

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 3 (1949)
Heft: 3-4

Artikel: The background of Tseng Kuo-Fan's ideology
Autor: Wilhelm, Hellmut
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145339>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 28.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE BACKGROUND OF TSENG KUO-FAN'S IDEOLOGY¹

BY HELLMUT WILHELM

I

An analysis of the political developments of 19th century China will not be complete without an understanding of the decisive importance of developments within the realm of Chinese thought. Both these developments run parallel, and the historical situation is both mirrored and shaped by contemporary Chinese thought. This situation found the scholars wide awake to their opportunity. Not only were they instrumental in moulding the military, political and social scene, but the group that was found ready to grasp the leadership which the moment called for, at the same time responded by instilling new ideas into a school tradition that appeared weakish and despondent. Born as an escape from political suppression, it was forged into an instrument of political domination.

2

Reflecting the actual power situation, the position of the scholar group had undergone a constant change during the first half of the Manchu dynasty. The incoming Manchus found themselves universally opposed by all the more important scholars of the time. Their unwillingness to cooperate with the foreign invader put the scholars into a unique position. Of the two tasks for which they were reared, intertwined in normal times, the scholars barred themselves from one. Unable to fill

1. This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at Seattle, Wash., December 1948. It is a product of the modern Chinese History Project carried on by the Far Eastern and Russian Institute of the University of Washington. The work of the project is of a cooperative nature with each participant contributing to the material and analysis in all individual research. The responsibility for the resulting study rests with the author.

the part of main actors on the political stage, they confined themselves to the role of observers; excluded from the possibility of taking care of their interests as a group, they fell back upon their philosophical calling. Up to the last period of Kanghsi, they remained in their intransigent attitude. There were those who actually took up arms and organised or joined anti-Manchu rebellions. There were those who lived in retirement and declined to take any part in politics. There were those who took on the robe of monk or priest to avoid political entanglements. And there were those who committed suicide.

The reaction of the Manchu court against this attitude was twofold. It could not tolerate open rebellion, or adverse criticism. Thus literary inquisitions and persecutions continued all through Kanghsi's reign and many of the better known scholars were involved in cases of this kind. For a time Emperor Sheng-tsu (Kanghsi) held these persecutions in limits as he was well aware of the fact that he was also dependent upon the leading scholars for his administrative machinery and that "traitors" whose cooperation he had succeeded in enlisting would not suffice to complete his empire. In 1679, the institution of a special examination, the Po-hsüeh hung-ju^{a2}, was revived and pressure was brought to bear on the scholars to participate. Most of them declined.

This period of being out of office bore its results. Free from official duties, the scholars found a breathing space for revaluating the field once again. The revaluation brought about an entirely new attitude towards scholarship and created new systems of thought. It produced a strong reaction against the thinking of the past. Gradually an almost general rejection of the authoritarian Sung philosophy developed. A general tendency towards a new realism can be observed. The task of

2. The small letters refer to the list of Chinese characters appended at the end of this article. This list contains only expressions, titles and names not commonly known or easily found in the current dictionaries, or in the bibliographical books such as A. Wylie's *Notes on Chinese Literature* and L. Wieger's *La Chine à travers les âges*, or in the biographic works such as H. A. Giles' *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary* and A. W. Hummel's *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (2 vols., Washington 1943). Editor.

scholarship was set down as being research rather than speculation. And at the same time, quite logically, the tendency was to lay renewed stress on local groupings and interests. Ku Yen-wu's (1613-1682) criticism of over-centralisation and Huang Tsung-hsi's (1610-1695) anti-dynastic writings may be cited here as examples. Thus the political aspect of this spiritual movement was an awakening of the gentry-consciousness of the scholar group.

The scholar-court relationship did not and could not remain as antagonistic as it had been during the first decades of the dynasty. As soon as the Manchus had consolidated their power and established themselves as a Chinese dynasty, the tradition of the anti-Manchu attitude gradually went underground and was kept alive by secret societies and religious groups, whereas the scholars eased their way into office again. This movement of the scholars was canalized by an ever-increasing watchfulness of the court against dangerous thoughts. Already in Yung-cheng times the severity of literary persecutions had again grown and showed all the sinister aspects of a thought-control carried on by a secret supervising agency. And the great impact of the literary inquisition of Chienlung times is too well known to require further elaboration.

