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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CONFUCIANISM IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Jesse Sloane

CONFUCIANISM IN RELIGIOUS TERMS

‘Confucianism’ can be thought of as a set of ideas and practices emphasizing the importance of proper actions in accordance with social roles. The Chinese term for proper actions (li) is conventionally translated as ‘ritual’ but in the widest possible sense, from everyday social behavior to elaborate sacrifices where food offerings were presented to unseen spirits. Good governance depended on emulating the legendary sovereigns of antiquity, whose era was considered a prosperous time of stable rule. In East Asia at the time of the Mongol conquests, ritual offerings and other Confucian ceremonies were among the essential duties of state officials, from county magistrates up to the sovereign. These state rites were valued partly as examples to those they ruled, encouraging each person to the proper performance of social roles, but also for their resonance with cosmic laws, which helped ensure favorable weather and avert natural calamity. The spirits that received state offerings were tied to the sacred geography outlined in the Confucian classical texts and included the deities of heaven, earth, soil, grain, as well as sacred mountains, rivers, and seas.

Another category of sacrifices in the Confucian tradition concerned offerings to the spirits of Confucius, his disciples and intellectual successors. These figures were considered shengren, a term connoting a more-than-human excellence closer to ‘saint’ than the standard English translation ‘sage’. At the time of the Mongol conquests, rites to Confucius and his successors were performed in a grand shrine complex in his home county of Qufu (in modern Shandong province) as well as in smaller shrines, private academies, and government schools throughout East Asia. The cult of Confucius was not believed to bring tangible rewards and lacked the ancient pedigree of rites to nature deities. State patronage of the cult had nonetheless grown from the eighth century onward and was viewed as an important affirmation of Confucian teachings by honoring their transmitters.
At the time of the Mongol conquests, Confucian rites were part of the court ceremonies not only of the two contenders for regional primacy, the Jurchen Jin and nativist ‘Chines’ Song, but had also been adopted in Koryo, Japan, and the Tangut Xia kingdom. All of these governments continued to sponsor Buddhist and, especially in the Jin and Song, Daoist and popular religious rites at both central and local levels. At the same time, it was normal for most people – even civil elites aspiring to government office – to participate in multiple religious traditions. When two Confucian scholars in the Jin insisted that Buddhist funeral rites not be performed for them after their deaths, their attitude was viewed as so anomalous as to be recorded in a compilation of ‘tales of the strange’. Even so, Confucian rites were the only category for which performance of particular rituals at the proper times was considered absolutely indispensable for a state to fulfill its function, and Confucian classical texts were featured in the examinations serving as the main route of entry to civil service in the Jin and Song. In consequence, some modern scholars use the term ‘Confucians’ to denote all people in East Asia pursuing or aspiring to a role in the prevailing forms of civil government or favoring those institutional structures. Because members of this group normally participated in multiple religious traditions, however, the terms ‘civil elites’ or ‘literati’ are favored here. Similarly, although some scholars refer to the accustomed structures of East Asian civil government as ‘Confucian’ when contrasting them with other forms of government in the Mongol world, this chapter deals specifically with practices, ideas, and institutions that modern scholarship conventionally addresses under the analytical category of ‘religion’.

**SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND LEGITIMATE RULE**

Confucian sacred geography was bound to particular locations and geographic features in and around the area referred to as the ‘Central Territories’ (Zhongguo), comprising the North China Plain and adjacent region. Although in modern usage the term Zhongguo is used to denote the People’s Republic of China and all areas under its control, at the time of the Mongol Empire it referred to a far more limited space where the societies that produced the Confucian classics a millennium and a half earlier had carried out their ritual and political activities. This sacredness could not be generalized to mountains and rivers in general, and in principle could not be transported to allow rites of the same importance in new regions, although in practice governments in Korea, Japan, and even southern China granted special significance to certain local geographic features. This same framework applied to governments: metaphysically, the human realm could contain only one supreme government, whose ruler held the position of ‘emperor’; a line of ‘legitimate succession’ (zhengtong) had begun with the first mythic ruler and ran through one ruling family on earth at any one time, with rare exceptions for periods of extreme political fragmentation. To be viewed as the heir to legitimate succession, a ruling house needed to gain control of the Central Territories, and its patriarch had to claim the title of emperor explicitly. Recognition of these circumstances then needed to be enforced on a critical mass of elite writers of Confucian official history, many of whom were normally employed in government bureaus dedicated to current and past official records. A new ruling house could gain this recognition even if it had arrived from
outside the Confucian geographic, linguistic, and social sphere; publicly identified itself in terms of an alien origin; and officially maintained other non-Confucian state rites.

