

Article

From Local Worthy to Temple Exemplar: Yang Shi's Enshrinement and the Ritual Making of Cheng–Zhu Orthodoxy

Chaomin Zhang 

School of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Minzu University of China, Beijing 100081, China;
zchao088@gmail.com

Abstract

Studies of Yang Shi's enshrinement in 1495 have traced the earlier petitions and examined how changing Ming criteria for admission to the Confucian temple shaped the outcome. This article asks a different question: how did a disputed intellectual genealogy acquire binding ritual authority? Reading local gazetteers, academy records, court chronicles, memorials and genealogical writings together, it argues that Yang's canonization unfolded through a hierarchy of ritual recognition. Academy and local-worthy worship made him a durable regional exemplar; the court's rejection of empire-wide enshrinement in 1465 nevertheless authorized a local shrine and thereby created an intermediate ritual status; later advocates recast him from an imperfect exegete into an indispensable transmitter and defender of the Way. Imperial enshrinement did not simply acknowledge an already settled Cheng–Zhu succession. It standardized one contested genealogy across state schools and made that genealogy publicly performable. Yang's case thus shows how ritual hierarchy constituted Confucian orthodoxy through continuing sacrificial relations between living communities and exemplary predecessors.

Keywords: Yang Shi; Confucian temple; ritual canonization; Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy; local cults; Ming China

1. Introduction: From Genealogy to Ritual Status

By the end of the Southern Song, Zhu Xi's synthesis had furnished later scholars with the conceptual and textual resources for narrating a continuous transmission of the Way (*daotong*) from the ancient sages to the Cheng brothers and then to Zhu himself. Viewed from the later dominance of Cheng–Zhu learning, the emergence of this tradition can appear more coherent and inevitable than it actually was. Intellectual histories commonly begin with accomplished doctrines and recognized masters; once the sequence has been stabilized, figures who connect one master to another are easily reduced to links in a completed chain. Scholarship on the social history of Neo-Confucianism has complicated that retrospective view by showing that the movement's ascendancy depended on academies, local elite networks, state education, examination culture, anthologies, and repeated acts of classification (Bol 2008, pp. 229, 232–33, 246, 248; Tillman 1992, pp. 2–4, 8, 253–55; Wilson 1995, pp. 10–11, 23). The genealogy of the Way was not merely remembered. It was made.

Ritual was one of the practices through which it was made. Thomas A. Wilson's work distinguishes the construction of a genealogy of the Way in writing from its authorization through sacrifice. His study of the Kong descendants shows that biological descent from Confucius did not by itself settle ritual authority: family claims had to be negotiated



Academic Editors: Qiyong Guo and
Vincent Goossaert

Received: 25 August 2026

Revised: 9 October 2026

Accepted: 14 October 2026

Published: 17 October 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

within the court's ordering of the cult. His introduction to *On Sacred Grounds* and his account of sacrifice further treat the temple as a setting in which relations among Confucius, his descendants, and other recipients of offerings were constituted through ritual practice (Wilson 1995, pp. 10–11, 23, 27; 1996, pp. 559–61, 577; 2002a, pp. 25–26; 2002b, pp. 258–59). Daotong, the succession through which the Way was understood to pass from teacher to disciple, was an intellectual genealogy rather than a biological pedigree. Yang's case brings these two kinds of relationship into comparison. The issue was how a disputed teacher–disciple succession acquired an authorized place in the sacrificial community. This builds on Wilson's account of ritual formation while following the movement between local worship, territorially limited state recognition, and empire-wide enshrinement.

The enshrinement of Yang Shi (1053–1135) provides an unusually revealing answer. Yang studied directly with both Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, transmitted learning associated with Luoyang to the southeast, and stood at the head of the line conventionally said to run through Luo Congyan and Li Tong to Zhu Xi (Tuotuo n.d., juan 428). In later accounts, he is therefore both a founder of Min learning and an ancestor of Zhu Xi's intellectual lineage. That position did not, however, carry him smoothly into the Confucian temple. Proposals to honor him moved through the Yuan and Ming courts, and Ming advocates submitted major petitions in 1448, 1465, 1491, and 1495. Objections concerned his lack of a major exegetical work, his association with Cai Jing, Zhu Xi's criticism of his interpretations, and the existence of other candidates who might claim a closer or superior place in the Cheng–Zhu succession. Only in 1495 did the Ming court grant him an empire-wide place in the Confucian temple.

Yang's case is distinctive within the conventional succession linking the Cheng brothers to Zhu Xi. He had studied directly with both Cheng brothers and was the first of its three intermediate transmitters—Yang Shi, Luo Congyan, and Li Tong—to obtain an empire-wide place in the Ming Confucian sacrificial register in 1495. Luo and Li were admitted only in the late Wanli period (Ho 2021, pp. 10, 31–32). This precedence is revealing because Yang's place in the genealogy had not secured his ritual recognition. The 1465 deliberation compared him with Lü Dalin and You Zuo as Cheng disciples, with Luo Congyan and Li Tong as figures nearer to Zhu Xi, and with Hu Anguo and Cai Shen as authors of major commentaries. Yang thus stood where genealogical necessity and assessments of individual achievement could pull in different directions. The same deliberation rejected empire-wide enshrinement while authorizing worship in his home region, making visible a consequential status between academy commemoration and universal sacrifice. Read alongside the varied local cults and the successful argument of 1495, this combination permits a close examination of how ritual scale and genealogical reasoning worked together. This limited chronological comparison does not establish Yang as the first Confucian admitted on genealogical grounds (*Ming Xianzong shilu* n.d., juan 21, Chenghua 1/9/wuchen).

