

Inner Motives Behind Exiled Literati's Turn Toward the Three Teachings in the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty

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ABSTRACT:

The disintegration of political order and the intensification of factional strife in the mid-to-late Tang dynasty led to the widespread exile of Confucian scholar-officials, placing them in a state of frustration and spiritual crisis. This study investigates the psychological and ideological process underlying exiled scholars' gradual turn from Confucianism toward Daoist and Buddhist thought. Through an analysis of their poetry, the study explores how Confucian anguish, an awareness of adversity and moral responsibility, and psychological dependence on official service shaped their spiritual predicament, and how Daoist and Buddhist ideas served as means of inner adjustment. The findings indicate that Daoist transcendence and Buddhist enlightenment offered emotional solace and spiritual liberation, while the literati's spiritual orientation remained fundamentally rooted in Confucian ideals of moral responsibility and social engagement. This shift reflects a process of self-reconstruction and spiritual renewal in response to political disillusionment and personal setbacks. Moving beyond earlier interpretations focused solely on religious practice or reclusion, the study highlights how political pressures and spiritual crises jointly reshaped the intellectual outlook of Tang literati, providing new insights into the reconciliation of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

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1. Introduction

During the mid-to-late Tang period (756–836), political order deteriorated, factional struggles intensified, and the political environment became increasingly complex, making exile a common experience. In this context, scholars committed to the Confucian ideal of official service faced setbacks in their official careers as well as profound psychological and moral dilemmas. Confucianism, with its emphasis on official service and ritual propriety, fostered psychological dependence on official service while instilling a strong sense of moral

duty and social responsibility. As political ideals clashed with reality, these scholars experienced mounting internal tensions arising not only from frustrated ambitions but also from the conflict between individual character and cultural expectations.

Previous studies on Tang literati and the interplay of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have largely focused on the cultural ideal of reclusion or the spiritual orientation of literati thought. In *Returning Home: A Cultural Perspective on Reclusion* (1995), Zhang Liwei conducts a comparative study of Confucian and

Daoist thought, examining the cultural significance of reclusion and highlighting the differences between the two traditions in terms of their values and conceptual approaches. This study provides valuable theoretical insights into the cultural meaning of reclusion. In *Tang Poetry in the Context of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism* (2003), Chen Yan and Li Chunhong examine the development of Tang poetry across different historical periods and the influence of the three teachings on its themes and stylistic evolution. They argue that the flourishing of Tang poetry was inseparable from a cultural environment in which Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism coexisted and interacted. Overall, these studies have provided an important foundation for understanding the cultural origins of reclusion in Tang poetry and the broader intellectual landscape shaped by the interaction of the three teachings. However, existing scholarship has largely concentrated on the practice of literati reclusion or the interaction among the three teachings, paying relatively little attention to the psychological processes and underlying motivations behind the transition from Confucian ideals of official service to Daoist and Buddhist perspectives.

- At the same time, studies on exiled literati of the mid-to-late Tang period remain relatively scarce. Poetry and prose, as key outlets for self-expression and emotional coping, have not yet been fully examined for their role in shaping this transformation of thought. This transition reflected not only disillusionment with political ideals and the disruption of cultural order, but also how literati sought emotional reconciliation while balancing loyalty to Confucian ideals with the pursuit of spiritual transcendence. Therefore, this study examines exiled literati of the mid-to-late Tang period and their literary works through both psychological and intellectual lenses. It explores the motivations driving their shift from Confucian ideals toward Daoist and Buddhist thought, as well as from active official service to reclusion, while considering the role of the three teachings in their practices of self-cultivation and spiritual adjustment. The study seeks to shed light on the

ways Tang literati navigated political and personal crises, providing not only a deeper understanding of their evolving mindset but also a fresh theoretical perspective on the intellectual history of Tang literati and the integration of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought.

- The study of exiled officials in the mid-to-late Tang dynasty holds significant scholarly value for several reasons. First, from the perspective of external historical conditions, the scholar-official class during this period commonly faced severe political instability and rapid changes in power, with exile becoming a normalized instrument of governance. Many literati not only experienced exile but were often repeatedly banished, forming a substantial exiled community that provides a solid textual foundation and abundant material resources for systematic research. Second, from the standpoint of their inner spiritual characteristics, exiled literati often developed a heightened awareness of life and stronger spiritual consciousness. After experiencing political setbacks and physical and psychological pressures, they frequently demonstrated remarkable literary creativity. Compared with their pre-exile works, the poetry and prose composed during exile displayed greater intellectual breadth and emotional depth, reflecting profound reflection on the value of life, official ambitions, and inner belonging. Such works served not only as literary responses to adverse political circumstances but also as means of pursuing spiritual transcendence.

- While the psychological disturbance faced by scholars following the An Lushan Rebellion constituted a matter of degree, the dramatic changes and deep shocks to their perception of life brought by exile represented a qualitative transformation. This shift often plunged exiled literati into identity crises and psychological struggles, prompting them to seek paths of liberation and spiritual resolution through literature and thought. It is also noteworthy that the mid-to-late Tang period marked a significant phase of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist integration. This cross-fertilization of ideas not only provided a spiritual foundation for the scholar-official class but also shaped their

