

A Review of Research on Tao Shu's Economic Thought from a Global Perspective

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Abstract

Tao Shu was a prominent statesman and economic reformer during the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns of the Qing dynasty. His theories and practices in areas such as grain transport, salt administration, fiscal policy, and currency reform had a profound impact on modern Chinese economic thought and the country's early modernization efforts. This paper, grounded in a global perspective, systematically reviews the current state of research on Tao Shu's economic thought, with particular attention to Chinese scholarship regarding his theoretical contributions, policy initiatives, and historical role. More importantly, it offers the first concentrated presentation of Western academic perspectives on Tao Shu and his reforms, aiming to highlight the multidimensional value of his thought on an international stage. Through this, the study seeks to expand the global reach of Chinese economic intellectual history and promote renewed recognition of traditional Chinese economic thought within the broader world intellectual system.

Keywords

Tao Shu, Economic Thought, Modern China, Global vision.

1. Introduction

Tao Shu (1779-1839) was a renowned statesman, financial expert and economic reformer during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods of the Qing Dynasty. In the fields of waterway transportation, salt administration, finance, taxation, currency circulation and social security, he attempted to carry out institutional reforms within the traditional feudal system, striving to alleviate the country's fiscal predicament and economic crisis. His reform measures not only had strong practical relevance but also demonstrated forward-thinking institutional thinking and economic concepts, making them an important part of the transformation of Chinese economic thought from traditional to modern.

Domestic academic circles have conducted relatively systematic research on Tao Shu, achieving fruitful results in terms of his ideological sources and connotations, specific policy practices and historical impacts. However, in existing research, systematic reviews and introductions of Western scholars' studies on Tao Shu are scarce, and his economic thought has not received sufficient attention in the West. In fact, since the 20th century, some Western scholars have given high evaluations of Tao Shu and his economic propositions through comparative institutional economic history and studies on modern Chinese reform thought. These achievements offer significant implications for broadening the international perspective of Tao Shu research and repositioning his significance in the global intellectual history.

This article aims to review the existing research in China and focus on introducing and analyzing the research results of Western scholars on Tao Shu's economic thought, exploring its value and influence in the context of global economic thought history, and attempting to promote the study of traditional Chinese economic thought from a domestic focus to a broader international academic dialogue platform.

2. Overview of Domestic Research on Tao Shu's Economic Thought

2.1. Compilation of Historical Materials on Tao Shu's Economic Thought and Reform Practices

During the late Qing period, both scholarly and popular efforts were made to compile and preserve Tao Shu's writings. In 1840 (the 20th year of Daoguang), The Collected Works of Minister Tao Wenyigong, edited by Xu Qiaolin, was published in 76 volumes, containing some of Tao Shu's memorials, essays, and poems. In addition, memorial collections such as Memorials of Tao Wenyigong and Petitions by Tao Wenyigong, compiled by Wei Yuan and Li Tingxi, provided valuable first-hand sources for future scholars. In 1998, Yuelu Publishing House released The Collected Works of Tao Shu, consolidating earlier folk compilations. In 2010, Professor Chen Puqing of Hunan Normal University edited and published The Complete Works of Tao Shu, which organized Tao Shu's surviving memorials, petitions, letters, literary writings, poetry, couplets, and monographs into eight major sections—representing the most comprehensive compilation to date. This corpus has greatly facilitated modern scholarship. However, many of Tao Shu's works were lost in the turmoil following his death, especially during the outbreak of the First Opium War, leaving gaps that are now impossible to recover.

2.2. General Evaluations of Tao Shu's Reform Achievements and Historical Standing

After Tao Shu's death in 1839 (the 19th year of Daoguang), the progressive thinker Wei Yuan composed three commemorative texts in his honor: a biographical account, an epitaph, and a stele inscription. In these works, Wei Yuan provided a detailed assessment of Tao Shu's life and political achievements, praising his successes in governance, grain transport, salt administration, water conservancy, and disaster relief, calling them "unprecedented" and stating "there has never been one like him." [1]. This represented a high recognition of Tao Shu's historical stature.