Earlier studies have established much of the political and intellectual chronology. Guo-Qiang Hong reconstructs the interaction between local interests and central deliberation, explains the immediate circumstances behind the major petitions, and shows how advocates selectively redeployed Zhu Xi's judgments of Yang. Wei-hsuan Ho locates the 1495 decision within a longer shift in the criteria of enshrinement, with greater emphasis on illuminating the Way and exemplifying moral conduct alongside achievement in transmitting the Classics (Hong 2014, pp. 61, 83–84, 88; Ho 2015, pp. 61, 76). Ho's later survey further shows that the Ming temple followed criteria of its own and did not simply reproduce a complete Neo-Confucian genealogy (Ho 2021). These studies provide the background for the more focused institutional question pursued here: how did differentiated scales of worship make a contested genealogy ritually authoritative?

This article therefore treats the petitions not as a sequence leading inevitably to acceptance but as moments in the production of differentiated ritual status. Its central claim is that Yang's path from academy worthy to temple exemplar joined three processes that should be distinguished analytically. First, local institutions accumulated and reproduced a memory of Yang as the bearer of the Way southward. Second, court rejection sorted this memory into a hierarchy: in 1465 the court denied universal enshrinement but ordered special worship in Yang's home region. That decision did not simply end a failed petition. It converted a local claim into a recognized, though territorially limited, ritual rank. Third, later memorialists translated the grounds of worthiness from exegetical authorship and doctrinal agreement into genealogical indispensability, defense of the Way, and moral efficacy. When the court finally authorized the placement of Yang's tablet in the Confucian temple, it made him a recipient of recurring offerings in state schools throughout the empire. These rites were to link living communities of teachers and students to Yang as a deceased transmitter of the Way.

Ritual canonization is used here descriptively, without claiming a new meaning for the term or a category exclusive to Confucianism. In this case it refers to the authoritative classification of exemplary persons through sacrificial inclusion, title, position, and ritual repetition. Its significance lies in the specific institutions and relations examined, rather than in terminological novelty. Enshrinement converted historical judgment into an institutionally durable relation: who accompanied Confucius, where a tablet stood, who received offerings, and how teachers and disciples were brought into a common sacrificial order. The term does not imply that all enshrined Confucians were understood as the same kind of deity, or that official rites produced uniform popular belief.

Religiosity is examined here through the relations sustained by sacrifice to deceased exemplars. A tablet honored with recurring offerings made its recipient an object of reverence within a living community, rather than merely a name in a history of ideas. In seeking an authorized place for an exemplary teacher, Yang's advocates also sought a public setting for their own commitment to honoring and continuing the Way. The religious question concerns how this commitment connected the living to deceased transmitters of a Way held to bind later generations, and how the court determined the legitimate scope of that connection. This does not require attributing miracle-working powers to Yang or presuming a uniform doctrine of his posthumous existence. The argument concerns sacrificial practice, exemplary presence, and the obligations of transmission; its evidence does not permit a reconstruction of every participant's inward belief.

The evidence comes from two bodies of material that are often read separately. Local gazetteers and academy records preserve a geography of commemoration in Jiangle, Yanping, Wuxi, and other places. *The Veritable Records of the Ming*, official deliberations, memorials, and collected writings record the bureaucratic work of evaluation. The method is historical and interpretive: I compare the grounds advanced in petitions with the court's stated decisions and the ritual arrangements recorded for particular institutions. Later gazetteers and retrospective academy accounts are read as evidence of the organization of memory, rather than assumed to reproduce earlier practice without change. Memorials disclose advocates' criteria and intended effects; they do not establish how all worshippers experienced the rites. Read together, the materials reveal neither a purely bottom-up movement nor a simple act of state appropriation. Local worship supplied sites, constituencies, and durable claims; the state imposed distinctions among those claims; successive petitioners altered the intellectual description of the candidate in response. The resulting orthodoxy was at once local in its resources, imperial in its authorization, and ritual in its mode of public existence.

All translations from Chinese primary sources are the author's unless otherwise indicated. Chinese names are given in pinyin, except where an author has established another English form of the name.

2. Localizing the Way: Academies, Shrines, and Regional Exemplarity

Yang Shi was born in Jiangle County in the jurisdiction later known as Yanping Prefecture, Fujian. He studied first with Cheng Hao and, after Cheng Hao's death, with Cheng Yi. Zhu Xi's *Record of the Sources of the Cheng School* preserves the anecdote in which Cheng Hao watched Yang depart and declared, "My Way is going south," an account that became a compact charter for later accounts of the Daonan, the southward transmission of the Way (Zhu 2010, p. 1061, juan 10, "Yishi"). Yang also taught for many years in the Jiangnan region. By the time later scholars described the Cheng–Zhu succession, he could be remembered simultaneously as a disciple of the Chengs, a teacher with several regional constituencies, an opponent of Wang Anshi's New Learning, and the remote teacher through whom Zhu Xi inherited the Luoyang tradition.

The earliest ritual settings in which this memory acquired institutional form were not the empire-wide Confucian temple but academies and local shrines. In 1209, the Yanping prefect Chen Mi established Yanping Academy on the model of White Deer Grotto Academy and initially commemorated Li Tong. During the Duanping reign (1234–1236), a shrine in the prefectural school included Yang among local former worthies. In 1266, an academy bearing Yang's sobriquet, Guishan, received an imperial plaque. In 1273, a locally sponsored Shuangfeng Academy enshrined Yang together with Liao Gang, Zhu Xi, and Liao Deming. Local gazetteers record further reconstructions, renamed academies, and shrines through the Yuan and Ming (Huang 2006, vol. 2, pp. 43–46, 553, juan 45 and 60).

These lists should not be read as a transparent record of a settled lineage. Each arrangement selected a particular association. A four-worthy grouping could present Yang, Luo, Li, and Zhu as a continuous regional transmission; a wider shrine could place Yang among several exemplary local teachers; another institution could associate him with officials remembered for service to a locality. Academy worship thus did more than preserve biographical memory. It arranged predecessors in spatial and pedagogical relations, and those relations varied with the institution doing the remembering.

