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Spatial Distribution and Function of Portraits and Praises of Eminent Scholars from the Song Dynasty

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Abstract

The study of portraits and eulogies of venerable sages in the Song Dynasty constitutes a vital component of sage research and serves as a key avenue for understanding the interaction between local sacrificial rites and political culture during the Song period. Current scholarly discourse remains insufficient in exploring their spatial distribution and functions. This paper systematically examines eulogies and related records of sages found in the Complete Works of the Song Dynasty, Song-era gazetteers, and anthologies of Song scholars. It analyzes the spatial distribution characteristics and political-social functions of sage worship across diverse settings such as temples, government offices, official academies, and ancestral shrines. The research reveals that the distribution of portraits and eulogies of sages in the Song Dynasty followed a distinct spatial logic and functional orientation: Temples and government offices predominantly venerated sages renowned for virtuous governance and enduring legacy. This practice aimed to inspire incumbent officials to emulate these exemplary figures by highlighting their moral achievements, thereby strengthening administrative ethics and moral education. Official academies, meanwhile, emphasized venerating sages who contributed to local cultural and educational development. By praising their achievements in promoting education, these institutions guided scholars to diligently study and cultivate virtue, thereby advancing regional educational progress. The findings reveal that the spatial differentiation of venerated sages in the Song Dynasty reflected the deep integration of state power and local practices: different sites achieved differentiated moral instruction and social integration for groups of officials, the scholar-official class, and the populace by selectively venerating specific sages.

Keywords

Portraits of venerated ancestors; Eulogies to ancestors; Spatial distribution; Function

1. Research Background

Praises for sages were typically affixed to portraits of the honored figures, enabling "visitors to view the image and read the praise" (Zhang, 2006), thereby understanding the sages' teachings. During the Song Dynasty, portraits of sages were generally enshrined in specific locations to facilitate their worship. By analyzing the spatial distribution of these portraits and praises, one can observe changes in the domains of sage worship and gain insight into the diverse ways Song Dynasty people expressed their reverence for sages.

2. Status

Li He's Institutionalized Writing of Ancient Biographies: A Study Centered on the Compilation of the "Official

Selection System" and "Biographies of Eminent Ancestors" in the Han-Wei and Six Dynasties Periods (2022) explores the compilation background and social functions of biographies and eulogies of eminent ancestors during the Han-Wei period.

He Yanran's "The Reshaping of Confucian Sage Families and Ancestral Worship in the Qing Dynasty: A Case Study of the Renzi System" (2021) demonstrates that the Qing revival of ancestral worship for Confucian sages like Ren Buqi (Renzi) was exemplified by the Ren family of Jining, Shandong. They rebuilt ancestral temples and compiled genealogies by securing imperial recognition as "worship students," collaborating with local governments and the Yanshenggong Office to maintain ritual observances.

Chang Huilin's "Sage Ancestors and Vengeful Ghosts: The Transformation of Deng Ai Worship Between the Han and Tang Dynasties" (2024) uses Deng Ai as a case study to examine the evolution of his worship between the Han and Tang periods: As a Cao Wei general, Deng Ai's posthumous image underwent a transformation from "malevolent spirit" to "venerated sage" in popular memory. This process reflects the complex interplay between state power, local society, and elite narratives, revealing how Deng Ai's image was reshaped as a cultural symbol across different political contexts to serve the needs of legitimizing regimes or moral education.

"Venerating the Virtuous and Discussing the Wise: A Critical Study of the Qiantang Biographies of Eminent Ancestors" (Song, 2024) examines the textual transmission, compilation process, character types of the eminent ancestors recorded, and historical value of the Qiantang Biographies of Eminent Ancestors written by Yuan Shao of the Southern Song Dynasty. Drawing extensively from official histories, local gazetteers, and other sources, Yuan Sha compiled biographies of 39 Qiantang sages categorized into virtuous ministers and capable generals, recluses and distinguished figures, and chaste and filial women.

Li He's "An Investigation into the Writing of Sage-Ancestors in Medieval Prefectural Records: Focusing on the 'Biographies of Sage-Ancestors'" (2025) examines biographical texts titled "Biographies of Sage-Ancestors" from the medieval period. It explores how such documents were selected, categorized, written, and shaped the image of "sage-ancestors," revealing the underlying cultural motivations and political functions behind them.

3. Results

3.1 Temples and Monasteries

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the imperial court prohibited private worship of ancestors beyond four generations. Consequently, prominent local clans often established ancestral halls within temples or built monasteries near ancestral graves to safeguard burial sites. Temples facilitated seasonal sacrifices and simplified ancestral hall management. Thus, commoners and local officials frequently chose temples and monasteries to venerate sages.