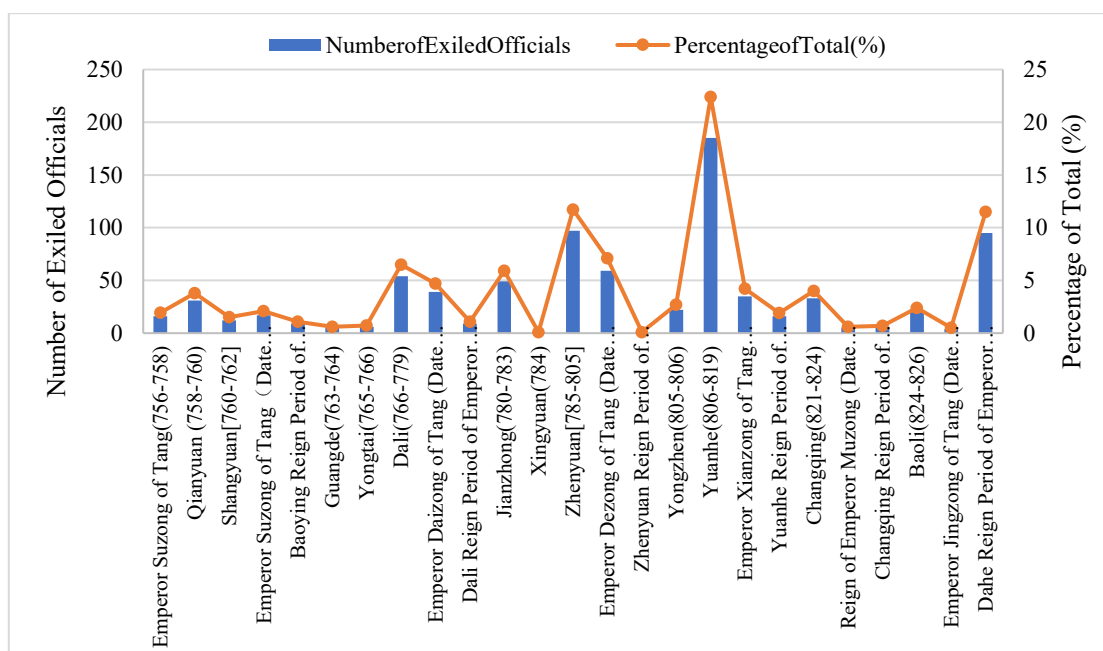
choices between service and withdrawal, thereby fostering the development of a pluralistic intellectual landscape.

2. Political Context of the Mid-to-Late Tang Dynasty

- The An Lushan Rebellion¹ (755–763) marked a major turning point in the social, political, and cultural landscape of the mid-to-late Tang period. In its aftermath, political instability and factional struggles intensified, shaping the broader political environment. Eunuchs and regional military governors alternated in exercising power, rendering the authority of the
- he literati.

imperial court largely nominal. Historical records indicate that during the Zhenyuan period (785–805), 97 officials were exiled, while the number rose to 185 during the Yuanhe period (806–819), representing the most concentrated phase of exile in the mid-to-late Tang period (Figure 1). These figures reflect both the prevalence of intense factional struggles within the court and the repeated setbacks encountered by the literati. Frequent exiles thus emerged as a defining feature of bureaucratic politics, profoundly shaping the career expectations and professional aspirations of t

• **Figure 1: Exiled Officials by Time Period (Mid-Tang Dynasty)**



- A similar pattern can also be observed in the Late Tang period. Statistical data show that between 836 and 907, the highest number of exile cases occurred during the Xiantong reign of Emperor Yizong, totaling seventy-three cases, followed by seventy-one cases during the Dazhong reign of Emperor Xuanzong. The prevalence of exile during the Xiantong era was closely related to the deterioration of the
- political situation. Emperor Yizong was widely regarded as ineffective and indecisive in governance, while close collusion between chancellors and eunuchs further undermined political order. Under such circumstances, the use of exile as a political measure became increasingly common and spread widely within official circles.

The relatively high number of exile cases during the Dazhong reign can largely be attributed to the political reorganization initiated by Emperor Xuanzong shortly after his accession. In the process of consolidating power, the court removed many officials associated with the

¹ The An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) was an armed uprising led by the Tang generals An Lushan and Shi

Siming during the reigns of Emperors Xuanzong and Daizong.

political faction of Li Deyu, thereby largely settling the issue of the so-called “Li faction.”

- Amid this turbulent political environment, individual scholars increasingly sought to critique and reform the system. In the second year of Emperor Wenzong’s Dahe reign (828), the jinshi Liu Fen (?-842) openly criticized political corruption in his examination essay, warning that “the imperial harem would fall into disorder, the state would be endangered, the empire would collapse, and chaos would spread throughout the realm” (Sima, 2023, p. 355). He condemned the eunuchs’ dominance in the inner court and the arrogance of provincial military governors, urging the emperor to “appoint virtuous men and draw near to upright officials” as a remedy for the crisis. However, his admonitions attracted little attention. As noted by the Qing scholar Zhao Yi (1727–1814) (2008, p. 282), during the Tang dynasty, eunuchs wielded power surpassing that of the emperor, exercising unprecedented control over imperial succession and deposition. In the ninth year of the Dahe reign (835), Emperor Wenzong (809–840) attempted to eliminate the eunuchs, triggering the Ganlu Incident². The plot failed, and the eunuchs emerged even stronger, reportedly declaring that “all Confucian scholars, regardless of rank, should be put to death” (Sima, 1956, pp. 7920–7921).

- The frequent political upheavals and factional rivalries profoundly altered literati attitudes toward official service. As bureaucratic changes became incessant and personal alliances increasingly determined career outcomes, scholars faced precarious positions with little sense of lasting security, even regarding their rank or personal safety. The more firmly they upheld the Confucian ideal of serving in office and governing for the welfare of the people, the more acutely they experienced the gap between their ideals and the realities of official life. The collapse

of the Confucian political ideal exemplified the sorrow of Confucian scholars, in which their enduring commitment to social responsibility clashed with the instability of bureaucratic structures. This moral paradox constituted the central spiritual dilemma of exiled literati and served as a key motivation for their subsequent turn toward integrating Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought.