The religious meaning of academy sacrifice is best examined through the relations enacted within these institutions. Academies were built environments in which instruction, collective identity, and reverence for predecessors converged. To enter such a shrine was to become available as a model for a community of learning. The rites did not need to imply a tightly organized church or a doctrinal creed. They connected a living pedagogical association to deceased persons whose tablets and images localized the authority of a tradition.

The Ming rebuilding of these sites makes the point especially clear. In 1383, local officials in Nanping converted an older lecture hall into a Shrine to Former Worthies and honored Yang, Luo, Li, and Zhu (Huang 2006, vol. 2, p. 42, juan 45). The material sequence was important: a place for teaching became a place for remembering teachers, and the group selected for worship mapped the southward transmission onto Yanping. The arrangement made Zhu Xi's learning appear as the culmination of a local succession rather than as an intellectual system detached from regional institutions. The educational purpose of such a grouping appears more explicitly in Xu Pu's account of the renovation completed at the Yanping prefectural school in 1492. He described a shrine to the four teachers below the Baozhang Pavilion, called the Daonan shiyou zhi tang, the Hall of Teachers and Friends of the Way's Southward Transmission. He envisaged students approaching the Way of

Confucius and Mencius through the learning of these teachers and ultimately putting it into practice in official service (Xu n.d., juan 2, “Yanping fu chongxiu ruxue ji”). The selected predecessors thus marked a route of learning within a place that also honored them through sacrifice.

Later language concerning Donglin Academy in Wuxi makes the same operation explicit. In his “Preface to the Donglin Compact,” Gao Panlong (1562–1626), looking back at Yang’s teaching there, wrote that Wuxi had no tradition of lecturing before Master Guishan. In the separate “Preface to the Gazetteer of Donglin,” he joined institution, teacher, genealogy, and sage in an ascending sequence: “While Donglin endures, Master Guishan endures; while Master Guishan endures, the masters of Luoyang and Min endure; while the masters of Luoyang and Min endure, the Former Sage endures. Their spirit is one” (Gao n.d., juan 9, “Donglin huiyue xu” and “Donglin zhi xu”). Gao wrote after Yang’s imperial enshrinement, and his statement cannot be projected unchanged onto the Southern Song. It nevertheless reveals what academy worship could achieve. A local site did not merely celebrate a famous resident. It made the presence of the sage tradition accessible through a chain of places and persons.

Local commemoration also pluralized Yang’s claims to recognition. In Jiangling and Yanping he was the bearer of the Way southward. In Wuxi he was the founder of a lecture tradition. In Xiaoshan, where he had served as magistrate, he could be remembered as a beneficial official. These memories were not identical, but each generated supporters, sites, and practical reasons to preserve his cult. Hong has shown that the 1465 petition associated with the retired official Wei Ji emerged partly from the politics of water-control works near a Xiaoshan shrine to Yang (Hong 2014, p. 61). A narrow intellectual history would treat this local interest as extraneous to the “real” question of Yang’s thought. A ritual history instead asks how such interests helped sustain the candidate’s public person across generations.

The relation between local worship and national enshrinement was therefore neither automatic nor merely symbolic. Local rites conferred a durable but bounded status. They enabled officials and students to point to an existing community of remembrance, while the multiplicity of local claims allowed Yang to be presented as teacher, moral official, defender of orthodoxy, and genealogical ancestor. At the same time, local worship exposed a limit. A tablet honored in one academy did not yet stand beside Confucius in every state school. The distance between these scales—local, regional, and empire-wide—became the field on which Yang’s status was argued.

3. A Hierarchy of Recognition: Yuan Precedent and Ming Rejection

The first recorded effort to move Yang beyond local worship came in 1359, when Hu Yu, an official in Hangzhou, petitioned on behalf of Yang Shi, Li Tong, Hu Anguo, Cai Shen, and Zhen Dexiu. Hu’s grouping itself was an argument. The five men could be situated within Zhu Xi’s intellectual lineage as predecessors or successors, and all had connections to the southeast. Hu praised Yang for having personally received the Cheng tradition, refuted Wang Anshi’s interpretations, and opened the source from which the learning of Zhu Xi, Zhang Shi, and Lü Zuqian later flowed. He requested posthumous titles and enshrinement “in the court of the Former Sage” so as to strengthen Confucian custom and encourage later students (Song and Wang n.d., juan 77).

The *History of the Yuan* records joint deliberation in 1361 and imperial authorization in the eighth month of 1362, followed by posthumous titles for the five masters. The warrants were to be sent to Fujian for delivery to descendants or, if descendants could not be found, placement in local schools, academies, or shrines (Song and Wang n.d., juan 77, “Song wuxian congshi”). Yet authorization and ritual performance cannot be treated as identical. The

record concerns delivery and local placement of warrants; it does not by itself establish an empire-wide installation. Chu explains the absence of an installation ceremony by reference to late-Yuan instability. Dong is more cautious: he considers the possibility that the authorization was not widely implemented and reviews competing explanations for the renewed Ming petitions (Chu 2015, p. 9; Dong 2014, pp. 177–78).

This ambiguity is analytically useful. A court order, a title, the delivery of a document, the placement of a tablet, and repeated sacrifice were related but not interchangeable acts. Later Ming advocates could cite the Yuan record as a precedent, while Ming ritual practice could still treat Yang as not yet enshrined. Authorization without evidence of widespread liturgical implementation left a claim available for reactivation.