The Mongols extended their power into East Asia at a time when incorporation of ruling dynasties from newly arrived nomadic groups into the ‘legitimate succession’ framework had become a familiar exercise for Confucian thinkers. In the early eleventh century, the Khitan state had established parallel ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ administrations to govern the affairs of its nomadic and sedentary populations, respectively; they conducted Confucian rites while maintaining other state rituals. The Khitan rulers had transformed their steppe confederation into a stable state and gained political supremacy in the region, compelling the Song court to recognize the Khitan sovereign as an emperor senior to their own and forcing Koryo to recognize them as the supreme legitimate power for most of the eleventh century. A more significant challenge to conventional understanding had been posed when the Jurchens established a state firmly occupying the ‘Central Territories’ from the late 1120s onward. Confucian thinkers across the region engaged in intense theoretical discussions over how the control of Zhongguo by a ruling house claiming an alien origin and identity should be understood in cosmological terms. One center of these discussions was the Jin court itself, where from 1194 to 1202 – culminating only a decade before the Mongols arrived in force – a series of debates sought to determine which of the Five Phases (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) was associated with their own state by drawing on Confucian cosmology and parallels with the mythical rulers of antiquity described in the Confucian classics. The proceedings of the debates were moderated by the emperor and recorded in detail, providing a precedent for loyal subjects of a ruling house proudly asserting its nomadic heritage to articulate their state’s legitimacy in Confucian terms.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM

The shock of the Jurchen takeover of the Central Territories, as well as the willingness of many former Song officials and elites to enter Jurchen service, convinced many Confucian thinkers in the portion of the Song surviving in the south that nothing less than a thorough reform of morality could effect the substantive change needed to revitalize society and strengthen their own state. The influential scholar-official Chen Liang (1143–1194) argued that even orthodox Confucian ritual and culture would lose its legitimating power outside the geographic setting of the Central Territories. As Chen explained in a series of memorials to the Song emperor, the zhengqi – ‘standard’ or ‘correct’ energy – of the earth was concentrated in the Central Territories. The Song would inevitably wither away if it remained confined to the southern regions it still controlled, regardless of the rituals and cultural practices the state and its subjects maintained. This sense of crisis stimulated the growth of Neo-Confucianism, at the time often called the ‘Learning of the Way’ (Daoxue). The movement spread through the Southern Song, aided by strong personal networks, the growing industry of private printing, and a network of academies founded by its most influential thinker and author, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Neo-Confucianism insisted on the vigorous application of Confucian morality in both individual life and politics, drawing urgency from the perceived failure
of the technocratic approach to governance in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and from the erosion of traditional family norms by the Song’s flourishing market economy. The movement grounded this reinvigorated morality on a metaphysics by which the ‘psychophysical stuff’ (qi) that composed and motivated all things in the world should be shaped and channeled by proper ‘principle’ (li). Correct ‘principle’, embodied in the actions of the shengren of the past, could be understood through careful study of canonical Confucian texts, observation of the natural world, and self-cultivation. While Neo-Confucianism spread quickly in Southern Song society, its adherents’ relationship with the Song court, bureaucracy, and mainstream elite culture was often mutually critical; this tension peaked with a state ban on Zhu Xi’s teachings from 1195 to 1202, although after his death they received increasing recognition from the Song court.

As a response to Jurchen control of the Confucian heartland and dissatisfaction with their own government, Song Neo-Confucians advanced the concept of the daotong, a unitary line of legitimate succession to the Way of the ancient mythic rulers and Confucius by new generations of exemplary Confucian practitioners who need not hold roles in government. In Zhu Xi’s formulation, the daotong lineage was one of righteous orthodoxy based on the concept of zhengtong, the legitimate succession of dynasties, but independent of political events. For those among Confucian thinkers who clung to a rejection of the legitimacy of self-identified ‘alien’ ruling houses, this doctrine of ‘legitimate succession of the Way’ lessened the degree of adjustment needed to accept Mongol rule by arguing that the identity of the family controlling the Central Territories was not of paramount importance. Whether one joined Mongol government or avoided serving it, in other words, Confucian worldviews provided a way to understand and value one’s role in the Mongol Empire.