3. Political Context and the Crisis of Confucian Career Ideals

3.1. The sorrow of the Confucian scholar³

- The so-called “sorrow of the Confucian scholar” was not merely the personal frustration caused by career setbacks. In the mid-to-late Tang period, it denoted a structural and internalized spiritual predicament experienced by scholar-officials whose Confucian ideal of entering office had been deeply internalized. Confronted with a highly uncertain and perilous political reality, these individuals experienced a prolonged imbalance between their ideals and the conditions of official life. Its defining feature was the tension of wanting to serve yet being unable, desiring advancement yet fearing to proceed. On one hand, scholar-officials continued to identify as Confucians, embracing career advancement as a goal and aspiring to assume the political responsibility of remedying state affairs; on the other hand, they repeatedly encountered disorder in official life and a sense of the invalidity of their social role, generating long-lasting and profound anxiety regarding their political legitimacy, personal safety, and even survival. Crucially, this sorrow extended beyond individual psychological experience. It left a lasting imprint on the behaviors and Confucian identity of exiled literati, constituting a widespread and enduring spiritual predicament among mid-to-late Tang scholars.

- In the third year of Emperor Muzong’s Changqing reign (823), the poet Han Yu (768–

² The Ganlu Incident (835) was an attempted purge during Emperor Wenzong’s reign, aimed at eliminating the powerful eunuchs. The plot was uncovered before it could be carried out and ultimately failed, allowing the eunuchs to consolidate even greater power afterward.

³ “The sorrow of the Confucian scholar” denotes the inner

anguish of Confucian literati whose lifelong commitment to serving the state and realizing moral ideals was confronted by the disillusioning reality of mid- and late Tang politics. It represents both a personal and cultural tragedy, in which faith is lost and ideals are betrayed.

824) lamented in one of his poems that “The court is crowded with officials, yet there is no place to stand. Though I serve within it, my influence wanes with each passing day” (Han, 2022). His words capture the sense of constraint and powerlessness that characterized the lives of scholar-officials in the mid- and late Tang dynasty. The following line, “Though I plead sincerely, my words went unheard,” further reveals the grim political reality of the time, in which loyal remonstrance went unheeded, and officials were caught between speaking out and remaining silent. Similarly, in “Shi Shuang”, Han Yu conveys his disappointment with court politics and his growing inclination toward withdrawal from official life. The psychological imbalance brought about by political repression reveals the early signs of the literati’s disillusionment with their official ideals.

- During exile, Yuan Zhen (779-831) mourned the failure of political aspirations. The tone of sorrow and emptiness that pervades his poetry reveals a profound transformation in the spirit of the literati, moving from the Confucian mission of serving the world and its people to a state of spiritual exhaustion.⁴ Such pervasive political repression lay at the root of the psychological crisis that beset the literati in the mid- to late Tang period.

- Political shadows hung over the lives of literati in the mid- to late Tang dynasty, who struggled to maintain their commitment to official careers amid turmoil and uncertainty. They faced multiple pressures: the dominance of eunuchs, doubts about their own abilities and virtue, fears of further exile, the necessity of navigating political opportunism with care, and the persistent tension between pursuing office and withdrawing from it. Although these anxieties did not necessarily mark the end of their careers, under an authoritarian, centralized regime, few could remain unscathed. As the main enforcers of the dynasty’s bureaucratic order, they were acutely aware of the harshness of

politics and the unpredictability of official life. Even those temporarily removed from political upheaval through exile could not escape the fear of survival. Their apprehension over career risks, coupled with their Confucian moral consciousness and sense of political duty, paradoxically became a profound source of inner torment. Literati could neither abandon their Confucian ideals of serving the world and benefiting the people nor evade repeated demotions and exile within a treacherous political landscape. The lofty spirit of the Tang dynasty gradually waned in their poetry, leaving a pervasive sense of frustration and sorrow that came to define the emotional tenor of literati in the mid- to late Tang period.

- Political setbacks and dead-ends immersed mid- to late Tang literati in the profound sorrow of the Confucian scholar. In this spiritual crisis, Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought offered essential resources for emotional consolation and inner sustenance. Confucius noted, “If the path of official advancement is blocked and I cannot realize my abilities, I should take a boat and leave” (The Analects, “Gongye Chang”; annotated by Zhang, 2007, p. 58), which served as a psychological anchor for literati seeking retreat and personal solace. It is worth noting that withdrawal under Confucian ideals did not imply complete disengagement from worldly affairs; even in seclusion, literati remained prepared to return to official life when circumstances allowed. True withdrawal from office was never straightforward. As Han Yu observed, service in office and retreat into seclusion were not strictly opposites: political advancement was limited by the influence of others, while seclusion was often dictated by practical necessity. Literati often “drifted restlessly with the rhythms of court life” (Han, 2022, p. 184) from Lu Langzhong Yunfu Ji Shi. lingering between engagement and withdrawal, caught in a persistent state of uncertainty. Many literati, though officially

⁴ Yuan Zhen reflects on the fleeting nature of time, the thinning of companions, and the precariousness of official life: Reply to Fu Yan, New Year of the Fourth Year of Changqing at the Prefectural Study. Farewell to Le Tian in

the Eastern Capital, Two Poems. Reply to Zheng Congshi, Banquet at Wanghai Pavilion in September of the Fourth Year.

appointed, contended with low rank, meager stipends, and the pressures of daily life. As Xue Feng(Xuefeng, c. 806-c. 874) lamented, “My monthly pay amounts to only sixty-five strings of coins, and my wife and children live in constant worry, their hardship almost palpable.” (Xue, 1999, p. 4115) This vividly illustrates the precarious and vulnerable circumstances endured by lower-ranking officials.