In 1448, Wang Changshun, an instructor in the Jiangle county school, asked that Yang be enshrined in the Confucian temple. His memorial emphasized that Yang had studied with the Chengs, that his explanations of the Five Classics and Four Books had been excerpted in the imperially sponsored compendia, and that the intellectual sources of Luo Congyan, Li Tong, and Zhu Xi began with him. Wang also praised the rectitude of Yang's mind and the subtlety of his learning of principle, which he considered beneficial to governance and education; enshrinement would display the dynasty's reverence for learning and Yang's achievement in transmitting the Way (Ming Yingzong shilu n.d., juan 163, Zhengtong 13/2/jiaxu).

The emperor referred Wang's request to the Ministry of Rites for deliberation (Ming Yingzong shilu n.d., juan 163, Zhengtong 13/2/jiaxu). That recorded procedural step should be distinguished from approval of the proposed rites. Wang had brought a county-school instructor's claim to the imperial court, but the entry does not establish a national installation or recurring sacrifice. The later 1465 deliberation shows that Yang's eligibility for empire-wide enshrinement remained contested.

The 1465 deliberation produced a more consequential result. A petition associated with Wei Ji asked again for Yang's enshrinement. The Ministry of Rites referred the matter to the Hanlin Academy, whose response conceded Yang's eminent place but articulated three classes of defect. First, Cheng Yi had been dissatisfied with Yang's discussion of the *Western Inscription*, and Zhu Xi had disputed aspects of Yang's interpretation of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Second, Yang's late-career response to Cai Jing's summons raised doubts about his conduct. Third, his exegetical achievements could not match Hu Anguo's commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* or Cai Shen's commentary on the *Documents*. The reviewers also turned genealogy against him: among the Cheng disciples, Lü Dalin and You Zuo might be judged superior; among those nearer to Zhu Xi, Luo Congyan and Li Tong stood closer (Ming Xianzong shilu n.d., juan 21, Chenghua 1/9/wuchen; Hong 2014).

The logic of the rejection is striking. Yang's location in a lineage did not automatically authorize his inclusion. It multiplied the comparisons that could exclude him. In a retrospectively constructed genealogy, Yang could be an essential link in transmission while still being judged less accomplished than other Cheng disciples or more remote from Zhu Xi than Luo Congyan and Li Tong. Zhu Xi's authority thus supported opposing arguments: Yang's link to the Chengs justified the petition, while Zhu's criticisms gave the reviewers grounds for rejecting it.

Although the court denied empire-wide enshrinement, the decision altered Yang's ritual status. The court ordered officials in his native prefecture to establish a shrine and offer sacrifices in spring and autumn. The court distinguished the two scales of worship: Yang would not be "universally sacrificed to under Heaven," but he would receive special worship in his home region (Ming Xianzong shilu n.d., juan 21, Chenghua 1/9/wuchen). A Daonan Shrine was established, with Luo Congyan and Li Tong as associated figures (Kong et al. 2016, p. 228, juan 5). The refusal thus contained an authorization.

This combination of denial and grant is the pivot of Yang's ritual canonization. If enshrinement is treated as a binary—inside or outside the national temple—the decision appears to be merely another failed petition. In fact, it differentiated two legitimate modes of honor. The court preserved the exclusivity of universal enshrinement while recognizing that Yang merited more than informal local remembrance. The order gave an existing regional cult formal state authorization and prescribed offerings in spring and autumn. Yang thus received official recognition in his home region while remaining outside the empire-wide sacrificial register.

The 1465 ruling also shows how the court could give local worship a formal place within the ritual order. By authorizing sacrifices in Yang's home region, the emperor defined the territorial extent of his recognition. This regional authorization gave later petitioners a firmer basis for seeking empire-wide inclusion: they could argue that Yang was already an approved recipient of offerings and that the remaining issue was whether to extend that recognition beyond his home region.

The episode further cautions against reducing official sacrifice either to political utility or to doctrinal judgment. Wei Ji's local interests mattered, as did the prestige of the petitioner. The reviewers nonetheless evaluated textual interpretation, conduct in office, authorship, precedent, and relative position within the lineage. Ritual governance gathered these heterogeneous considerations into a single classificatory decision. The outcome was not a philosophical verdict on whether Yang's ideas were "true." It was a judgment about the kind and range of exemplary presence those ideas, deeds, and associations warranted.

4. Recasting Yang Shi: From Imperfect Exegete to Indispensable Conduit

After 1465, advocates faced a clearly articulated problem. They could not plausibly erase Zhu Xi's criticisms, produce a monumental canonical commentary, or deny Yang's contact with Cai Jing. The later memorials therefore reweighted a genealogical claim already present in the Yuan petition and Wang Changshun's 1448 memorial. Earlier advocates had invoked transmission alongside textual achievement; Xie Duo and Cheng Minzheng made its implications for the consistency of the sacrificial order more forceful. The question increasingly became what would happen to the publicly recognized succession of the Way if Yang were omitted.

Xie Duo's 1491 memorial illustrates the transition. As chancellor of the Nanjing Imperial University, Xie presented six proposals on education. Under the heading of selecting teachers, he called for teachers with moral standing comparable to that of Han Yu and Yang Shi. Under the heading of correcting the sacrificial register, he praised Yang as an authentic transmitter of Luoyang learning and a defender of the Way, and requested Yang's promotion together with Wu Cheng's exclusion. He argued that this change would benefit moral education (*Ming Xiaozong shilu* n.d., juan 47, Hongzhi 4/1/xinchou). The proposals linked the choice of teachers and recipients of sacrifice to a shared educational purpose.

Xie coupled Yang's promotion with the expulsion of Wu Cheng. The court replied that both matters had repeatedly been raised and were difficult to reopen. Later compilers accused Xie of acting from partisan loyalty to the southward lineage (*Ming Xiaozong shilu* n.d., juan 47, Hongzhi 4/1/xinchou; Ji et al. n.d., juan 61, "Yiluo yuanyuan xulu"). Yet the failed request shows that advocates could connect transmission and defense of the Way to institutional teaching without securing a change in the sacrificial register.

