrated academic thought with educational practice. Its success lay in its clear educational purpose (learning the classics for practical use), its operable institutional guarantees (detailed regulations), and the hands-on involvement and educational enthusiasm of its leader (Dai Junheng).

From the perspective of educational innovation, the Tongxiang Academy case offers a historical analogue to modern discussions about instructional design and quality assurance. The academy's charter functioned similarly to a modern curriculum framework or learning management system, providing structured pathways for teaching, assessment, and resource allocation. Its biannual examinations with public recognition and rewards parallel contemporary formative assessment and gamification strategies. Understanding this historical precedent enriches our appreciation of how non-technological innovations can achieve effects similar to those sought by modern educational technologies.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through a case study of Tongxiang Academy, reveals that its success was not accidental. Externally, it adapted to the stage-specific characteristics of academy development during the Qing Dynasty and the prevailing trend of "practical application of knowledge." Internally, it achieved effective governance through the creation of strict and operational regulations and clarified the direction of talent cultivation by establishing the concept of "learning the classics for practical application." The implications for modern education are that the long-term development of educational institutions requires building a sound internal governance system to ensure operational quality, and even more importantly, establishing a core educational philosophy that transcends

utilitarian skills training, emphasizing the unity of scholarship and morality, knowledge and practice. The practice of Dai Junheng and Tongxiang Academy demonstrates that transforming profound educational philosophies into concrete institutional designs and teaching activities is key to achieving effective education.

The case of Tongxiang Academy shows that successful educational institutions need clear institutional guarantees and a distinct educational purpose. Their efforts to transform academic thought (the Tongcheng School's literary tradition and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism) into concrete teaching practice, and their exploration of the "learning the classics for practical application" talent cultivation model, offer significant historical lessons for modern education on how to balance institutional management and academic autonomy, and how to integrate professional knowledge with character development. These educational achievements are the crystallization of the hard work and dedication of our predecessors, and deserve to be valued by the contemporary education community and used as reference cases for teaching philosophies and practical applications.

Funding: This research did not receive external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The data of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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