- More profound than their material hardship was the inner turmoil that came with losing spiritual balance and a sense of self-worth. Rooted in the Confucian principle of valuing the Way over material concerns (The Analects, “Wei Ling Gong”; Zhu, 2022, p. 252), the line “To devote one’s life to scholarship is never regrettable” (Feng, 2019, p. 433) embodies a value system in which success in official or literary pursuits is seen as the highest expression of purpose and integrity, showing how, within Confucian thought, worldly achievement could serve as both a moral and spiritual guide. The Confucian moral system anchors individual purpose within the broader order of society and the state, subordinating personal interests to collective and political obligations. Self-realization is thus often expressed through scholarly achievement, official rank, and social responsibility. When the ideals of governance and familial duty clash irreconcilably with political reality, the very foundations of life’s meaning are shaken. In this context, the dignity of the Confucian scholar becomes imbued with sorrow, leaving literati in a state of profound psychological disorientation, where guiding ideals provide no support and deeply held convictions lack secure grounding.

- During the Tang dynasty, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism coexisted as the three principal philosophical and religious traditions. The disruption of the Confucian ideal of official advancement naturally prompted exiled literati to engage more deeply with Daoist and Buddhist thought. In this context, as Xue Feng lamented, “Life flashes by like a fleeting dream; why cling so tenaciously to official

power?” (Xue, 2007, p. 1775) They sought to restore inner order and heal the psychological wounds inflicted by their political careers through Daoist and Buddhist philosophies. Yet this otherworldly philosophical solace could never entirely alleviate the profound sense of loss and lingering resentment experienced by those committed to the pursuit of official success.

- Compared with Daoist and Buddhist thought, Confucian culture held a dominant position in traditional Chinese society and profoundly shaped social norms. Consequently, literati and scholar-officials internalized a deeply rooted Confucian ethos that permeated their worldview. While the Daoist and Buddhist ideals of freedom and harmony with nature were appealing, it was Confucian scholarship and moral standards that constituted the overarching framework guiding their aspirations and conduct. This framework rendered it exceedingly difficult for them to transcend the internalized cultural norms that governed both their thinking and behavior.

- The relentless drive for official success, exemplified by Wang Jian’s statement, “I will not return until I have established merit and rank” (Wang , 1999, p. 2229) and, as Lü Wen (772-792)states in his poem, “I strive only to achieve merit and rank” (Lü,1999, p. 2733), coexisted with the aspiration to simultaneously uphold both Confucian and Daoist ideals, as reflected in Liu Yuxi’s (772-842)aspiration to harmonize the two: “to harmonize Confucian and Daoist principles” (Liu, 2018, p. 697). The psychological tension arising from this coexistence remained acute. The concept of the “sorrow of the Confucian scholar” thus not only reveals the erosion of the literati’s faith in official advancement after political setbacks but also constitutes a key internal factor driving their spiritual reorientation and cultural adaptation.

3.2. Awareness of adversity

- Exiled literati in the mid- to late Tang dynasty were profoundly shaped by the Confucian ethos of vigilance in adversity.⁵

⁵ According to Xue Yongmin (2024, p. 234), Confucianism

has long cultivated a deep sense of responsibility toward

Awareness of adversity among Chinese scholar-officials refers to a deep-seated psychological alertness and self-discipline when confronting uncertainties in both personal life and the political sphere, coupled with a persistent concern for the well-being and stability of the state. Within the mental and moral framework of the literati, this awareness reflected not only individual anxieties over survival but also the Confucian commitment to civic duty and ethical responsibility.

- Its cultural roots stretch far back into Chinese history, with early manifestations evident in Shang and Zhou divination practices, which reveal a pervasive ancestral concern with fate and the unknown. As political structures grew increasingly complex, such apprehension became more pronounced and deeply ingrained. By the Tang dynasty, this cultivated sense of vigilance had become an essential feature of the scholar-official's inner life, shaping both thought and temperament. As Xu Fuguan observed, although the Zhou succeeded in overthrowing the Shang, they did not succumb to complacency; instead, they cultivated an awareness of adversity to uphold political order and moral foundations (Xu, 2014, p. 98). This spiritual tradition, gradually internalized by the scholar-official class since the Spring and Autumn period, became an instinctive part of their identity, rendering the principle of "to consider the world one's own responsibility" central to their sense of self. The awareness of adversity was not merely a political sentiment; it closely intertwined individual ideals with the rise and fall of the dynasty, forming the ethical foundation for the literati's conduct and sense of purpose.

- For exiled literati, awareness of adversity played a particularly formative role, influencing their outlook, decision-making, and literary expression. It heightened the poignancy of their personal experiences while simultaneously providing a framework for upholding moral

principles and critically reflecting on the state of governance. This enduring psychological disposition not only intensified the personal and professional challenges faced by the literati but also offered them conceptual and ethical resources for navigating political instability and fostering self-cultivation.