In the Shu territory, a custom existed of painting portraits of officials. After an official left office, the people would place his portrait in a temple or monastery for veneration. As Li Zichun's Record of the Portrait of Prince Muwu of Chu states: "It is the custom of Shu to honor the virtuous and esteem the senior. Whenever an official leaves his post, they must request a portrait of his divine likeness to be eternally revered" (Li, 2006). Portraits of departing officials in Shu were sometimes placed in Tianqing Temple, such as those of Wang Zong and Zhang Yong, both venerated there. Others were placed in different temples or shrines, like Gao Jixun's portrait, which his grandson Gao Shidun placed in the Zhengfa Chan Monastery of Anfu Temple. Portraits of Gao Jixun's descendants were also scattered across various temples and shrines in Chengdu. At Chengdu's Great Holy Compassion Temple, since Emperor Suzong's Zhi De era, "portraits were painted of officials from imperial clerks, prefectural governors, and provincial supervisors down to subordinate staff, totaling three hundred and ninety individuals to date" (Li, 2006). This demonstrates temples and Taoist shrines as significant venues for venerating portraits of venerable predecessors.

One key purpose of designating temples and Taoist shrines as sites for venerating and sacrificing to sages was to leverage these institutions for the maintenance and management of ancestral shrines. For instance, in his "Three Sages' Praise" honoring Wang Zeng, Zichan, and Pei Du, Han Qi mentioned that after Wang Zeng's death, his younger brother Wang Zirong buried him in Xinzheng County, Zhengzhou. The tomb was adjacent to those of Zichan, the minister of the State of Zheng, and Pei Du, the Tang dynasty chancellor. Wang Zirong then painted portraits of the three and placed them in the temple adjacent to the graves (Han, 2006). This monastery may have been specifically constructed by Wang Zirong to facilitate tomb maintenance and memorial rites for the three. In the second year of Baoqing (1220), Yuan Shao, the Prefect of Lin'an, constructed the Shrine of Eminent Ancestors beside West Lake. Consequently, the Yu Chen Taoist Temple was relocated adjacent to the shrine, where it assumed responsibility for

daily maintenance and ritual offerings. Monks from the temple and Taoist priests from the shrine, being well-versed in ritual procedures and etiquette, were entrusted with conducting the ceremonies, thereby facilitating the smooth operation of the ancestral worship activities.

3.2 Government Offices

During the Song Dynasty, government offices and halls were commonly used for venerating local sages, with the honorees typically being former prefects. Sichuan maintained the tradition of "no prefect without a portrait" (Zhou, 1994). In the second year of the Qingli era (1042) of the Northern Song Dynasty, Jiang Tang, serving as Prefect of Yizhou with the title of Imperial Secretary, expanded Wen Weng's stone chamber into an academy. He selected subordinate officials to instruct students, leading to a flourishing of Confucian scholarship in Sichuan. In the fifth year of Yuanfeng (1082), Hu Zongyu, as Prefect of Chengdu, rebuilt the East Study—Jiang Tang's former resting place—adjacent to the Xianzhai. He inscribed Jiang Tang's poetry within it and "painted portraits of fifty-five governors from the founding of the dynasty to the present on the study walls" (Hu, 2011). He also "constructed the Qingyin Pavilion before the East Study" (Wu, 2006). In the winter of the eighth year of the Southern Song Dynasty's Shaoxing era (1138), Hu Shijiang, serving as the Governor and Military Commissioner of Sichuan, administered Chengdu and renovated the Qingyin Pavilion, "adding portraits of ten governors from Li Gongbing of Qin and Shu downward" (Huang, 2011). This demonstrates that Sichuan maintained a tradition of preserving portraits of governors within official residences.

The Wu region also valued prefects, "painting portraits of incoming officials" (Fan, 1986) to inspire officials and citizens while reforming customs. During the Northern Song dynasty, Pingjiang Prefecture (present-day Suzhou, Jiangsu Province) erected the Si Xian Pavilion, honoring Wei Yingwu, Bai Juyi, and Liu Yuxi. Later renamed San Xian Hall, it was destroyed in the Jianyan wars. In the 28th year of the Shaoxing era (1158) of the Southern Song Dynasty, Prefect Jiang Can rebuilt the Sanxian Hall. By the 32nd year of Shaoxing (1162), Prefect Hong Zun added Wang Zhongshu and Fan Zhongyan as honorees, renaming it Sixian Hall. Portraits of successive governors of Pingjiang Prefecture were housed in the two wings of the Qiyun Tower within the government offices and periodically displayed for "officials and citizens to pay their respects". During Hong Zun's tenure as governor of Wucheng, he constructed the Zhan Yitang Hall to protect the portraits from weathering. In the third year of Shaoxi (1192), Prefect Shen Kui relocated the portraits to Ningxiang Hall, retaining the name Zhan Yitang (Fan, 1986). By the second year of Qingyuan (1196), Prefect Zheng Ruorong noted, "From the Zhidao era to the present, Wu Prefecture has had one hundred and fifty successive prefects, each with a portrait painted" (Lou, 2006). This demonstrates the prefecture's profound regard for these portraits.

Officials standing before portraits of their predecessors in the government offices served as a reminder to learn from the wisdom of past sages, while also demonstrating their own admiration and aspiration to emulate these exemplary figures. Simultaneously, commissioning portraits of former governors functioned as a form of virtuous governance, serving as one of the local officials' educational measures for the local bureaucracy and populace.

