

# A Martyr's Tale

## The Life, Death, and Posthumous Career of Yang Jisheng

Research >  
China

Yang Jisheng was beheaded in Beijing in 1555. His crime was criticizing the leading political figure of his day, Yan Song. But when Yan fell from power seven years later, Yang became a posthumous hero, a Confucian martyr. Over the ensuing 450 years his image has been used by emperors, members of the literati elite, and his own descendants to promote various interests and agendas. Today his memory is again being revived to serve new interests in post-communist China.

By Kenneth J. Hammond

Born in 1516 in a village about 120 km south of Beijing, Yang Jisheng led a hard life as a young man. He managed to acquire a Confucian education in the village school, passed the entry level Confucian examinations and attended the National University in the capital. In 1547 he passed the highest examination and began his official career. After a promising start at the secondary capital in Nanjing, he was called to Beijing in 1551. However, he then submitted a memorial criticizing the policy of trading with Mongol raiders on the northern frontier supported by the chief grand secretary Yan Song. Because of this he was arrested, beaten in prison, demoted, and banished to a remote posting on the frontier of the Ming empire, in what is today Gansu province. He served there for one year, during which time he became popular with both the local elite and the commoners. He founded a school for local children with funds raised by selling his horse and his wife's jewels.

By the beginning of 1552 the political tide in Beijing had turned against trade with the Mongols, and Yang's career got a fresh start. Yan Song sought to recruit Yang to his own ranks of followers. Yang received a series of promotions, and was finally recalled to the capital. But when he arrived in January 1553 he immediately submitted a new memorial, attacking Yan Song directly for ten crimes and five kinds of corruption. Three days later he was arrested again. This time he was beaten much more severely, and kept in prison for over two years. Finally, despite the efforts of friends like the rising scholar Wang Shizhen to aid him, he was executed in November 1555. Wang and other junior officials retrieved Yang's body from the execution ground and paid for his burial.

### A posthumous career

Yang's story might well have ended here, as just another casualty in the factional battles which plagued the imperial political system. But in 1562 Yan Song fell from power, and officials like Xu Jie, who took over dominance at the Ming court, called for the rehabilitation of Yan's political victims. Yang Jisheng was posthumously restored to office, promoted, given honorary titles, and in 1567 the new Longqing emperor ordered shrines to be built to praise his loyalty.

By this time Wang Shizhen had become one of the most influential literary and cultural figures in China. He wrote a biography of Yang which drew the portrait of a righteous martyr, a Confucian hero who sacrificed his life to oppose Yan Song's corruption and abuse of power. The new chief grand secretary, Xu Jie, wrote a funeral epitaph for Yang praising his righteous spirit, artfully neglecting to note his own failure to defend Yang while serving as Yan Song's subordinate. Even the often iconoclastic writer Li Zhi articulated the story of Yang Jisheng in its essential heroic dimensions. Yang's former residence in Beijing had a small shrine built in his honour, and his memory came to be associated with the City God's cult. In the late eighteenth century his memory was revived when his home became a focal point for literati activism, with a series of political groups using the space for gatherings. Qing reformers from Zeng Guofan to Kang Youwei invoked Yang's name in their own causes.

While these major literati figures established the orthodox treatment of Yang as martyr, his family was using his fame to build their own prestige in rural Hebei province. When the Longqing emperor granted funds for shrines in Yang's honour, the family undertook to build one in the village of Beihezhaoh, with a copy of the imperial rescript carved on a stele for all to see. This shrine was carefully maintained and repeatedly restored, as was one in the county seat of Rongcheng, and the district capital in Baoding. Yang's grave was in another village, about 25 km away and here, too, a shrine was built and sacrifices to his spirit were maintained. Yang's family endured, and kept the memory of their heroic ancestor alive through the end of the Ming, throughout the Qing dynasty, and into the tumultuous years of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile in Lintao, in Gansu province, the school Yang had established flourished. He had bought land to sustain

the school, and the local gazetteers record the continuing flow of revenues from these fields for its support. Local men who were educated there wrote poems and essays about it, and about their martyred patron Yang, which both glorified his memory and enhanced their own cultural status by association with so noble a figure. This school, the Chaoran Terrace Academy, also survived into the twentieth century.