This reasoning was reinforced by activities outside the capital. Officials repaired academies and Yang's tomb, expanded sacrificial endowments, and reproduced texts associated with him. During his tenure as prefect of Yanping, Su Zhang printed chronologies, collected writings, and recorded dialogues associated with Yang, Luo, and Li. Xiong Wei,

a Jiangle student, also wrote a defense of Yang's enshrinement. In 1494, the tribute student He Sheng submitted another memorial (Hong 2014, pp. 67–68; Kong et al. 2016, pp. 412, 635–36). Such activity did not compel the court, and it should not be romanticized as a unified popular movement. It nevertheless created an archive of advocacy. Shrines, repaired sites, printed biographies, and petitions made the claim recurrent. By 1495, the final court deliberation could say that “the hearts of later learners are all unsettled” by Yang's exclusion (Cheng n.d., juan 10, “Guishan xiansheng congsi yi”). The phrase transformed multiple local and institutional appeals into a collective moral subject.

The intellectual setting at court had also changed. Cheng Minzheng (1445–1499), who drafted the decisive deliberation, is often associated with an effort to reconcile Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan. In his 1489 preface to *The Way Is One*, Cheng argued that their teachings differed initially but ultimately converged, and criticized readers who treated their early disagreements as evidence of lifelong opposition (Cheng n.d., juan 28, “Daoyi bian xu”). One need not make Cheng's reconciliationism the direct cause of Yang's success. What matters is that it supported a less exclusionary picture of legitimate Confucian learning and accompanied Cheng's broader attempt to revise the criteria of temple inclusion.

The decisive memorial began with a general proposition: “Among the Confucians enshrined with Confucius, none can be without merit to this Way.” Because the Way was difficult for later students to judge directly, Cheng continued, the court should take the testimony of great Confucians as evidence and thereby arrive at what was common to human hearts. He then selected favorable materials from the Cheng corpus and Zhu Xi's *Record of the Sources of the Cheng School*. These described Yang's deep cultivation, firm practice, gentle manner, and resemblance to Cheng Hao. Most importantly, Cheng Hao's declaration that “my Way is going south” became proof that, among the Cheng disciples, Yang alone had explicitly been entrusted with the Way (Cheng n.d., juan 10, “Guishan xiansheng congsi yi”).

This was not neutral compilation. Hong's account of Yang Lian's advocacy shows a related practice: Yang selectively excerpted and edited Zhu Xi's judgments to establish Yang Shi's place in the Cheng lineage (Hong 2014, pp. 83–84, 88). The act of selection was part of ritual canonization. Court officers did not first discover a complete, uncontested intellectual identity and then reward it with sacrifice. They composed the candidate appropriate to the rite from a divided textual record.

Cheng next expanded the meaning of merit. Yang's “merit in transmitting the Way” lay in the line from Luo Congyan to Li Tong to Zhu Xi, in Hu Anguo's personal receipt of instruction, and in the wider intellectual effects attributed to Zhang Shi and others. His “merit in defending the Way” lay in opposing the elevation of Wang Anshi in the Confucian temple and the use of the *New Commentaries* in education. On this account, Yang's importance did not rest primarily on a doctrine unique to him. It lay in enabling later orthodoxy to exist:

Guishan transmitted the teaching to Luo of Yuzhang; Luo transmitted it to Li of Yanping, who gave it to Master Zhu, and this became known as the orthodox line. Hu Wending personally received his instruction, and the commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was written. Zhang Nanxuan traced the source upward, and the meaning of the Supreme Polarity was clarified. . . . The merit of Guishan in transmitting the Way cannot be denied (Cheng n.d., juan 10, “Guishan xiansheng congsi yi”).

The passage turns mediation into achievement. A philosopher who appeared derivative when measured by distinctive authorship became indispensable when measured by the continuity of a tradition. On the question of Cai Jing, Cheng invoked Zhu Xi's approval of Hu Anguo's defense of Yang's decision to take office. Hu had held that Yang could have helped the situation if his counsel had been heeded and that the Cai family

could not taint him. Cheng thus defended Yang's integrity without denying the association that had prompted the objection. The charge that Yang had written too little received a different response. Cheng noted that Yang had lived in the aftermath of the proscription of Luoyang learning and had nevertheless shown students the fundamental source and the practice of experiential realization. Zhu Xi, he argued, had received essential indications through that transmission. The memorial condensed its conclusion into a counterfactual: "In short, without Guishan, there would have been no Master Zhu" (Cheng n.d., juan 10, "Guishan xiansheng congsi yi"). Qiu Jun also formulated this counterfactual in his *Supplement to the Extended Meaning of the Great Learning*, using Yang's transmission of Cheng learning southward to argue for his enshrinement (Qiu n.d., juan 66).

The counterfactual did more than praise an ancestor. It made Yang's exclusion generate a contradiction inside the temple. Hu Anguo, Zhu Xi, Zhang Shi, Cai Shen, Zhen Dexiu, Xu Heng, and Wu Cheng had all received sacrifice, directly or remotely, within a genealogy to which Yang was made essential. How could disciples and later inheritors be present while an indispensable teacher remained outside? Cheng appealed to the obligation of disciples toward their teacher: a sacrificial order that honored later inheritors while excluding the relevant transmitter failed to express the relationship invoked to justify their inclusion. He also cited the Yuan authorization as a precedent, explaining that political upheaval had prevented it from being extended throughout the empire. In the accepted deliberation, an earlier decision that had not secured universal implementation was made to support the renewed request. Genealogical obligation and ritual precedent reinforced one another (Cheng n.d., juan 10, "Guishan xiansheng congsi yi").

