

Modern Development Paths and the Reconstruction of Educational Function: A Case Study of Longnan Academy

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Abstract: As a prominent Qing Dynasty circuit-level academy (daoli shuyuan) in Northwest China, the historical evolution of Longnan Academy represents a typical transformation path for traditional Chinese educational institutions during the process of modernization. This study systematically charts the academy's trajectory: from its origins as Wenchang Academy, its relocation to Qinzhou, its reconstruction as Longnan Academy, to its late-Qing conversion into a modern secondary school, ultimately evolving into the contemporary Tianshui No. 1 Middle School in Gansu Province. The article focuses on its "evolutionary adaptability" across historical stages and its "functional persistence" in returning to the essence of education. By analyzing its roles in cultural edification, talent cultivation, and academic inheritance, this research reveals the underlying logic of its centennial continuity. Through a longitudinal analysis of the academy's philosophy of "statecraft and practical learning" (jingshi zhiyong), its sacrificial rituals, curricula, and institutional shifts, this paper argues that traditional academies were not entirely replaced during modernization; rather, they achieved a sustained extension of educational value and a reconstruction of cultural functions through adaptive transformation. This study enriches the history of education and academy systems in Northwest China while providing historical insights for the contemporary "Shuyuan Revival" and ongoing educational reforms.

Keywords: Longnan Academy; Academy System; Cultural Continuity; Cultural Function; Educational Modernization

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese academies (Shuyuan) occupied a pivotal position within the nation's classical educational hierarchy. Since their flourish during the Song Dynasty, academies functioned as unique entities distinct from official state schools and private village schools, playing a critical role in academic research, talent cultivation, and moral instruction. As conduits for Confucian thought and venues for scholars to engage in philosophical discourse and self-cultivation, they produced countless individuals dedicated to practical governance, profoundly shaping the development of Chinese society.

With the advent of the modern era, the traditional academy system faced severe challenges under the impact of radical social upheavals and Western cultural incursions. In Northwest China, this transition was particularly complex due to unique geographical conditions, ethnic compositions, and historical backgrounds. However, Longnan Academy, a renowned Qing-era circuit academy in Gansu, offers a distinctive case study. It did not merely undergo an institutional conversion from a traditional academy to a modern school; it exhibited a unique vitality that allowed it to persist as the predecessor of today's Tianshui No. 1 Middle School. This clear lineage of institutional inheritance makes Longnan Academy an ideal specimen for investigating how traditional institutions adapt and achieve cultural continuity during modernization.

The recent "Shuyuan Revival" in Chinese society reflects a reassessment of traditional cultural values and a critique of the deficiencies in modern education. It represents an attempt to reconcile "fundamental cultural genes" with contemporary society. In this context, analyzing how traditional academies achieved transformation and cultural transmission is vital for strengthening cultural confidence and driving educational reform.

2. Historical Development and Traditional Functions

The Precursor to Longnan Academy Longnan Academy was not built in a vacuum; its roots trace back to Wenchang Academy in Minzhou (present-day Min County, Gansu), the former seat of the Gong-Qin-Jie Circuit. Historical records suggest that Wenchang Academy was founded in 1835 by Circuit Intendant Cheng Derun, who sought to revitalize local literature by providing classic texts and stipends for scholars. Under the leadership of renowned masters like Niu Shumei, the academy significantly improved the local academic atmosphere, producing distinguished scholars known as the “Five Talents of Longshang”.^[1]

However, the academy’s path was disrupted in 1864 when warfare (the Taiping and Dungan Revolts) destroyed both the circuit headquarters and the academy.^[2] This external crisis forced an adaptive response: the circuit seat was moved to Qinzhou (modern Tianshui), and Wenchang Academy was subsequently relocated and rebuilt. This resilience in the face of destruction highlights a core characteristic of the institution: the “educational fire” was not extinguished by war but was instead reignited in a new environment, laying the foundation for Longnan Academy.