3.3 Official Academies

From its founding, the Song Dynasty issued edicts promoting education, mandating Confucius worship in schools at all levels. Confucius' shrines were established within official academies across the realm. To educate officials and citizens, Song officials also built shrines within these academies to honor local educational pioneers who had contributed to schooling and scholarship.

In the fourth year of the Qingli era (1044), an official surnamed Lin received an imperial decree to establish the Huai'an Military Academy in Shu. After its completion, local residents commissioned an artist to paint the official's portrait for display on the academy walls. Lin himself composed a laudatory inscription for the portrait. Lin Wen had made significant contributions to education in Shu. Song Qi believed that since Lin Wen established schools in the Han Dynasty, Shu had continuously produced talented individuals. Figures like Sima Xiangru, Wang Bao, and Yang Xiong all benefited from Lin Wen's educational initiatives. In the second year of Jiayou (1057), Song Qi, serving as Prefect of Yizhou, discovered that the Wen Weng Shrine had long been neglected and fallen into disrepair. Consequently, he constructed a shrine west of the academy to enshrine portraits of ten individuals who had contributed to Shu's cultural and educational development, from Wen Weng of the Han Dynasty to Jiang Tang of the Song Dynasty, composing inscriptions for each. According to Records from the Nenggai Studio, Song Qi's construction of the Wen Weng Shrine stemmed from his sorrow over the destruction of Jiang Tang's educational legacy. Seeking to honor

Jiang Tang's educational vision, he built the shrine on the site of the original academy. Whether moved by the ruin of the Wen Weng Shrine or the destruction of Jiang Tang's educational legacy, Song Qi's purpose in erecting portraits and establishing the shrine was to disseminate the educational contributions of these sages to Shu. This aimed to inspire local officials and commoners to emulate the sages, ultimately achieving the goal of enlightening the populace.

When officials commissioned portraits of sages and composed eulogies for schools, these eulogies primarily emphasized the educational function of the images, hoping they would "inspire the aspirations of students" and motivate local scholars to pursue learning diligently. By the Southern Song Dynasty, with the rise of the Neo-Confucian movement, officials began venerating Neo-Confucian sages in state schools to expound Neo-Confucian academic principles. Thus, the sages' shrines in state schools became symbols of "education" in the minds of officials.

3.4 Shrines and Temples

Folk shrines dedicated to deities enjoyed widespread popular support in the Song Dynasty. As symbols of popular belief, shrines often became focal points of regional worship. Consequently, local officials also selected shrines as venues for venerating sages.

During his tenure as Prefect of Hangzhou in the Tang Dynasty's Changqing era, Bai Juyi frequently visited the Bamboo Pavilion at Guanghua Temple on Gushan Mountain. Later generations established a shrine there to honor Bai Juyi, with Lin Bu and Su Shi enshrined alongside him as the Three Sages of Lin'an. When the Bamboo Pavilion was later relocated to Beishan Mountain, the Three Sages Hall fell into disuse. In the fifth year of the Qiandao era (1169) of the Southern Song Dynasty, Prefect Zhou Cong rebuilt the Three Sages Hall in the eastern wing of the Water God Temple. Zhou Cong chose the Water God Temple as the site for rebuilding the Three Sages Hall based on Su Shi's poem "Postscript to Lin Bu's Poem," which reads: "Otherwise, paired with the Water God, a cup of cold spring water offered to the autumn chrysanthemums" (Wang, 1982). In the fifteenth year of the Jiading era (1222), then-prefect Yuan Shao argued that Su Shi's poem was composed for Lin Bu alone. Zhou Cong's decision to honor both Bai Juyi and Su Shi together fundamentally missed the poem's intent. Furthermore, the Water God Temple lacked sufficient space to properly honor the sages, making it difficult to achieve the goal of "promoting education and strengthening moral standards." "Moreover, with the Water Immortal deity solemnly enshrined within, the Three Sages must dwell beneath the colonnade. When the prefect pays homage to pray for clear skies or rain, the proximity of the ceremonial canopy already makes it impossible to feel at ease. Yet officials and soldiers clamor and lounge about as if at home, showing increasing disrespect toward the sages. How can worship be conducted thus?" (Qian, 2009). Therefore, the Three Sages Hall was relocated and rebuilt at Huawu on Su Causeway.

4. Discussion and Suggestions

Portraits of Song Dynasty sages were primarily distributed across temples, government offices, official academies, and ancestral shrines—all key venues for venerating these figures. The specific sages honored and their functions varied across these different settings. Temples and government offices primarily honored virtuous predecessors, using their moral governance and achievements as models to inspire successors to diligently emulate them. In contrast, government academies venerated sages who had made outstanding contributions to promoting education locally. Local officials honored these figures to encourage local scholars to study diligently and strive for progress. Folk shrines, rooted in popular beliefs, were sometimes selected by local officials as sites for venerating sages. However, since folk beliefs and sage worship operated within distinct ritual systems, their coexistence proved difficult over the long term.

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