Other late Qing reform-minded officials, such as Zuo Zongtang and Zeng Guofan, also offered praise. Zuo Zongtang, in his memorial Request to Establish a Shrine for the Late Viceroys, noted the "remarkable effectiveness" of Tao Shu's reforms, especially in salt policy, and emphasized that "gentry and people alike remember him fondly. [2]" He requested an imperial decree to jointly commemorate Tao Shu and Lin Zexu in a dedicated shrine. Zeng Guofan also lauded Tao Shu's piao yan (salt ticket) system as "elegant in conception and beneficial in practice, [3]" and advocated for its promotion across the Lianghuai region.

During the Republican era, Draft History of the Qing, compiled by the Beiyang Government under chief editor Zhao Erxun and published in 1927, included a dedicated biography of Tao Shu, summarizing his policies and accomplishments during office [4].

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, scholars from Tao Shu's native province of Hunan have continued to explore his legacy. For example, such as Tao Shu: A Great Politician at the Transition of Ancient and Modern Times (2009) by Professors Chen Puqing and Xue Qilin of Hunan Normal University, and Tao Shu as a Pioneer of Modern Economic Reform in China (2005) by Professor Tao Yongshu of Hunan City University, both of which recognized Tao Shu's historical significance and long-lasting influence.

2.3. Specialized Research on Tao Shu's Salt Administration Thought and Reform Practices

Tao Shu's reforms in the Lianghuai salt administration have long been a focal point in post-1949 Chinese scholarship. Existing studies generally fall into three categories:

The first category involves the compilation and textual analysis of historical documents related to Tao Shu's reforms. Key works include Luo Qingkang's A Brief Discussion on Tao Shu's

Rectification of the Lianghuai Salt Administration (1988), Fang Yiqing's Tao Shu and the Reform of the Lianghuai Salt Administration (1989), Tao Yongshu's On Tao Shu's Rectification and Reform of the Lianghuai Salt Administration (1991), Li Yingsheng's A Brief Analysis of Late Qing Salt Administration and Tao Shu's Reform Measures (1996), Zhang Mingzu's Tao Shu's Reform of the Northern Huai Salt Administration (2001), and Huang Kangjian's A Preliminary Study of Tao Shu's Salt Ticket Reform in Northern Huai (2008). These articles provide detailed analyses of Tao Shu's measures and their historical documentation.

The second category focuses on in-depth evaluations of Tao Shu's salt policy and its implications. For instance, Professor Duan Chao (now at South-Central University for Nationalities), in *Tao Shu's Salt Reform and Its Characteristics of the Time* (2000), analyzes the motivations, policies, outcomes, and historical significance of the reforms, identifying two key features: "respect for the laws of commodity circulation" and "emphasis on the role of merchants. [5]" Professor Ni Yuping of Tsinghua University, in *Government, Merchants, and the People: On Tao Shu's Reform of the Salt Ticket System in Northern Huai*, explores the reform's motivations, implementation, and results, concluding that the policy disrupted the monopolies of licensed salt merchants and helped rebalance the interests of the government, merchants, and consumers [6]. In another paper, *Flexibility Within Legal Precedent: Tao Shu and the Reform of the Salt Administration in Southern Huai* (2010), Ni notes that the southern Huai reform was more constrained by precedent, limiting its effectiveness [7].

The third category incorporates assessments of Tao Shu's reforms into broader studies of Qing salt history. Representative works include Professor Chen Feng's *Salt Administration and Salt Taxes in the Qing Dynasty* (1988, reprinted in 2013), and Ni Yuping's *Game and Balance: The Reform of the Lianghuai Salt Administration in the Qing Dynasty* (2011). These monographs provide both historical context and analytical depth.

