A Martyr’s Tale

The Life, Death, and Posthumous Career of Yang Jisheng

By Kenneth J. Hammond

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.

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, pass the local examinations, and attend 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 1553. 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 even taken on 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 1555 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 Yang’s political victims. Yang Jisheng was posthumously restored to office, promoted, given honorary titles, and in 1567 the new Longqing emperor gave Yang’s family permission to build their own shrine.

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 Yang 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 orthodoxy 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 Beihuzhai, Yang’s home village. The imperial inscription 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 is some 25 km away, but here, too, a shrine was built and sacrifices to his spirit were maintained. Yang’s family endured, and kept the memory of his heroic ancestor alive through the end of the Ming, throughout the Qing dynasty, and into the tumultuous years of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile in Lintian, in Gansu province, the school that Yang had established flourished. He had taught land to sustain the school, and the local gazetteer records the continuous 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 Confucianism.

This revival is taking place in at least two of the traditional places of study associated with his life and may eventually involve the third as well.

In Lintian 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 450th 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.

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