The result of this pressure was the formation of the T'ung-ch'eng school^b. The emergence of this school can be explained as the outcome of different processes which together produced an overwhelming stress on the features of style and a general neglect of the features of content. By the prohibition of certain intellectual topics the scholars were pushed into a concentration on refinement of form. Frightened into conformity by the attitude of the court against independent thought, they abstained from creative thinking altogether. Thus, a reaction against the expansion of the substance of thought as practised by the early Ch'ing scholars set in and intensified the pitch of another development in the artistic sphere: a highly formalized style modeled after Sung and T'ang masters took the place of the stylistic freedoms of the past era. The T'ung-ch'eng school soon became the literary fashion of the time. It took its

name from a town in Anhui where its founder Yao Nai (1730-1814), as well as two earlier scholars Fang Pao (1668-1749) and Liu Ta-k'uei (1698-1780) whom Yao Nai considered as his teachers, was born. The stylistic niceties of Yao Nai and his school usurped the minds of the time to such a degree that attention to contents and substance was altogether neglected. Although Yao repeatedly defined the three tasks of a scholar as being philosophy, stylistic achievement, and research, the stylistic feature by far outbid the others. The first of these tasks was a bow to his ideological allies, the remnants of the Sung school, and the last a concession to his adversaries, the Han school of scholarship. But the T'ung-ch'eng scholars never excelled in original thinking and their researches were confined to an accumulation of commentaries which were found to be in accordance with the teachings of the court-sponsored Sung philosophers.

3

The ideological line-up by mid 19th century can be described as follows: on the one side stood the large and powerful T'ung-ch'eng school and their ally, the Sung school. Its philosophical significance had dwindled considerably, but at least two of its representatives, T'ang Chien (1778-1861) and the Mongol Wo-jen († 1871) were influential in later developments. The adherents of both these schools have been labeled as "Hao-hao hsien-sheng"^c, scholars who acquiesced in the prevailing situation, and conformed to the ideological exactions of the court. Both undertook a heated controversy with the Han school of scholarship, the men of research, who could boast of such original thinkers as Tai Chen (1724-1777) within their ranks. The attacks of the T'ung-ch'eng scholars against this school were especially acrimonious. One of them, Sun Ting-ch'en († 1859) even went so far as to say that they brought about the Taiping rebellion, an indictment which Tseng Kuo-fan calls a slight overstatement. Another group, the Chin-wen scholars who at that time were represented by Kung Tzu-ch'en (1792-1841) and Wei

Yüan (1794–1856), had recently splintered off from the main trend of the Han school. But the importance of this group was to become evident only at a later time when K'ang Yu-wei (1858–1927) and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873–1929) developed their ideas.

4

This was the situation when Tseng Kuo-fan set up his life in the capital, and this was the ideological material he had to work with. Tseng had not been a very brilliant student. It had cost him great pains to work his way through the examinations. But he was a master strategist in the field of ideology; he grasped quickly the possibilities of the actual situation and responded by making the best use of it. Only after he had arrived at the capital for his final examinations, did he realize what scholarship really meant; and we are told the touching story how he borrowed money and pawned his clothes in order to buy books. Exposed to the intellectual atmosphere of Peking, he set out to reshape himself, and his disgust with the superficiality of metropolitan officialdom is only surpassed by his disgust with himself and his squandered years. He worked out a rigid time schedule for himself which not only included vast reading, but meditation and moral endeavours as well, following the influence of his Sung school friends. For a time he retired into a temple in the South city, so as not to be disturbed in his studies and discussions. But chance had it that this temple was located opposite the Hall of Reverence in honor of Ku Yen-wu. It is during this time that Tseng became an admirer of the T'ung-ch'eng school, and he considered himself one of their flock ever after. Of his eight fundamental maxims laid down in a home letter more than twenty years later, two are replicas of Yao Nai's prescriptions for reading and writing, and in a letter written in the year preceding his death, he repeats one of the precepts of T'ung-ch'eng stylistics. All through his life, he quoted Yao Nai and contemporary T'ung-ch'eng scholars such as Wu T'ing-tung (1793–1873). He even shared their adverse criticism of the men of the

Han school and especially condemned Tai Chen, although he did not reject them entirely: «I revere Sung Confucianism, but I do not wish the Han school to be eliminated», he said. His great memorials in the beginning of Hsienfeng time by which he established his name as a potential leader are full of the ideas of T'ang Chien and Wu T'ing-tung. The starting point even of these memorials: correction of human habits and moulding of human talents are the property of the T'ung-ch'eng school.