The Founding of Longnan Academy and the “Practical Learning” Ethos In 1876, Dong Wenhuan, the Circuit Intendant of Gong-Qin-Jie, officially established Longnan Academy.^[3] This occurred during a period of systemic crisis where the Shuyuan system was often criticized as a mere “appendage of the civil service examinations”. Dong invested heavily in the construction, personalizing the effort to create a space that could accommodate over a hundred students.^[4]

The academy’s success was largely due to the leadership of its headmasters, Ren Qichang and his son Ren Chengyun. Ren Qichang, known as the “Literary Dean of Longnan,” emphasized a pedagogical model centered on personal character and intellectual rigor, contrasting with the standardized management of modern institutions. Philosophically, the academy championed “Statecraft and Practical Learning” (经世致用), advocating that “governing the classics and governing affairs should proceed together”. This pragmatic orientation—requiring students to stay informed on current events via the Dibao(邸报)—ensured that the academy remained relevant to the administrative needs of the state.^[5]

As a circuit-level academy (daoli shuyuan), Longnan Academy’s establishment in Qinzhou significantly elevated the region’s educational standards and intellectual output. Prior to the founding of Longnan Academy, Qinzhou’s performance in the imperial examinations had been relatively unremarkable. However, the academy’s inception radically transformed this landscape. During the two metropolitan examinations (huishi) of 1880 and 1886 (the 6th and 12th years of the Guangxu reign), Qinzhou produced a total of eight jinshi (metropolitan graduates)—a feat regarded as a “nationwide miracle” for such a geographically remote prefecture. Statistics indicate that among the scholars nurtured by Longnan Academy, as many as eighty to ninety individuals attained the prestigious ranks of jinshi or juren (provincial graduates).^[6]

3. Modern Transformation and Functional Evolution

Institutional Shifts Under the Late-Qing Reform Wave Faced with domestic turmoil and foreign aggression, the Qing government initiated the “Gengzi/Kuimao Educational Reforms” in 1901, mandating the conversion of all academies into modern schools.^[7] In 1904, after 28 years of traditional operation, Longnan Academy was formally abolished and reconstituted as Gannan Middle School.

This top-down reform was not without friction. The transfer of academy assets (gongchan) often triggered local conflicts and altered social power dynamics. Furthermore, new schools initially struggled with financial stability and social recognition. This forced modernization underscores the complexities of institutional transformation, where “progress” often comes at the cost of original identity and structural stability.

The Evolutionary Path Toward a Modern School The institutional lineage of Longnan Academy is remarkably clear, transitioning through several iterations:

- 1904: Gannan Middle School (Integrating modern science with classical studies)
- 1914: Gansu Provincial Third Middle School (Modern academic curriculum)
- 1939: Gansu Provincial Tianshui Middle School (Becoming a comprehensive high school)
- 1978–Present: Tianshui No. 1 Middle School (A premier provincial demonstration school)

In its contemporary form, the school continues to harmonize “keeping pace with the times” with “returning to educational functions.” By implementing modern pedagogical innovations like “learning communities” while maintaining a focus on “whole–person education” and “core competencies,” the school preserves the “practical learning” spirit of its predecessor.

4. The Underlying Logic of Continuity

The survival and success of Longnan Academy over a century can be attributed to two core factors:

4.1 Evolutionary Adaptability

The academy consistently responded to shifting social needs. Whether it was relocating after wartime destruction or pivoting from Confucian classics to modern science in 1904, the institution demonstrated an innate flexibility. Unlike modern revivals that often focus on “surface–level traditionalism,” Longnan Academy’s adaptability was rooted in a deep understanding of the era’s requirements, allowing it to maintain institutional relevance across different political regimes.

4.2 Persistence in “Returning to Educational Essence”

Beyond structural changes, the institution remained committed to the “original intent” of the Shuyuan: cultivating individuals of both talent and moral integrity. The traditional pursuit of “statecraft” evolved into a modern commitment to social responsibility and holistic student development. This persistence ensures that the academy is not merely a historical site but a living vessel for cultural memory and identity.

5. Conclusion

The centennial journey of Longnan Academy serves as a model for the modernization of traditional institutions. Its history proves that educational functions possess an inherent resilience; they can be sustained through strategic repositioning and functional adjustment. The success of this transition was driven by a triad of factors: extraordinary adaptability, unwavering core values, and visionary leadership.

For contemporary education, Longnan Academy offers three vital lessons:

- (1) Cultural revival must move beyond physical restoration to the “reactivation” of core educational functions.
- (2) Cultural inheritance is not a static replication but a creative transformation of values (such as character education and practical utility) into modern frameworks.
- (3) Modern education can find enrichment in the “whole–person” philosophy of traditional academies, moving beyond exam–oriented models toward a more sustainable and balanced pedagogical system.

Ultimately, Longnan Academy demonstrates that the modernization of traditional culture does not require the abandonment of the past, but rather the wisdom to draw from historical roots to answer modern questions.

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