2.4. Specialized Research on Tao Shu's Grain Transport (Canal and Maritime Shipping) Reform Thought and Practices

Tao Shu's reforms in grain transportation—particularly his shift from riverine to maritime shipping—represent another major focus of Chinese scholarship. This body of research may also be classified into three main types:

The first type includes studies dedicated to the compilation and textual analysis of historical materials on Tao Shu's reforms. Representative works include: Tao Yongshu's *Tao Shu's Rectification and Reform of Grain Transport* (1990) and *On Tao Shu and the Maritime Transport Reform of Daoguang Bingxu Year* (1995); Duan Chao's *Tao Shu's Maritime Transport Reform and Its Historical Status* (1999); Li Yumin's *Tao Shu's Reform of Grain Transport* (2001); Wen Kai and Wang Yanying's *Tao Shu and the Daoguang Sixth-Year Maritime Reform of Tribute Grain* (2015); Wang Chenchen's *A Study of Tao Shu's Official Documents on Grain Transport* (2020).

These works mainly trace the historical background, implementation details, and official memorials regarding Tao Shu's reforms. Most authors offer positive assessments, arguing that Tao's maritime transport initiative improved state fiscal revenue and reduced burdens on the people. Many also consider Tao Shu a pioneer of Qing maritime grain transportation and regard his reform as epoch-making.

However, some scholars have adopted more neutral or cautious stances. In *Several Issues Regarding the Sixth-Year Daoguang Maritime Grain Reform* (2002), Ni Yuping contends that maritime shipping did not actually reduce costs compared to river transport. Rather, it merely shifted the fiscal burden from the central government (via "bounty fees") to local governments (via "contracted transport" expenses). He also points out the existence of semi-coercive practices in merchant ship recruitment (fenggu) during the reform [8].

Guo Yanhong, in *A Cost Study of the Sixth-Year Daoguang Maritime Transport Reform* (2017), supports Ni's conclusions and adds that the widespread acclaim the reform received was due in part to a historical inevitability: maritime transport was seen as the future, and the intellectual class hoped that the pilot reform would succeed and be expanded. This created an exaggerated narrative of cost savings that did not align with the actual figures [9].

The second type of research appears in general or thematic works on the history of grain transport. These include: *Grain Transport in the Qing Dynasty* (1995) by Li Wenzhi and Jiang Taixin, and *Maritime Grain Transport and Social Change in the Qing Dynasty* (2005) by Ni Yuping.

The third type focuses on the impact of Tao Shu's grain transport reforms on specific social groups or historical events. For example: Zhao Siyuan's *From "Grain Transport Leases" to "Grain Transport Appeals": Evolution of Gentry Power in Jiangnan During the Early Daoguang Reforms* (2011) explores how Tao Shu's crackdown on corrupt practices affected local gentry's economic and social status [10]. A notable international study is *Rebel on the Canal: Disrupted Trade Access and Social Conflict in China, 1650–1911* by Cao Yiming (Boston University) and Chen Shuo (Fudan University), published in *American Economic Review* (2021). Using panel data over 262 years, they find that the decline of canal-based grain transport correlates with an increase in uprisings along the canal, due to reduced trade accessibility and economic opportunity [11].

Among Chinese scholars, the most comprehensive analysis of Tao Shu's maritime grain reform is Ni Yuping's *Maritime Grain Transport and Social Change in the Qing Dynasty*. Ni reconstructs the entire process of the Daoguang Sixth-Year reform—from inception to implementation—and highlights the collaborative efforts of Tao Shu with key figures like Qishan, Bao Shichen, and Wei Yuan. While affirming the reform's historical significance, he also rigorously examines issues such as merchant participation, cost transparency, shipping safety, and vessel capacity, ultimately offering a balanced economic-historical evaluation of Tao Shu's initiative [12].

2.5. Research on Tao Shu's Other Economic Ideas

In addition to his well-known reforms in salt and grain transport, scholars have also explored Tao Shu's broader economic thought, including his perspectives on commerce, currency, taxation, water conservancy, disaster relief, and foreign trade. These studies, though often shorter in form, offer important insights into the depth and complexity of Tao Shu's economic philosophy. The relevant research may be grouped into the following categories:

First, studies on Tao Shu's pro-commerce thinking (*li shang sixiang*). Tao Yongshu's early paper *A Preliminary Study on Tao Shu's Pro-Commercial Thought* (1984) identifies three key features: his emphasis on the role of commercial capital, his protection of merchants' political rights, and his advocacy for minting silver coinage. Tao links these views to broader social and economic changes of the time [13].