Another way in which Yang's image was deployed was through drama. In the 1570s a play called *The Cry of the Phoenix* appeared which dealt with the rise and fall of Yan Song. The story of Yang Jisheng filled three of the forty-two scenes in the play, and provided the moral pivot for the critique of Yan as an evil official. The play was attributed to Wang Shizhen, but in fact was written by one of his followers, with Wang lending his name to enhance sales and promote interest. Clearly the portrayal of Yan and Yang in the play accords with Wang's political and cultural views. This play became quite popular, and gave rise to others, such as Ding Yaokang's *The Python's Gall* which appeared in the 1650s.



Photo by Ken Hammond

Through the late Ming and on through the Qing dynasty, then, Yang's legacy was developed, appropriated, and deployed by diverse interest groups within Chinese society and political culture to promote a range of agendas. Emperors praised his loyalty and devotion to the throne. Literati held him up as a hero of Confucian morality, and a model for emulation. By extension they sought to enhance their own moral status by a process of 'virtue by association'. His family built on his fame as a fund of cultural capital in their rural society. In Lintao the local elite kept his educational foundation alive as a means of disseminating Confucian values and of promoting their own virtuous reputations.

### Yang in the twentieth century

The twentieth century saw the collapse of the Confucian system in China, and in the course of revolution Yang Jisheng was consigned, temporarily it now appears, to the dustbin of history. By the 1960s his home in Beijing was subdivided for urban housing, his shrines were dismantled, even in his natal village, and the Chaoran Terrace Academy became a 'People's Cultural Palace'. Confucian political martyrs were no longer desirable figures for emulation in the age of Lei Feng.

But that age has passed. In the years since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China has turned away from the path of socialist revolution and embraced a new quest for wealth and power. In the process the ideals of Marxism and Maoism have faded away. China today is in search of new ways to understand the world, and new moral guidelines for living in it. One place in which at least some are searching for guidance is in the legacy of Confucianism. It is in this context that we can understand the current revival of the cult of Yang Jisheng. This revival is taking place in at least two of the traditional venues associated with his life, and may eventually involve the third as well.

In his native village his descendants, who now account for some 75 per cent of the local population, rebuilt his shrine in 1997. They have resumed the annual Qingming sacrifices



Woodblock print of Yang Jisheng.

Taken from 'Yang Jiaoshan gong wenji', 1896.

at his grave. One of his seventeenth generation grandsons is the village Party chief. A new county gazetteer published in 1999 gives extensive coverage to Yang's biography, and reproduces the imperial edicts of 1567 bestowing posthumous honours on him. The family hopes to expand the shrine in the years ahead, and to attract tourists as a way of boosting their local economy.

In Lintao Yang Jisheng has something of a modern fan club. Local history enthusiasts gather to visit the site of his school, and a pagoda with some of his calligraphy inscribed was rebuilt in the late 1990s. A modern, simplified character version of his collected writings was published in 1999. And in June 2002, to honour the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the school, local Party and government representatives convened an official commemorative gathering to honour Yang, which ended with a groundbreaking ceremony for the restoration of the Chaoran Terrace Academy.

In Beijing Yang's former home continues to languish, marked by a plaque from the Cultural Relics Bureau, but in sad repair. From time to time reports appear in the Beijing Evening News lamenting this state of affairs, but nothing yet seems to have resulted from this.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this current phase in Yang's posthumous career can be seen in the preface to the new edition of his writings. There he is portrayed as a fighter against official corruption. And his spirit is invoked with the explicit end of contributing to the building today of a new China of law, order, and public morality. ◀

**Prof. Kenneth J. Hammond** is Associate Professor and Department Head in History at New Mexico State University. He is currently an affiliated fellow at IIAS. Past President of the Society for Ming Studies, he is the editor of *The Human Tradition in Premodern China*. His research deals with the culture and politics of Ming dynasty and late imperial China.  
khammond@nmsu.edu

Descendants of Yang Jisheng, Beihezhaoh, Hebei, 1999.

Statue of Yang Jisheng in his shrine in Beihezhaoh, Hebei, 1999.



Photo by Ken Hammond