With this in mind, the degree to which Tseng developed these ideas is all the more astonishing; but one should well remember that all his conceptions are based on a philosophy of an ultra-authoritarian tint.

But already in these memorials, Tseng did not limit the arsenal of his argumentations to those offered by the T'ung-ch'eng school. Here as well as in his treatise on the Origin of Talents, he quoted the great personalities of early Ch'ing times. What impressed him was the personal attitude of intransigence he found in Ku Yen-wu, Huang Tsung-hsi, Sun Ch'i-feng (1585-1675), and others, their firmness and uprightness. This was what was called for in order to "change the habits and customs and mould the talents of the generation in accordance with the tendency inherent in oneself". Only in this way, he held, was it possible to deal with affairs, which called for self-denial and love of the people, removal of the artificial and reverence for the simple, not shrinking back from difficulties and not looking for compensation. "Do not care for the harvest, but care for the tilling and weeding."

To this attitude he wanted his generation educated. Combined with thorough studies, this attitude leads to scope and stature (*ch'i-shih*)^d, the prerequisite condition for political leadership.

Here we find the ideological alloy in the process of formation which would later prove to be of such great strength and vigor, the call to the support of his military and political tasks. Impressed by the attitude of Ku Yen-wu, and the other scholars of early Ch'ing, he took over more and more of their substantial conceptions and his political ideology in its final shape owes much to their influence.

5

Tseng's final ideological system is centered around the conception of *li*, social usage or principle of social conduct. It is not by chance, that he chose this term from the Confucian armory. His main task was to bring about a new social cohesion and to rally a gentry which he described as "bowing to circumstances and short-breathed, crafty and greedy, not white and not black, not sensitive to pain nor to itches". To integrate this new cohesion he uses that Confucian term which has the most social implications, which once before had been called upon to cement the tottering political system and which throughout China's history had stood for the predominance of social conduct over economic feasibility. As a motto he quotes a sentence from Wang Fu-chih (1619-1692): "Amongst the means by which the Holy Kings balanced the relationship between the object and the subject and appeased the struggles of the world, internally there was none greater than humanness (*jen*) and externally there was none more important than social usage (*li*)", on which Tseng elaborates:

"By which way the gentlemen of antiquity exhausted their minds in order to cultivate their nature cannot be known. But as to the education of their persons, the regulations of their families, the governing of the state, and the pacifying of the world, all that is comprised in the word *li* (social usage). Starting to speak from the internal aspect, without social usage, there is nothing that could be called morals; starting to speak from the external aspect, without social usage, there is nothing that could be called politics."

To formulate his conception of *li*, he drew heavily on the *Li-shu kang-mu*^e of Chiang Jung († 1762) and on the *Wu-li t'ung-k'ao* of Ch'in Hui-t'ien (1702-1764). But again he applies the teachings of the early Ch'ing scholars such as Ku Yen-wu, and above all, he quotes several times the *Chung-yung lun*^f of Chang Er-ch'i (1612-1678). That he mentions this treatise represents that for him, *li* meant not only ceremoni-

ousness, rites, or proper conduct, but that he had the social function of this conception in mind as well as its metaphysical background.

With this conception he not only tried to integrate society again, but also tried to reconcile his former opponents. All schools, he said, have this conception as a common basis, and even Tai Chen is acknowledged in this connection. "The school of philosophy", he says, "the school of stylistics, the school of statesmanship and the school of research, all these four have to go together". It is worthy of note, that three of these four schools mentioned are comprised in the enumeration of Yao Nai, and that these three are confined to the so-called internal aspect, the education of the personality. But with the help of his newly won allies he built up the science of *li* as the science of statesmanship (*ching-shih-hsüeh*).

6

From this conception of *li* as a social function, there logically springs one of the slogans of Tseng Kuo-fan's ideology: the preservation of civilisation (*ming-chiao*)⁸. It is characteristic that what he wants to preserve is not the Empire, nor the throne of the foreign dynasty but civilisation. It is furthermore characteristic, that he does not use the term for Confucianism (*ju-chiao*) or for orthodoxy (*cheng-chiao*) by which usually Sung Confucianism was understood, but the word *ming-chiao* which could be translated as: the proper terms and teachings of the Sages. This slogan was especially evolved against the new ideology of the Taipings. He says:

"Since the days of Yao, Shun and the Three Dynasties, the Sages of all the ages have preserved civilisation (*ming-chiao*) by stressing human relationships, and the position of ruler and official, of father and son, of above and below, of honoured and common, consequently became noninvertible just as cap and shoe. Now the brigands of Yüeh (the Taipings) have usurped the principles of foreign barbarians, they adhere to the religion of the Lord in Heaven and therefore their fake rulers and

fake ministers, down to the soldiers and servants all call themselves brothers. They say that only Heaven could be called father, but aside from that, the fathers of all people are brothers, and the mothers of all people are sisters. The farmers are not allowed to till their own fields in order to pay taxes, but they say that all the land is the land of the Heavenly King. The merchants are not allowed to put up their own business in order to draw interest, but they say all the merchandise is the merchandise of the Heavenly King. The scholars are not allowed to recite the Classics of Confucius, but they have other teachings of one so-called Jesus and the Book of the New Testament. That means that usages, and propriety, and human relationships, that the *Songs*, and the *History* (the Confucian Classics), and the regulations in use for many thousand years in China are entirely swept away with one stroke. How could that be a change that only concerned our Ch'ing dynasty? No, it is a serious change that concerns our entire civilisation (*ming-chiao*) from its very beginnings and makes our Confucius and our Mencius cry with grief at the Nine Wells. How can anyone who can read and write remain quietly seated, hands in sleeve, without thinking of doing something about it?"

This passage is characteristic for Tseng Kuo-fan in several respects. Firstly, it shows how deeply he was prejudiced by the extreme authoritarianism of Sung philosophy for which the relationship between above and below forms the main substance of civilisation. So much blinded was he in his zeal, that he did not even stop at repeating word for word one of the best known passages from the *Analects*, usually translated as "all men are brothers", to rail against the baseness of Taiping ideology. Secondly it shows how intensely he was aware of the revolutionary character of the Taiping movement and how alarmed he was by the danger which its revolutionary social order and its revolutionary ideology carried for a civilisation in which the main function of the farmer was to pay taxes and of the merchant to make profits. Thirdly, it shows that the people he called upon to preserve this civilisation were those who could read and write, in other words, the gentry.

Quoting a passage from Ku Yen-wu "Every man (*p'i-fu*)^h has his responsibility here", he appealed to the scholar-gentry class, over and over again, to preserve this civilisation. We have already seen, that he tried to instil a new social consciousness into this class, and the details of these endeavours may be taken from many of his instructions and regulations. He works out a set of four commandments for the gentry which read:

1. Protect the stupid and the weak in order to guard the district.
 2. Observe frugality and courteousness in order to serve the common weal. (This, as is explained, is especially said with regard to the preservation of the local financial power.)
 3. Avoid bombast in order to devote yourself to reality.
 4. Expand ability and knowledge in order to be prepared for action.
- And he exacts respect for the local gentry not only from the population but also from his field commanders.

7

One word about Tseng's attitude toward the people. Of course, people have to be loved and protected. He knew well that without the force of the people, his campaign against the Taipings could not succeed. Therefore he says, "Over the whole world, rulers are installed and officials are appointed only for the sake of the people", but, as for him the people were mainly the stupid and the weak, he continues, "as long as we are in office our intercourse with the people is restricted to lawsuits and taxes". By alleviating the financial burden of the people and by making the decrees simple and the punishments light, this intercourse will have satisfying results for everybody concerned. But Tseng in his social-mindedness went one step further. What he wanted to achieve is the social integration not only of the gentry but also of the people. For this purpose he made use of the local corps (*t'uan-lien*)ⁱ. He made it clear in several letters and instructions that the aim of the

local corps is not only and not even mainly to build up military strength. The stress, he said, should be laid more on the *t'uan* than on the *lien*, more on the cohesion of the community than on the military training. This device works in two ways, and both were envisaged by Tseng. It works toward social integration and to build up morale. But it also facilitates supervision and what he calls the weeding out of bandits. For, according to his rules, the setting up of a corps has to be matched by a strict population census and by the system of mutual responsibility (*pao-chia*)^k. So his love for the people had its ulterior motives.

But the great achievement of Tseng Kuo-fan remains his idea of the integration of social forces on a local basis, and thus he achieved his second great slogan: "Protect our mountains and rivers."

a 博學鴻儒

f 中庸論

b 桐城學派

g 名教

c 好好先生

h 匹夫

d 器識

i 團練

e 禮書綱目

k 保甲