Second, discussions of Tao Shu's monetary thought. In *The Monetary Theories of Tao Shu*, Lin Zexu, and Wei Yuan (1994), Tao Yongshu examines responses to the Daoguang-era currency crisis. He concludes that Tao Shu's proposal to mint silver coinage was among the most scientifically sound of the time, reflecting the demands of a developing market economy and protecting both national industry and monetary sovereignty [14].

Third, explorations of Tao Shu's tax philosophy. Liu Fan and Liu Bei, in *A Comparison of the Tax Theories of David Ricardo and Tao Shu: A View of China's Early Modernization* (2010), note that Tao Shu's ideas, as expressed through the salt ticket system, mirror Ricardo's belief that tax burdens should align with individuals' financial capacity and that lower taxes reduce prices. They argue that Tao's thinking already embodied certain "modern" elements [15].

Fourth, his views on foreign trade. In *Tao Shu: A Regional Leader in the Opium Prohibition Movement* (2015), Chen Puqing summarizes Tao's anti-opium stance and initiatives, arguing

that Tao's determined resistance to opium deeply influenced Lin Zexu and that Tao deserves recognition as a leading figure in the prohibition movement [16].

Fifth, studies of Tao Shu's approach to disaster relief and famine relief. Representative works include Tao Yongshu's *Tao Shu's Response to Floods in Suzhou and Huai'an* (1993), and Li Zhiqun's *A Study of Tao Shu's Famine Relief Thought and Practices as Governor-General of Liangjiang During the Jiaqing and Daoguang Periods* (2008). These studies outline Tao's philosophy on pre-disaster prevention, emergency response, and post-disaster recovery, praising his methods as "practical and thorough. [17]"

2.6. Research on the Influence of Tao Shu's Economic Thought

Some Chinese scholars have examined the influence of Tao Shu's economic thought and his interactions with prominent political and cultural figures of his time. This research mainly takes two forms:

First, historical investigations into Tao Shu's personal and intellectual relationships with other notable Qing officials and thinkers. Representative studies include: *Tao Shu and the "Three Titans of the Xiang Army"* by Yi Yongqing and Tao Yongshu; *Lin Zexu and Tao Shu in Jiangsu* by Xiao Zhizhi. Tao Yongshu's series of studies: "Like-minded and Deeply United": On Tao Shu and Lin Zexu; "I Have Ascended the Western Pavilion, You Should Soon Be at Court": On Tao Shu and He Changling; "Eager to Chase the Wind, Willing to Roam Freely": On Tao Shu and Wei Yuan; "Searching for Chives in the Rain, Reading Your Letters in the Spring Breeze": On Tao Shu and Yan Ruyi; *A Preliminary Study of the Relationship Between Tao Shu and Bao Shichen*; "A Talent of Vast Tolerance and Steady Virtue": On Tao Shu and Liang Zhangju.

These works reconstruct Tao Shu's intellectual network, particularly within the reform-oriented "statecraft" (jingshi) tradition, emphasizing the collaborative intellectual climate of the period.

Second, analyses of Tao Shu's impact on later generations of Hunanese reformers and scholars. Professor Tao Yongshu has contributed most extensively to this line of inquiry. In his articles *Tao Shu as the Core of the Hunan Talent Network in Modern China* and *Further Discussion on Tao Shu and the Modern Hunan Intellectual Group*, he positions Tao as a central figure in the formation of the Hunan school of statecraft and a key link between Qing reform officials and the intellectual development of Hunan in the late Qing and early Republican period.

In 2018, Tao Yongshu published *Tao Shu's Circle of Friends and Mentors*, a monograph exploring Tao's relationships with influential figures such as Yan Ruyi, Tang Peng, Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, and Wei Yuan. The book examines the mutual influence among these figures and their shared commitment to practical reform, thus illuminating the broader intellectual currents Tao Shu helped shape.

2.7. Monographs and Chronological Studies on Tao Shu

Chinese scholars have produced several dedicated monographs on Tao Shu, offering comprehensive assessments of his life, political achievements, and economic thought. These works have laid the foundation for Tao Shu studies as a distinct academic field.