- As Han Yu observed in Dongzheng Xing, "In that moment, worldly cares flooded my thoughts, and external anxieties weighed upon my heart" (2022, p. 31). By juxtaposing "worldly cares" with "external anxieties," the poet reveals his deep unease over the turbulent state of his times. Li Shangyin (Li Shangyin, 813–c. 858) also wrote in Chong Yougan, "One must share the ruler's concerns" (2007, p. 1740), reflecting the Confucian scholar's profound concern for the state and its people. Within this intellectual tradition, Confucius exhorted in *The Analects* (2023, p. 28) that "a scholar must be resolute and broad-minded, for the burden is heavy and the path long," establishing a guiding model for how scholars understood and positioned themselves. They harbored profound concern for political order and societal well-being, regarding the state's stability and the people's welfare as their own responsibility. This sense of duty not only sustained their ideals and convictions but also exposed them to profound inner turmoil and existential anxiety when political order faltered, and their aspirations were thwarted.

- The frequent exiles of officials during the mid-to-late Tang dynasty reshaped the very nature of literati anxiety. Their sense of concern was no longer limited to a rational awareness of the state's fate and stability but transformed into an inner psychological unease—one that also intensified their tragic consciousness as exiled scholars. Before their exile, the Confucian spirit prevailed, and scholars regarded concern for the ruler and the state as their foremost duty. In exile, however, guided by

the world. For Confucius, the noble person "is concerned with the Way rather than with poverty," while Mencius embodies the Confucian commitment to all people, treating the welfare of everyone as if it were his own. Through their systematic elaboration, this awareness developed into a

guiding principle of engagement and practical assistance, reflecting an active, worldly ethos, with the Confucian sense of responsibility ultimately realized through concrete efforts to benefit the world whenever possible.

Daoist and Buddhist thought, their anxieties gradually turned inward toward reflections on their own fate and the meaning of life.

- Liu Zongyuan (773-819) wrote in *Lament for Assistant Secretary Ling of Lianzhou*, “The exiled are shunned by men and even forsaken by the spirits” (Huang, 2007, p. 1115). Exile led them to question their own worth, as their concern gradually shifted from the fate of the nation to the fate of the self. This inward-focused concern arose not only from political disappointment and the crisis of dependent identity, but also from the interaction of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought.

- In essence, the pursuit of achievement and lasting fame by ancient scholars reflected a fear of being forgotten and a steadfast commitment to the significance of their existence. Within the Confucian tradition of cultivating virtue, pursuing achievements, and leaving a mark through writing, exiled scholars, though unable to attain official distinction, still sought to create a legacy. Bai Juyi (772-846) emphasized the importance of recording the deeds of virtuous individuals in writing, ensuring that their good actions are remembered and preserved. (Bai, 1996, p. 10) Xu Yin (849-938) wrote, “Surrounded by green mountains, I give no thought to official rank, and even with hair turned white, I continue to devote myself to writing” (Zhou, ed., 1999, p. 5268). They sought to restore moral and ethical order through their writings, using thought to resist the silencing effects of political setbacks and to compensate for the spiritual void left by frustrated official ambitions. Amid the ruins of shattered ideals, they defined themselves through their words, transforming external political ethics into an inward spiritual framework. At this stage, their concern was no longer a rational awareness of the

state’s fate but a deep reflection on the meaning of life and the ultimate destination of the spirit.

- At the same time, Daoist⁶ concepts of immortality and Buddhist teachings on transcending attachment and the cycle of life and death offered exiled scholars a profound spiritual refuge, serving as a practical compensation for the loss of Confucian ideals. While Confucianism provides a spiritual anchor for life in the present world, Daoism extends life’s temporal dimension through practices of cultivation. As Wang Jian (768-835) observed, “In the quiet and empty realm, where can one seek immortality?” (Zhou, ed., 1999, p. 2234). In their pursuit of alchemy and Daoist practices, scholars harbored a yearning for eternal existence. In their pursuit of alchemy and Daoist cultivation, scholars nurtured a longing for immortality and enduring existence. Buddhist teachings on the integration of metaphysical principles, the meaningful connections conveyed through texts, and concerns about life and death effectively met the spiritual needs of exiled scholars (Tang, 1982, p. 193). Zhang Shizhao (2000, p. 199) also noted that Buddhism was particularly appealing to “disappointed heroes and demoted officials,” because its wisdom of emptiness helped dissolve their clinging anxieties.

- The study of Tang Confucianism cannot be confined primarily to the cultivation of mind and nature (xinxing), nor could it adequately address the emotional anguish and existential anxieties of exiled literati. In comparison, Song and Ming Neo-Confucian scholars were considerably more fortunate: confronted with life’s uncertainties, they could find reassurance in principle (li) and meet circumstances with equanimity. By contrast, the intellectual horizon of mid- to late-Tang Confucianism was narrow; beyond pursuing official careers, few alternative paths existed. Consequently, the literati’s search for ultimate

⁶ When establishing its system of beliefs, Daoism “placed Laozi at the top and then elaborated on the immortals” (Liu, X., *Mie Huo Lun*). Daoism honors Laozi, the founder of the tradition, and venerates his *Daodejing* as its central sacred text. It views the pursuit of immortality and the life of the xian (immortal in Daoism) as the highest goal of spiritual cultivation, and elevates the Dao proposed by

Laozi to the status of the cosmic origin and sovereign of all things. These principles form the core teachings of Daoism, which followers revere and uphold, thus establishing the identity of Daoism as it is known in later generations (Bai, Wang, & Li, 2024, p. 169).

concerns—questions of life, destiny, and the self—was largely deferred to Daoist practices for understanding the natural world and life cultivation, and to Chan Buddhism for guidance on mental cultivation and the afterlife. Numerous poems from this period vividly portray the profound sorrow and inner struggles of exiled officials, whose honor and disgrace fluctuated like drifting autumn thistle; though the heart yearned for retreat, worldly ties remained. It was through such intimate confrontation with the dilemmas of life, career, and inner cultivation that literati not only sought consolation in Buddhism but also drew spiritual support from Daoism and Confucianism, producing a complementary interplay of the three teachings across psychological and philosophical dimensions.

