



RITUAL ARCHITECTURE AND MUSICAL HIERARCHY: THE CONFUCIAN TEMPLE AND THE SHIDIAN RITE IN MING CHINA

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Abstract: This article examines the Confucian temple through four interrelated dimensions: architectural type, naming system, ritual function, and musical-dance hierarchy. Particular attention is given to the Ming dynasty, when the musical and dance specifications of the shidian rite underwent significant changes in ritual rank. These changes moved from the Hongwu-period regulation of dengge 登歌 music and the six-row dance formation, to the Chenghua and Hongzhi-period tendency toward imperial-level specifications, and finally to the restoration of the six-row dance after the Jiajing-period rectification of Confucian temple rites. This transformation was not merely a technical adjustment in music or choreography, but reflected the state's redefinition of Confucius's status, the position of Confucian learning, and the hierarchy of ritual order. The article argues that the Confucian temple transformed Confucian thought into a visible and repeatable state ritual order through space, nomenclature, sacrifice, music, and dance.

Keywords: Confucian, shidian rite, Ming ritual system, sacrifice

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Introduction

The Confucian temple is one of the most representative spaces within the traditional Chinese system of ritual architecture. It is both a sacrificial site commemorating Confucius and a symbolic building through which the state recognized the orthodox status of Confucian learning. It was connected with the system of local schools, while also embodying state ritual order through sacrificial ceremonies, music and dance, and architectural layout (Agnew, 2019). For this reason, the Confucian temple cannot be understood merely as an ordinary shrine,

nor should it be simply classified as religious architecture. It is a composite ritual space situated among sacrifice, politics, education, and ethics.

The source document first points out that the Confucian temple belongs to the category of Chinese “temple-and-altar architecture.” Temple-and-altar architecture itself is a special architectural type. It possesses a certain quasi-religious cultural significance, while also containing political and ethical meanings. Compared with palace architecture, the Confucian temple may seem to lack a direct function of imperial display. Yet through sacrificial order, systems of naming, musical and dance specifications, and spatial hierarchy, it in fact performs an important role in political and ethical expression. The object worshipped in the Confucian temple is Confucius. In the ideology of the ancient Chinese state, Confucius was not an ordinary historical figure, but a symbol of the “Former Sage,” the “Former Teacher,” and the Confucian lineage of the Way. Therefore, the sacrifice to Confucius was not only a commemoration of a cultural figure, but also a state-level confirmation of the legitimacy of Confucian orthodoxy.

From the perspective of historical development, the nature of the Confucian temple was not fixed. With changes in Confucius’s titles, the system of associated worship, school institutions, state ritual regulations, the functions and symbolic meanings of the Confucian temple were repeatedly reshaped. In the Ming dynasty especially, the musical and dance specifications of the shidian rite in Confucian temples were adjusted several times, moving from the six-row dance to the eight-row dance, and then from the eight-row dance back to the six-row dance. This reveals clear institutional fluctuation. On the surface, these changes concerned the number of dancers and the rank of ritual performance. In essence, however, they involved the complex relationship between Confucius’s status, the hierarchy of state ritual, imperial authority, and the symbolism of Confucian learning.

On the basis of the source document, this article addresses three questions. First, what position did the Confucian temple occupy within the Chinese system of temple-and-altar architecture? Second, what institutional functions are reflected in the diverse naming system of Confucian temples? Third, what ritual logic is revealed by the rise and fall of musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite? Through the analysis of these questions, we can more clearly understand the special nature of the Confucian temple as ritual architecture, as well as the ways in which the Ming state regulated the relationship between Confucian authority and political order through sacrificial institutions.

The Position of the Confucian Temple within the System of Temple-and-Altar Architecture

Traditional Chinese architecture was not classified simply according to practical function. It was often closely related to ritual order, political status, and cosmological ideas. The source document, drawing on Wang Zhenfu’s *Basic Categories of Chinese Architecture*, divides temple-and-altar architecture into four categories: altars, ancestral temples, *mingtang* and *biyong*, and shrines. Altars were used to sacrifice to Heaven, Earth, and other divine powers, such as the Temple of Heaven, the Altar of Earth, the Altar of Soil and Grain, and the Altar of the First Agriculturist. Ancestral temples were used to worship ancestors, such as the imperial ancestral temple and lineage temples. *Mingtang* and *biyong* were ancient ritual buildings where rulers manifested political instruction; major ceremonies such as court audiences, celebrations, rewards, and the selection of scholars could be held there. Shrines, meanwhile, could be divided into those connected with natural worship and those connected with the worship of historical figures. Shrines dedicated to natural deities included the Dai Temple at Mount Tai and Dragon King temples, while Confucian temples,