The earliest known monograph is *Tao Shu in Jiangnan* (1985) by Taiwanese scholar Wei Xiumei, which offers a detailed examination of Tao Shu's political and economic reforms in the Liangjiang region.

The second major work emerged following the 1989 academic symposium commemorating the 150th anniversary of Tao Shu's death, held in Anhua County, Yiyang City, Hunan Province. The selected proceedings were published in 1992 under the title *On Tao Shu*, containing 36 essays covering a wide range of topics, including his political accomplishments, statecraft ideology, relationships with other reformers, and literary contributions.

Two important monographs focus specifically on Tao Shu's thought within the context of Qing dynasty statecraft:

The first is *Tao Shu and the Statecraft Thought of the Jiaqing and Daoguang Periods* (1999), based on Professor Duan Chao's doctoral dissertation at Wuhan University. This book takes Tao Shu as the central figure in exploring the broader intellectual trends of the time. It provides a detailed account of his political philosophy, reform achievements, and influence on the Hunan school of practical governance. Duan identifies elements of modernization within Tao Shu's economic reforms while also acknowledging their limitations. The book was formally published in 2001 and has had significant influence in reshaping scholarly perceptions of Tao Shu's historical role [18].

The second is *Tao Shu's Thought and Practice of Statecraft* (2011) by Professor Xue Qilin of Hunan University. Written from the perspective of intellectual history, the book explores Tao Shu's ideas and policies related to reform, education, scholarship, and disaster relief. Xue summarizes Tao Shu's historical significance in four dimensions: a powerful enforcer of statecraft thinking, a promoter of economic development in the Liangjiang region, a pioneer of modern economic reform in China, and a model official known for administrative efficiency and talent cultivation [19].

In addition to these studies, two chronological biographies (*nianpu*) of Tao Shu have been compiled:

The first, *Chronology of Minister Tao Wenyigong* (1938), was written during the Republican era by Wang Huanrui of Jinling University (now Nanjing University). Divided into two volumes, it presents a chronological account of Tao Shu's life and career.

The second, *Chronology of Tao Shu* (1984), co-authored by Tao Yongshu and Shi Yantao, provides a more detailed and contextualized narrative. This version incorporates major contemporaneous historical events and biographical information on individuals who interacted with Tao Shu, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of both his personal trajectory and the broader environment in which he lived.

3. Overview of Overseas Research on Tao Shu's Economic Thought

As a key political figure in the Qing dynasty prior to the Opium War, Tao Shu has also drawn attention from scholars outside China, particularly in North America and Japan. While the volume of foreign-language literature is limited, existing studies demonstrate valuable perspectives and contribute to the global understanding of Tao Shu's thought.

3.1. Research in North America

Early Western mentions of Tao Shu were often brief but notable. For instance, renowned American Sinologist Arthur W. Hummel included Tao Shu in his edited volume *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (1944), describing Tao's achievements in grain transport and salt administration as substantial. Hummel especially highlighted Tao's implementation of the salt ticket system (*piao yan zhi*), which he believed partially dismantled the monopoly of the licensed salt merchants (*gang shang*) and boosted state revenues [20].

More in-depth studies followed in the 1960s. German-American scholar Thomas A. Metzger made Tao Shu the subject of his 1962 paper *Tao Chu's Reform of the Huaipai Salt Monopoly*, published in *Papers on China*. Metzger praised Tao for "swiftly and comprehensively restoring sales and tax revenue in the Lianghuai salt region," while also noting that Tao's reforms antagonized conservative officials and merchants, limiting long-term political support [21].

Tao Shu later became the entry point for Metzger's PhD dissertation at Harvard University, titled *The Internal Organization of Ch'ing Bureaucracy: Legal, Normative, and Communication Aspects*. Using Tao's memorials from 1831 to 1834, Metzger examined the Qing bureaucratic

system's inner workings. He argued that Tao's economic reforms demonstrated "creativity and flexibility," while his memorials tactfully employed "traditional expressions" to secure imperial approval—for example, referencing precedent (*chengfa*) to justify new measures. Metzger concluded that the Qing bureaucracy, contrary to prevailing assumptions, exhibited a degree of adaptability. Capable officials like Tao Shu could enact meaningful reforms during times of crisis [22]. The dissertation was later published in book form in the United States in 1973, and it remains one of the most influential Western-language works involving Tao Shu.