THE MONGOLS AND CONFUCIAN RITUAL

The Mongol rulers were initially reluctant to recognize the value of Confucian practices. Because Confucian ritual roles were tied to social positions, their proponents could not promise that through their own actions they could accomplish the practical intercession of cosmic forces on the Mongol rulers’ behalf, as might the clergy of other traditions. Consequently, although authority regarding Confucian rites lay with East Asian civil elites, this group did not receive darqan tax-exempt status until 1237, later than Daoist and Buddhist clergy. Confucian scholars firmly believed that their classical rites brought tangible benefits to the realm, yet they could not perform the most important offerings in place of the sovereign. Consequently, the literati in northern China – who were also the local authorities on civil administration – repeatedly urged Mongol rulers to adopt them.

The main shrine complex to Confucius, in his ancestral home of Qufu, had been burned during the Mongol invasion of the area in 1214. The Yan family, who had been granted the hereditary title of myriarch by Ögödei in the early 1220s, had established their headquarters at Dongping, a short distance northwest of Qufu, and governed the area. The Yan family sponsored the long process of rebuilding the elaborate shrine complex, gaining a decree from Ögödei in 1236 that formally ordered the reconstruction. In 1233, Ögödei summoned the most senior living
descendant of Confucius, Kong Yuancuo (1181–ca. 1251) to an audience with him, and in response to Kong’s urging issued a decree in 1238 ordering that the ritual and musical implements and personnel from the Jurchen court, which had been scattered after the Mongol destruction of the capital, be collected and put back into use.24 These musicians and ritual officiants were assembled not at the Mongol capital at Qaraqorum, but rather at Dongping, and thus for a time not only offerings to Confucius but also the Confucian state rites were performed at the shrine complex in Qufu.25 After assuming the title of qa’an in 1260 and consolidating his court at the Great Capital, in 1261 Qubilai had the formal shidian seasonal rites performed at court for the first time since the fall of the Jurchens, issuing a decree ordering the rites to be incorporated into the Mongol state’s ritual calendar.26 Mongol rule also brought the practice of Confucian offerings and the study of the Confucian canon by groups who had not engaged in either before, particularly Uyghur and Central and Western Asian families who settled in the Yuan Ulus and joined the civil elite alongside Tanguts and the descendants of Song and Jin subjects.27

The Yuan court’s patronage of Confucian ritual went beyond mere restoration of previous institutions and practices, as rulers, imperial relatives, and officials introduced a series of innovations following Qubilai’s death. Immediately after succeeding to the throne in 1307, Qaishan (r. 1307–1311) issued an edict further augmenting the noble title conferred on Confucius that determined the ritual honors due to his spirit.28 Earlier dynastic courts in China had set a precedent of conferring posthumous honorary titles on Confucius,29 yet the promulgation of Qaishan’s decree was distinguished from previous instances by a deliberate inclusion of multiple ethnic constituencies. Although the edict was drafted by the prominent Chinese scholar Yan Fu (1236–1312), officials who led the call to elevate Confucius’s status appear to have had Mongol, Uyghur, and Khitan backgrounds.30 This edict was sent to every administrative center under Yuan control and over 50 stelae inscribed with its text are extant in various locations in China today.31 On imperial order, an imposing stele announcing the edict was placed in the Shrine to Confucius in Qufu, using Phags’pa script for a phonetic gloss on the inscription’s Chinese text to demonstrate the intended universality of the announcement.32 This stele’s presentation of the cult of Confucius as relevant to the varied constituencies of the Great Yuan Ulus was borne out in practice: other epigraphic evidence testifies that Yuan subjects from a range of backgrounds either visited Qufu to pay their respects or participated in restoration projects there.33