- These observations suggest that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were not fixed forces in the lives of scholars; rather, they interacted dynamically, and their influence shifted with changing life circumstances. As Bai Juyi observed in *Shuiqi Yanzuo* (Zhou, ed., 1999, p. 3096), Buddhist and Daoist practice ultimately converge in the same spiritual insight. It was through this interplay of ideas that exiled scholars of the mid-to-late Tang transformed the “sorrow of the Confucian scholar” into a commitment to writing, the quest for Immortality, and spiritual insight through Chan practice. Within the convergence of the three teachings, they sought the transcendent realm of the spirit, completing a shift in focus from concern for the state and its people to introspection and the cultivation of the self.

3.3. Dependent Personality

- As the social and political environment became increasingly stifling after the mid-Tang period, scholars shifted from active engagement in public affairs to self-preservation. On the surface, this appears as an avoidance of the turmoil of the times, but it reveals their ineffectual resistance to autocratic rule and their passive accommodation. As their awareness of adversity shifted from concern for the state to concern for the self, scholars gradually realized that the sorrow of the Confucian scholar

stemmed not only from setbacks in official careers but also from the constraints of a dependent personality and the difficulty of maintaining spiritual autonomy. Through this reflection, they began to reassess their relationship with the political system. For the exiled scholars, their grievances were largely directed at the superficial aspects of autocracy, including the corrupt court, deceitful colleagues, and inept rulers, without confronting the system’s deeper roots. The more dissatisfied they were with reality, the stronger their dependent personality became. While they criticized power and authority, they were nonetheless compelled to remain within the system, resulting in a profound inner conflict between moral ideals and the demands of the social order.

- The formation of a highly dependent personality among literati can be understood as both a product of social structures and a response to the historical and political environment. In the Tang context, scholars faced intense centralization of power and tightly controlled social thought, leaving few alternatives beyond pursuing official careers. Consequently, their search for ultimate concerns, including questions of life, selfhood, and moral cultivation, was often deferred to Daoist practices for understanding the natural world and life cultivation, and to Chan Buddhism for guidance on mental discipline and the afterlife. Numerous poems from this period vividly portray the sorrow and inner struggles of exiled officials, whose honor and disgrace fluctuated like drifting autumn thistle; though their hearts yearned for retreat, worldly ties remained. Through such experiences, literati not only sought consolation in Buddhism but also drew spiritual support from Daoism and Confucianism, creating a complementary interplay of the three teachings across psychological and philosophical dimensions.

- These highly dependent personality traits emerged as a psychological and social adaptation to environments marked by political uncertainty and concentrated authority. As Liu Zehua (2017, p. 309) observes, “The subordinates’ reverence for and obedience to the sovereign constitute a necessary foundation for the consolidation of

autocratic power. These cultures of praise are by no means optional; they serve as crucial spiritual pillars of despotic monarchy and as one of the essential conditions for the operation of autocratic authority.” From this perspective, monarchism in ancient China not only dominated institutionally but also exercised sustained control over officials through cultural and ideological channels. The emergence of dependent personalities is therefore closely linked to the centralized political environment: officials consciously chose dependence as a strategy for personal security and social survival, while at the same time, this behavioral pattern objectively reinforced the structure of autocratic rule.

- After enduring the intense external pressures of exile, false accusations, and factional struggles, exiled officials, driven by their innate self-preservation instincts, developed a strong psychological dependence on those in power, even when they rationally recognized the unreasonableness of such attachment. The deeply entrenched autocratic system of imperial China and the Confucian ritual codes governing ruler–subject relations had long permeated the literati’s thinking. Their habitual acceptance of autocracy, combined with a psychological inertia that discouraged challenging the status quo, gradually made them more tolerant of the imperfections of reality. The inherent weakness and dependence of ancient Chinese scholars led them to tacitly accept the existing social order. Their dissatisfaction with society was often entwined with a subtle attachment to it, and their resentment toward fate was tempered by endurance. For those subjected to exile, their anger was initially directed at the instruments of autocracy, including the dark court, treacherous colleagues, and incompetent emperors. However, as such dissatisfaction intensified, the very personality traits of dependency they exhibited tended to become even stronger.

- This orientation toward dependence prevented exiled scholars from completely disengaging from political affairs;

even in remote regions, they remained closely attentive to developments at court. Such a tendency was not simply the result of personal weakness or compromise but was deeply embedded in the Confucian cultural system of rites and social hierarchies. In Confucian thought, social rank and ritual norms have long been considered fundamental principles for maintaining social order. “When social roles are unclear, communication breaks down, undertakings fail, and the proper practice of ritual and music cannot be maintained” (Confucius, Chunqiu, 2016, p. 188). This statement reveals the underlying logic linking the “ZhengMing”⁷ to political legitimacy.

- The literati, long shaped by entrenched social and educational norms, came to view ritual, law, hierarchical status, and the principle of ZhengMing as self-evident, inescapable cultural and psychological obligations. As a result, when confronted with exile, they often confessed their failings to express humility and gratitude (Duan, 2018, p. 130), a practice that simultaneously reinforced the oppressive reach of imperial authority over officials.