In 1980, Laurence David Sokoloff of the University of British Columbia submitted a master's thesis that built on Metzger's legacy. He argued that Metzger may have been overly optimistic about Qing administrative capacity. While acknowledging the short-term success of Tao's salt ticket reforms, Sokoloff identified internal weaknesses in the system. He noted that external pressures—including the Taiping Rebellion and Western imperialist encroachment—eventually undermined the viability of these reforms. Nevertheless, he affirmed the overall value of Tao's proposals, calling them the most comprehensive and pragmatic solutions available at the time [23].

Tao Shu's reform of grain transport also attracted interest. Professor Jane Kate Leonard of the University of Akron, in her 1996 book *Controlling from Afar: The Daoguang Emperor's Management of the Grand Canal Crisis, 1824–1826*, analyzed the central government's response to the canal crisis and assessed Tao Shu's maritime grain transport initiative. Like Metzger, Leonard recognized the administrative innovations behind the reform and emphasized Tao's key role in its successful execution [24].

3.2. Research in Japan

Among Japanese scholars, the most influential work on Tao Shu comes from historian Saeki Tomi. In his book *Research on Qing Dynasty Salt Administration* (1956), Saeki devoted an entire chapter to Tao's salt reform policies. He argued that the core of Tao's strategy was to "lower official salt prices to compete with the private salt market" and abolish the corrupt *zongshang* (general merchant) system, which he termed "a cancer of salt administration." Saeki concluded that Tao's reforms were highly effective: private salt diminished, people gained access to better and cheaper official salt, and the government reaped greater tax revenue [25].

Another Japanese scholar, Otani Toshio, also conducted specialized research on Tao Shu. In his 1995 article *On the Formation of the Late Qing Hunan Bureaucracy: From the Perspective of Statecraft Thought and Policy*, Otani examined Tao's central place in Qing-era Hunan officialdom and his influence on key figures such as Zuo Zongtang, Zeng Guofan, and Hu Linyi [26]. In a later 1998 paper, *Tao Shu's Administration and Thought as a Qing Statecraft Official*, Otani discussed Tao's contributions to salt and monetary reform. He praised Tao as "just, pragmatic, patriotic, and incorruptible," and credited him with rectifying serious flaws in both governance and finance [27].

4. Conclusion

In summary, scholarly research on Tao Shu's economic thought in China has produced a substantial body of work, encompassing the compilation of historical documents, specialized studies, theoretical analyses, and evaluations of his historical significance. Among these, the discussions on his reform practices in salt administration and grain transport are particularly in-depth, highlighting Tao Shu's important role within the Qing dynasty's statecraft tradition and institutional transformation. Nevertheless, further efforts are needed to enhance the comprehensiveness and systematic integration of his economic thought, especially regarding its conceptual connections with modern economic ideas.

In contrast, although the volume of Western research on Tao Shu remains limited, existing studies exhibit distinct strengths in the use of primary sources, institutional analysis, and theoretical framing. Notably, they offer important insights into the institutional motivations behind Tao Shu's reforms and the adaptive capacity of the Qing bureaucratic system. However, these valuable contributions have long lacked systematic introduction and critical engagement within Chinese academia, resulting in Tao Shu's underrecognized position in global economic intellectual history.

Future research should deepen in the context of sustained Sino-foreign academic dialogue. On one hand, scholars should continue to uncover and organize first-hand historical materials related to Tao Shu, thereby promoting more systematic studies of his economic thought. On the other hand, it is imperative to situate Tao Shu within the broader framework of global economic thought, exploring the intersections between his reform philosophy and early modernization, institutional economics, and fiscal-monetary governance. Such efforts will contribute to the construction of an economic intellectual history narrative with distinct Chinese characteristics and global relevance.

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