The accepted memorial reframed doctrinal difference. Zhu Xi's criticism of Yang no longer had to prove that Yang stood outside the orthodox succession. A lineage could transmit authority without reproducing identical propositions at every generation. The temple would canonize Yang's function as transmitter and defender, not every interpretation he had offered. This made the argument compatible with acknowledged doctrinal defects, although the surviving deliberation does not establish that this consideration alone caused the court's approval. Ritual orthodoxy could therefore be stricter than pluralism but broader than doctrinal uniformity.

The growing emphasis on illuminating the Way was essential, as Ho has demonstrated (Ho 2015, pp. 61, 76). Yet "the Way" did not simply replace one neutral criterion with another. It allowed advocates to redescribe the relevant scholarly achievement. A large commentary was an object an individual authored; the transmission of the Way was a relation among persons, texts, places, and later effects. Once the latter became decisive, local institutions could count as evidence, intermediate teachers could count as agents, and the existence of an already enshrined posterity could count as a claim on behalf of an excluded predecessor.

This finding complements the different emphases of Bol and Tillman. Bol situates Neo-Confucian learning within historically formed communities and institutions; Tillman reconstructs the exchanges and disputes through which Zhu Xi's position gained ascendancy (Bol 2008, pp. 4–5, 246, 248; Tillman 1992, pp. 2, 8, 254–55). Neither approach requires ritual to be absent. Yang's case focuses on a further problem: how a court decision selected from existing claims and made one relation binding in an official sacrificial register. Local support and persuasive discourse did not themselves determine eligibility, as the earlier rejections show. Yet rejection could authorize a more limited cult, and the accepted memorial could recast an earlier genealogical claim as an obligation within the temple's existing order. Ritual classification joined community formation and argument to a specific institutional outcome. The case supports this account of their interaction, rather than a general refutation of either scholar's account of Neo-Confucianism.

5. Enshrinement and the Public Authority of the Cheng–Zhu Succession

In the seventh month of 1495, the Hongzhi emperor granted Yang Shi the title Earl of Jiangle and ordered his enshrinement in the Confucian temple. The order placed his tablet after Sima Guang's and established the decision as a regulation (*Ming Xiaozong shilu* n.d., juan 102, Hongzhi 8/7/dinghai). Imperial enshrinement authorized his inclusion in the spring and autumn sacrifices of the state-school system; the surviving order by itself does not establish the date of implementation at every school.

The physical placement deserves attention. Enshrinement was not an abstract honor added to a biography. A title, tablet, relative position, calendar, and network of institutions gave the judgment a material and repeatable form. Placement after Sima Guang simultaneously individuated Yang and incorporated him into an ordered community. The temple made a historical thesis spatial: the persons who had transmitted and defended the Way belonged in the ritual company of Confucius.

This act had a different force from the academy arrangements described earlier. Local groupings could present Yang as one of the four worthies of Yanping or as the initiating teacher of Donglin. National enshrinement did not abolish those memories, but it translated them into a common liturgical register. Officials and students in state schools far from Fujian no longer encountered Yang only as a regional master described in a genealogy. The imperial order authorized his tablet to receive recurring sacrifice in those schools.

The difference is best understood as standardization rather than simple elevation. Local rites had already made Yang exemplary to particular communities. The court's act fixed the scale, form, and relative rank of that exemplarity. Imperial recognition also fed back into local memory. A shrine honoring a nationally enshrined figure acquired a different relation to the court than a shrine petitioning on behalf of a disputed candidate. Subsequent academy histories could narrate their own local cults as anticipations of an imperial truth.

The 1495 decision therefore did not merely acknowledge a Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy that had long been complete in philosophy and politics. It helped define what that orthodoxy was. In textual genealogies, authors could debate whether Yang had truly understood the Chengs, whether Luo and Li were closer to Zhu, or whether other disciples were philosophically superior. The temple required a decision. By including Yang, it privileged a model of orthodoxy organized around transmission and defense of the Way. It also made Zhu Xi's lineage of teachers a matter of state ritual.

This conclusion extends Wilson's account of the ritual formation of Confucian orthodoxy. Wilson's study of the Kong descendants shows how family and state cults converged uneasily in Ming ritual politics. Yang's case reveals a related process among the secondary figures who populated the temple. Here the problem was not biological descent but intellectual filiation. Ritual still did genealogical work: it decided which relation counted, who could stand as an ancestor, and how a living community would reproduce that relation through sacrifice (Wilson 1996, pp. 559–61, 564, 577). The comparison concerns the authorization of relationships, rather than an identity between the Kong family cult and the cult of a teacher in the Cheng–Zhu succession.

Wilson's analysis of the imperial cult offers a further perspective on these decisions. He shows how canonical precedent authorized a cult and situated it within a ranked system of sacrifice, while court debates determined its titles and liturgical forms (Wilson 2002b, pp. 253, 258–59, 268). Yang was not classified as a cosmic power identical to the gods of the great state sacrifices, and the language used for Confucian exemplars must remain historically specific. Nonetheless, comparable work of classification occurred here. Court officials studied canonical and historical precedents, argued over Yang's moral and pedagogical efficacy, assigned him a title and position, and authorized his inclusion in recurring rites (Cheng n.d., juan 10, "Guishan xiansheng congshi yi"; *Ming Xiaozong shilu* n.d.,

juan 102, Hongzhi 8/7/dinghai). In this limited sense, the court did not only recognize a great man; it produced a liturgical person whose authorized presence could act within the dynasty's program of teaching.