- These lines, “Hearing the imperial decree, fear overwhelmed me and my courage wavered” (Zhang, Jingzhou Xie Shangbiao) and “Receiving the imperial order, I could only comply in fear, reluctantly shouldering additional responsibilities” (Yan, Xie Jian Yushi Dafu Biao) (Zhou, 2000, pp. 3258, 3850), reveal the deep anxiety and cautious compliance of scholars confronted with the demands of the ritual and hierarchical order. Their responses were shaped not merely by personal timidity but by the overwhelming authority of a system in which rank, ritual, and duty were inseparable from moral and political obligations. The Confucian system of ritual and hierarchical rank constrained not only their actions but also deeply shaped their psychological framework. Coupled with the pressures of exile, obedience and

⁷ Confucius’ concept of ZhengMing has two interpretations: one as a principle of political thought, and

the other as a methodological approach to reasoning.

deference became almost instinctive responses among officials in the mid-to-late Tang period.

- The exilic attitudes of Han Yu, Liu Yuxi, and Liu Zongyuan vividly illustrate scholars' deep-seated dependence on the Confucian order of ritual and rank, showing how this systemic reliance shaped both their behavior and mindset. During his exile to Chaozhou, Han Yu reflected on his own shortcomings, acknowledging that some of the criticisms he had received were justified, and ultimately interpreted his banishment to Lingnan as an act of benevolence (Han, 2022, p. 214). In works such as *Langtaosha* (Nine Poems) and *Zhi Shi Fu*, Liu Yuxi expressed a sense of personal loss, yet his writings still reveal a reliance on and deference toward those in power. Liu Zongyuan's poems reveal his deep anxiety under constant political scrutiny, as he warned his correspondent to handle matters with utmost discretion (Liu, 1979, p. 802). This habitual desire to appease was not merely an emotional reaction but a deeply ingrained cultural mindset shaped by systemic repression. Despite the difficulties of official life, exiled scholars continued to view a return to office as their goal. As Yuan Zhen reflected, "Five years we saw off travelers along the river, yet I longed with you for those returning north" (Zhou, ed., 1999, p. 2991). This demonstrates the profound constraints and dispossession that feudal politics imposed on the selfhood of exiled officials.

- After being subjected to exile, officials naturally tended toward submission and endurance in the face of political authority. Although they initially expressed complaints and resistance toward the court, such efforts inevitably ended in failure. As their experience of banishment lengthened and they grew older, they gradually ceased to display their discontent outwardly and internalized it instead. In its place, a personality oriented toward flattery and opportunism emerged, aimed at currying favor with the authorities to secure rank and benefits. This demonstrates the powerful capacity of feudal politics to erode the selfhood of exiled officials. Their poetry reveals both their simultaneous expectation and obsequiousness

toward the political regime, while also indirectly reflecting their ongoing desire for official advancement and their adherence to political ideals.

- However, when hopes for advancement in office remained unfulfilled and reliance on political power proved fruitless, scholars were prompted to reconsider the feasibility of Confucian ideals of official success amid hardship. They came to realize that political life did not equate to personal fulfillment, leading some exiled literati to seek liberation from the constraints of Confucian ethics. The dangers of society and the uncertainties of official life drove them to profound reflections on life, the universe, and the meaning of existence. Inspired by the Daoist principle of "QiWu" (the oneness of all things) and the Buddhist concept of "Kongji" (serene emptiness), scholars gradually overcame their dependent tendencies, striving instead for autonomy of character and spiritual transcendence. Liu Zongyuan, inspired by Daoist cosmology, eased his grief by immersing himself in the vast, limitless rhythm of the universe, sensing a boundless flow alongside the forces of creation (Gao, ed., 1998, p. 1199). In contrast, Bai Juyi drew on Buddhist thought to cultivate inner tranquility and emotional balance.

- In this sense, it is evident that the exiled officials' adherence to Confucian ritual codes was not consistent. The dangers of the sociopolitical environment, combined with a lifetime of demanding service and accumulated anxieties, gradually prompted them to engage in profound reflection on life, society, and the cosmos. Prolonged oppression often elicited a corresponding psychological rebound, while sustained constraints fostered internal adaptation and detachment. A closer examination of these officials' mental transformations reveals a significant shift: under the influence of Daoist and Buddhist thought, exiled literati began to loosen their emotional attachment to imperial authority and gradually reconstruct their spiritual stance, moving toward a relatively autonomous personality. When these scholars left the suffocating turbulence of worldly affairs and entered the tranquil spaces of monasteries and

mountains, they encountered a new realm in which both body and mind could find renewed solace.

- Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought remained the dominant cultural currents throughout the Tang dynasty. Exiled officials encountered significant setbacks in their pursuit of Confucian ideals, and how to secure a stable place for themselves in a chaotic sociopolitical landscape became one of the most pressing practical concerns of their lives. These literati sought spiritual “liberation,” yet beyond death or conversion to Buddhism, could other means exist to achieve psychological settlement? How could such dependency be overcome? If “liberation” is understood as the alleviation of suffering or the search for inner peace, it more accurately reflects the lived reality of these officials. During the mid-to-late Tang period, Daoist and Buddhist thought offered forms of quasi-reclusive pursuit, providing exiled officials with possibilities for psychological and spiritual accommodation. Accordingly, the shift of Tang exiled literati from Confucian faith toward attention to Daoist and Buddhist thought represents an internally coherent development.

- As Hegel (2013, p. 115) notes, if an individual stands in opposition to the “in-itself and for-itself,” they cannot realize their own value nor attain genuine significance; only through unity with the ontological can the individual achieve true meaning. Within this theoretical framework, the spiritual practices of Tang exiled officials exhibit a similar logic: by immersing themselves in natural landscapes and engaging with Buddhist and Daoist teachings, they gradually diminished their attachment to official careers and, through orienting the self toward the external universe, transcended the suffering of exile, thereby achieving spiritual fulfillment. Li Zehou (2008, p. 192) observes that this pursuit of transcendence, being difficult to realize materially, ultimately manifests in ideals of personality, wherein the problems of bodily (xing) and mental (shen) existence converge into the attainment of independent character and spiritual freedom. This trajectory also reflects the core of Zhuangzi’s philosophy, namely the

pursuit of spiritual freedom and the cultivation of a complete and autonomous personality.