From that point onward, the mode of patronage of Confucian ritual practiced by the Mongol court diverged still further from preceding models. Most striking was the greater role of women, who had historically been excluded from participation in all ceremonies in Confucian shrines.34 Most active of these was the princess Sengge Ragi (ca. 1284–1331), a younger sister of Qaishan whose appanage included Qufu. In 1308, she sponsored sacrifices at Qufu in honor of Confucius’s new title, presided over by a Chinese official who acted in the explicit capacity of her personal representative and was received by descendants of Confucius and his chief disciples.35 As Qaishan had done, Sengge Ragi presented the tailao ‘large animal’ sacrifices, the traditional offering of sovereigns at Qufu.36 In 1327, now in the status of older sister to the new ruler Yesün Temür (r. 1324–1328), Sengge
Ragi dispatched representatives, including a Chinese civil official and the local 
daruqachi, to offer liquor and incense at the Qufu shrine on her behalf.37 On this 
ocasion, her representatives erected a stele memorializing the rites and praising 
Sengge Ragi’s distinguished family and her virtue in supporting the sacrifices; at 
2.55 meters, it towered over even Qaishan’s imperial edict stele. In 1334, Sengge 
Ragi’s daughter Buddhashri (1305–1340) offered sacrifices at Qufu in the position 
of Supreme Empress Dowager.38 The occasion was commemorated in a lengthy 
stele, which, although badly weathered, appears to record a series of events in 
which a group of officials traveled to Qufu on Buddhashri’s instructions to offer 
sacrifices and meet members of the same distinguished families as Sengge Ragi’s 
representatives. Under the precedent of previous dynasties, including the Jurchens, 
the dispatching of personal representatives to offer sacrifices at Qufu had been a 
prerogative strictly limited to the (male) sovereign. The early fourteenth-century 
sacrifices by relatives of the Yuan rulers marked the first time women had taken 
this role, and indeed it would not be repeated after the Mongols lost control of the 
region later in the century.

THE MONGOL IMPACT ON NEO-CONFUCIANISM

Neo-Confucian texts had reached northern China before the Mongol conquests, yet 
Confucian learning in the Jin and neighboring Koryo still focused on poetry and 
conservative commentaries on the classical canon rather than Neo-Confucianism’s 
elaborate metaphysical, social, and political programs.39 The Mongol conquest of 
the Song in the late 1270s integrated into the empire the personal networks and aca-
demic institutions that gave Neo-Confucianism its social presence in southern China. 
In consequence, by the end of the thirteenth century, it became dominant in northern 
China as well. To the movement’s popularity among civil elites, the Mongol court 
added stronger state support than it had ever before received. When after decades of 
lobbying by literati the civil service examination system was finally restored under 
Ayurbarwada (r. 1311–1320) in 1315, the examination curriculum focused on 
testing candidates’ mastery of Neo-Confucian thought,40 a feature that government 
examinations in China retained until 1905.41 The Mongol court also ordered that 
Zhu Xi and other leading Neo-Confucian thinkers be added to the figures honored 
in the Shrine to Confucius; this ritual change has persisted in Confucian ritual to the 
present day.42 The patronage Neo-Confucianism enjoyed from the Great Yuan Ulus 
appears to have contributed to its spread throughout East Asia and later adoption as 
oficial ideology by other regimes. Scholar-officials from Koryo staying in Daidu in 
the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries brought Neo-Confucian texts and 
ideas back to the Korean peninsula, where they spread among educated elites and 
became the state ideology of the Choson dynasty (1392–1910).43 Neo-Confucianism 
first gained patronage by the imperial court in Japan at the same time but became 
firmlly associated with state authority there only after 1605, when Hayashi Razan 
(1583–1657), who drew on continuing Neo-Confucian developments in China and 
Korea, was made retainer to the first Tokugawa shogun.44 The incorporation of East 
Asia into the Mongol world thus led to the transformation of Neo-Confucianism 
from a popular intellectual movement based in local academies in southeast China 
to an ideology shared by states across the region.45

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NOTES

7. For the distinguishing role of these civil elites immediately preceding and under the Mongol Empire, see Hymes 1986, 1–11 and 124–135; Makino 1987, 529–553; Gerritsen 2007, 47–112.

8. LS, 3; Marsone 2011, 97–176.
10. Chan 1984, 80; Da Jin deyun, 22b.
12. Chen 1204, 1a.
17. On this concept, see Bol 1992, 28–30 and 338.
18. See, respectively, Bol 1992, 368, n. 123; Soffel and Tillman 2012, 93–94.
23. YS 34.
32. For a rubbing of the stele and analysis of its layout, see Miya 2006, 271–272.
34. Flath 2016, 140–142.
42. Huang 2010, 224–225.
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Da Jin deyun tuoshuo (1214) Siku quanshu edn.


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LS, See List of Abbreviations.


Su, T., ed. (ca. 1334) Yuan wenlei. Chizaotang Siku quanshu huiyao edn.


YS, See List of Abbreviations.