Yang's religious status also cannot be exhausted by the political recognition that enshrinement conferred. The 1465 and 1495 decisions concerned where he could legitimately receive sacrifice and which communities would renew that relation in spring and autumn. The religious significance was the authorized incorporation of a deceased teacher into an enduring community of recipients of offerings. His authority could be approached through a tablet and repeated acts of reverence, extending the teacher–disciple relation beyond the lifetimes of its members. Cheng's closing appeal joined the obligations of disciples toward their teacher to a wish to “reassure later learners in their pursuit of the Way” (Cheng n.d., juan 10, “Guishan xiansheng congshi yi”). Recognition of the exemplar could thus also give public form to the living advocates' own obligation to honor and continue his tradition. Gao Panlong's later assertion that Donglin, Guishan, the Luoyang and Min masters, and the Former Sage shared one spirit expresses this continuity in devotional terms, although it cannot establish the beliefs of participants in the earlier rites (Gao n.d., juan 9, “Donglin zhi xu”). The petitions and placement decisions document the institutional conditions for that continuity; they do not establish a cult of miracles, a uniform theory of Yang's spirit, or measured changes in popular belief.

The educational function repeatedly invoked by petitioners should therefore be taken seriously without being accepted uncritically. Xie Duo argued that changing the recipients of sacrifice would benefit moral education (*Ming Xiaozong shilu* n.d., juan 47, Hongzhi 4/1/xinchou). Cheng Minzheng argued that the list must accord with the common judgment of human hearts (Cheng n.d., juan 10, “Guishan xiansheng congshi yi”). Xu Pu's school record supplies a concrete example: the four teachers formed a path through which students could seek the Way of the sages (Xu n.d., juan 2, “Yanping fu chongxiu ruxue ji”). Cheng's objection to honoring inheritors while excluding their teacher extends this logic to the temple. Selecting recipients of offerings identified whom students should revere, while admitting a teacher alongside later inheritors presented intellectual transmission as a relation carrying obligations of reverence toward the teacher. A recurrent sacrifice enacted that judgment in a setting devoted to education. In this sense, correct classification was a mode of teaching: the sacrificial order gave institutional form to a judgment about exemplary conduct and the continuity of the Way. These were the effects expected by the advocates. The records do not establish that every participant understood the arrangement in the same way.

The long delay helps clarify that efficacy. If temple inclusion had been a decorative consequence of philosophical victory, Yang's absence would have mattered little after Zhu Xi's curriculum received state endorsement. Instead, generations of local officials, instructors, scholars, and court ministers continued to treat the omission as a defect. Their persistence suggests that textual dominance and ritual completeness were distinct. The Cheng–Zhu succession could dominate official learning while its temple representation remained incomplete in the eyes of Yang's advocates. Enshrining Yang answered that claim by aligning the temple's sacrificial community with a newly persuasive account of intellectual descent.

At the same time, the repair was selective. Other Cheng disciples and Zhu Xi's nearer teachers remained outside the national register. The successful argument did not create a neutral rule that automatically admitted everyone in the lineage. It elevated Yang through a combination of regional memory, available precedents, political sponsorship, textual curation, and the counterfactual claim that Zhu Xi's own appearance depended on him.

Ritual canonization did not end contest. It fixed one outcome strongly enough that later histories could treat it as tradition.

6. Conclusions

Yang Shi's enshrinement is often told as a story of delayed recognition: a worthy thinker was finally given the honor his role in the Cheng–Zhu succession deserved. That formulation preserves the verdict of the successful advocates. It obscures the process by which the candidate, the relevant merit, and the succession itself were repeatedly redefined.

From the Southern Song onward, academies and local shrines made Yang present to particular communities as a bearer of the Way, a former official, and an exemplary teacher. Yuan authorization created a usable precedent whose implementation remained uncertain. The Ming petitions of 1448 and 1465 translated claims about a regional teacher into appeals to the imperial cult. Most importantly, the 1465 refusal established a state-authorized local shrine. It should be understood not as an empty consolation but as an intermediate ritual rank that both limited and legitimized Yang's cult. Subsequent advocates accumulated texts, repaired sites, renewed petitions, and altered the grounds of judgment. By 1495, the question was no longer whether Yang had equaled the greatest exegetes or anticipated Zhu Xi without error. It was whether a temple containing Zhu Xi and his intellectual posterity could coherently exclude the person now described as their indispensable ancestor.

The final enshrinement made one answer authoritative. It transformed a regional cult and a contested genealogy into a standardized, recurring relation within state ritual. In doing so, it reveals a broader feature of Confucian orthodoxy: intellectual succession acquired public authority not only through philosophical argument, examination curricula, and historical writing, but also through ranked acts of worship. Ritual did not merely express a completed Cheng–Zhu *daotong*. It helped give that succession a determinate form within the imperial sacrificial order.