- The mid-to-late Tang exiled literati’s turn from Confucian career ideals toward Daoist and Buddhist awareness was essentially a form of spiritual refuge arising from political turmoil and thwarted ambitions. This shift reflected both a deliberate detachment from political realities and a conscious retreat from the pursuit of official rank and prestige. Immersed in natural landscapes and the meditative practices of Buddhism and Daoism, they aligned themselves with the rhythms of heaven and earth. Freed from the constraints of Confucian expectations, the weight of official success or failure, personal joys and sorrows, and attachment to political power gradually receded. Even as exiled literati strove to overcome ingrained dependence and assert their personal autonomy, their seemingly serene and optimistic poetry often concealed a profound sorrow. Confucian education had constrained natural development and personal freedom, while the influence of Daoism and Buddhism encouraged a retreat into ease and harmony with nature, gradually eroding their inner resolve and diminishing their proactive engagement.

- From a broader historical perspective, compared with mid-Tang literati who still attempted to navigate between Confucian political ideals and the setbacks of reality, late Tang officials facing stalled careers were more inclined to confront the impossibility of realizing their political aspirations and gradually shifted their spiritual focus toward Buddhist-style inner liberation. Late Tang poets, drawing on Buddhist cosmology, likened worldly attachments to official careers to insignificant dust, and the pursuit of meditation and enlightenment celebrated in their poetry effectively constituted a transcendence of the external world. These poets engaged in new reflections on their frustrated official lives, and under the inspiration of Buddhist notions of emptiness, they attained fresh insights for overcoming personal predicaments. At the same time, their psychological attachment to power and official careers was being reexamined, and their

subjectivity increasingly exhibited a tendency to loosen external dependence and turn toward internal spiritual settlement.

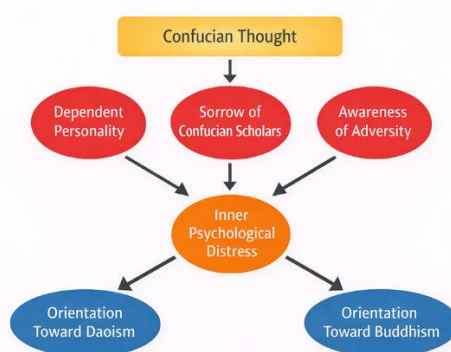
4. Conclusion

- As the Japanese scholar Hirano Akira (2013) has noted, in ancient China, only a small number of individuals were engaged in literary activity or able to appreciate literature, but by the Tang dynasty, this restriction had gradually loosened. Tang poets, while composing their works, were highly sensitive to political events and developments that could shape their personal fortunes and social positions. Consequently, a careful reading of their poetry readily reveals: the poetry of exiled literati in the mid-to-late Tang often centered on personal careers and fortunes, reflecting the characteristic sorrow of Confucian scholars, a strong awareness of adversity, and a habitual reliance on political hierarchies. Confronted with the tension between career ambitions and the unstable realities of court politics, scholars were reluctant to fade into obscurity yet feared the dangers of exile. This inner struggle led them to seek new strategies for spiritual cultivation and self-reconstruction, including literary expression, self-cultivation, and engagement with nature, which served both to avoid misfortune and maintain personal integrity.

- The reality of exile gradually unsettled their adherence to Confucian principles. Political disorder and the unpredictability of fate led them to reconsider their dependence on hierarchical authority, fostering a gradual intellectual and spiritual awakening. As Buddhism teaches, attachment to external objects or desires ensnares the mind in an endless cycle of suffering (Jiang, ed., 2005, p. 43). Bai Juyi's poem *Qiuchi* illustrates an awakening from worldly ambitions toward authentic realization of the mind's true nature (Zhou, ed., 1999, p. 3313).

- By transcending the gains and losses of official careers, exiled literati underwent a spiritual transformation, moving from concern for the state to concern for the self, and ultimately toward enlightenment. In this process, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism intertwined in their lives, reflecting a convergence of thought despite different paths. Confucianism guided ethical conduct, Daoism offered a means to transcend worldly concerns, and Buddhism provided emotional and intellectual solace, allowing scholars to gradually transcend their dependent tendencies and cultivate spiritual autonomy.

• **Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Exiled Literati's Turn Toward Daoism and Buddhism**



- Confucian values shaped several key psychological traits among literati: dependent personality, the sorrow of Confucian scholars,

and an awareness of adversity. These traits generated profound inner psychological distress and gradually prompted their intellectual and

spiritual engagement with Daoist and Buddhist traditions. In sum, the turbulent mid-to-late Tang political climate, together with habitual dependence and strong moral obligations, created profound psychological tensions that motivated engagement with the three teachings. This study highlights how literary and philosophical practices facilitated spiritual adjustment and ideological transformation, while suggesting further research on the interactions of

political adversity, cultural expectations, and individual psychology.

5. Limitations and Further Study

- The study, however, relies mainly on textual and poetic analysis, leaving the specific interactions between individual psychology and political context open for further empirical investigation, and the variations among exiled groups and broader applicability of the Three Teachings remain to be explored.

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7. Author Declaration

Confirm originality of work The first author was responsible for the overall research design and conceptual framework, conducted textual analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the initial manuscript.

The second author provided substantive revisions and academic guidance, finalized the manuscript, and selected the appropriate journal for submission.