The religious significance of this process lay in establishing an authorized relation between living communities and deceased bearers of the Way. Their exemplarity was sustained through offerings to tablets and recurring acts of reverence, as well as through texts. The petitions also sought recognition for the living advocates' commitment to honoring those teachers and continuing their transmission. Yang's case does not demonstrate that the entirety of Ming society adopted a single, inward Cheng–Zhu faith. It demonstrates something both narrower and more historically recoverable: officials and local literati treated sacrificial inclusion as an efficacious recognition of exemplary presence, and they worked for centuries to align the temple's liturgical community with the genealogy they regarded as true. Their success gave that genealogy a body, a place, and a calendar. The Way became not only a line to be read but a relation to be performed.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) primarily for English-language assistance, including translation and revision, with supplementary support for reference checking. The author has reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bol, Peter K. 2008. *Neo-Confucianism in History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Cheng, Minzheng 程敏政. n.d. *Huangdun Wenji* 篁墩文集 [Collected Works of Cheng of Huangdun], Siku quanshu 四庫全書 ed. Available online: <https://www.shidianguji.com/zh/book/SK2998/chapter/1m1htn2rlxvs6> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Chu, Hung-lam 朱鴻林. 2015. *Kongmiao congsi yu xiangyue* 孔廟從祀與鄉約 [Confucian Canonization and the Community Compact]. Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian.
- Dong, Xining 董喜寧. 2014. *Kongmiao Jisi yanjiu* 孔廟祭祀研究 [A Study of Confucian Temple Sacrifice]. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe.
- Gao, Panlong 高攀龍. n.d. *Gaozi yishu* 高子遺書 [Posthumous Writings of Master Gao]. Digital Text, Shidian Guji. Available online: <https://www.shidianguji.com/zh/book/NA11431/chapter/1m80ingckedkb> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Ho, Wei-hsuan 何威萱. 2015. Cong ‘chuanjing’ dao ‘mingdao’: Cheng Minzheng yu Mingdai qianqi Kongmiao congsi biao zhun de zhuanbian 從「傳經」到「明道」—程敏政與明代前期孔廟從祀標準的轉變 [From ‘Academic Achievement’ to ‘Moral Conduct’: Cheng Minzheng and the Transformation of the Criteria of the Confucian Temple Canonization in the Early Ming]. *Taida lishi xuebao* 臺大歷史學報 [Historical Inquiry] 56: 35–86. [CrossRef]
- Ho, Wei-hsuan 何威萱. 2021. Song Yuan lixuejia congsi Mingdai Kongmiao xiaokao: Jian lun Mingdai Kongmiao yu lixue daotong de guanxi 宋元理學家從祀明代孔廟小考—兼論明代孔廟與理學道統的關係 [A Study of the Canonization of Song and Yuan Neo-Confucian Scholars in Ming Confucian Temples, with a Discussion of the Relationship between Ming Confucian Temples and the Neo-Confucian Succession of the Way]. *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 [Ming Studies] 36: 7–59. [CrossRef]
- Hong, Guo-qiang 洪國強. 2014. Songru Yang Shi zai Mingdai congsi Kongmiao de licheng ji qi shidai yi yi 宋儒楊時在明代從祀孔廟的歷程及其時代意義 [The Process and Significance of Enshrining Yang Shi in the Confucian Temple in the Ming Dynasty]. *Xin shixue* 新史學 [New History] 25: 51–95.
- Huang, Zhongzhao 黃仲昭. 2006. *Bamin tongzhi* 八閩通志 [Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Eight Min Prefectures], 2nd ed. Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe.
- Ji, Yun 紀昀, Xixiong Lu 陸錫熊, and Shiyi Sun 孫士毅, chief compilers. n.d. *Qinding Siku Quanshu Zongmu* 欽定四庫全書總目 [Imperially Commissioned General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries], Siku quanshu 四庫全書 ed. Available online: [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/欽定四庫全書總目_\(四庫全書本\)/史部/卷061](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh/欽定四庫全書總目_(四庫全書本)/史部/卷061) (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Kong, Zizhu 孔自洙, Qi Song 宋杞, directors, Dianling Wu 吳殿齡, chief compiler, and Xinzhi Chen 陳新之, compiler. 2016. *Yanping Fuzhi* 延平府志 [Gazetteer of Yanping Prefecture]. Shunzhi 17 (1660) ed. Edited and Punctuated by Nanping shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 南平市地方志編纂委員會. Beijing: Zhongguo Wenshi Chubanshe.
- Ming Xianzong shilu* 明憲宗實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Xianzong of the Ming]. n.d. Digital Text, Chinese Text Project. Available online: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?chapter=374713&if=gb> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Ming Xiaozong shilu* 明孝宗實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Xiaozong of the Ming]. n.d. Digital Text, Chinese Text Project. Available online: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?chapter=277695&if=en> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Ming Yingzong shilu* 明英宗實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Yingzong of the Ming]. n.d. Digital Text, Chinese Text Project. Available online: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?chapter=674141&if=gb> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Qiu, Jun 丘濬. n.d. *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補 [Supplement to the Extended Meaning of the Great Learning]. Juan 66. Digital Text, Wikisource. Available online: <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/大學衍義補/卷066> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Song, Lian 宋濂, and Yi Wang 王禕, chief compilers. n.d. *Yuan shi* 元史 [History of the Yuan]. Digital Text, Wikisource. Available online: <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/元史/卷077> (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Tillman, Hoyt Cleveland. 1992. *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Tuotuo 脫脫, chief compiler. n.d. *Song shi* 宋史 [History of the Song], Siku Quanshu 四庫全書 ed. Digital Text, Wikisource. Available online: [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/宋史_\(四庫全書本\)/卷428](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/宋史_(四庫全書本)/卷428) (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Wilson, Thomas A. 1995. *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wilson, Thomas A. 1996. The Ritual Formation of Confucian Orthodoxy and the Descendants of the Sage. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55: 559–84. [CrossRef]
- Wilson, Thomas A., ed. 2002a. *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Wilson, Thomas A. 2002b. Sacrifice and the Imperial Cult of Confucius. *History of Religions* 41: 251–87. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

- Xu, Pu 徐溥. n.d. *Qianzhai wenlu* 謙齋文錄 [Collected Writings from the Studio of Modesty], Siku Quanshu 四庫全書 ed. Digital Text, Wikisource. Available online: [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/謙齋文錄_\(四庫全書本\)/全覽](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/謙齋文錄_(四庫全書本)/全覽) (accessed on 8 October 2026).
- Zhu, Xi 朱熹. 2010. *Yiluo Yuanyuan Lu* 伊洛淵源錄 [Record of the Sources of the Cheng School]. In *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 [Complete Works of Master Zhu], rev. ed. Edited by Jieren Zhu 朱傑人, Zuozhi Yan 嚴佐之 and Yongxiang Liu 劉永翔. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, vol. 12.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.