Guandi temples, temples of the Three Sovereigns, and temples of the Medicine King belonged to the latter category (Sebastien, Thoraval:2009: 82-100)

This classification helps us understand the basic attributes of the Confucian temple. First, the Confucian temple was not an architectural site for sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. It differed from the Temple of Heaven or the Altar of Earth, which directly served the state's sacrifices to cosmic and divine powers. Second, it was not the same as an ancestral temple or imperial ancestral temple. The object worshipped there was not an imperial ancestor, but Confucius, a cultural sage honored by the state. Third, although the Confucian temple was closely connected with educational institutions, it was not entirely identical with *mingtang* or *biyong*. The latter more directly embodied imperial politics and state instruction, whereas the Confucian temple formed a ritual space centered on the Confucian lineage of the Way through the worship of Confucius, his disciples, former worthies, and former Confucians (Buckley, 1991).

Therefore, the Confucian temple is best understood as a ritual shrine dedicated to the worship of a historical figure. However, "worship of a historical figure" should not be equated simply with the worship of deities in popular religion. Confucius's position within the Confucian temple was highly institutionalized. He was not worshipped as a general deity, but incorporated into the state sacrificial system as the symbol of Confucian orthodoxy, cultural legitimacy, and political ethics. The Confucian temple therefore possessed commemorative and educational functions, as well as sacrificial and political ones (Benjamin, 2000).

The distinctiveness of the Confucian temple also lay in its frequent combination with the school system. Among the names listed in the source document are "Confucian learning temple," *xuegong*, *hongxue*, county school, and prefectural

school. This shows that, in local society, the Confucian temple was often not an isolated structure, but was connected with the space of official education. In other words, the Confucian temple was both a site for sacrifice to Confucius and the symbolic center of Confucian education. Students received instruction in Confucian classics in the school complex, while the shidian rite performed in the Confucian temple repeatedly reinforced the sacred and orthodox character of this education through ritual form. In this way, the Confucian temple became an important institutional node connecting the state, local society, schools, and the community of scholars.

The Naming System of Confucian Temples and Its Institutional Meaning

The source document states that the names of Confucian temples varied according to historical period and region. In addition to *Wenmiao*, they were also called *Zhisheng miao*, *Wenxuanwang miao*, *Xiansheng miao*, *Fuzi miao*, *Xianshi miao*, *Lu Sikou miao*, Confucian learning temple, *xuegong*, *hongxue*, county school, prefectural school, and so forth. Although these names are numerous, their common feature is that they are all related to the worship of Confucius. In general terms, any temple hall in which Confucius was enshrined may be called a Confucian temple (Farmer, 1995).

These designations are not merely differences in terminology. They reflect the multiple functional dimensions of the Confucian temple and the multiple aspects of Confucius's identity.

The name *Wenmiao*, or "Temple of Culture," emphasizes the relationship between the Confucian temple and *wen*. Here, *wen* does not simply mean culture or literature; it also refers to civilizational order, ritual-music instruction, and the Confucian lineage of the Way. Since Confucius was honored as the great synthesizer of Confucian civilization, the designation *Wenmiao* itself implies the state's recognition of the cultural authority of Confucian learning.

The names *Zhisheng miao* and *Xiansheng miao* highlight Confucius's status as a sage. "Ultimate Sage" indicates that Confucius held the highest position within the Confucian genealogy of sages and worthies, while "Former Sage" emphasizes his role as an earlier model revered by later Confucians. Such designations express primarily Confucius's moral and scholarly authority.

The name *Wenxuanwang miao* is closely connected with Confucius's title. Historically, Confucius was granted the title "King Wenxuan," and this designation reflects the state's institutional arrangement of honoring Confucius with a royal title. This raises an important question: when Confucius was called a "king," should his sacrifice be performed according to a higher ritual rank? The rise and fall of musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite is closely related to this question. If Confucius was understood as a "king," then it became reasonable for his sacrificial rank to move toward higher specifications. If he was redefined as "Former Teacher," however, his identity leaned more toward that of a teacher of the Way rather than a king in the political hierarchy; as a result, the ritual specifications also changed (Flath, 2016).

The names *Fuzi miao* and *Xianshi miao* emphasize Confucius's identity as a teacher. The designation "Former Teacher" in particular carries strong educational significance. It positions Confucius as the teacher and model for all later generations, rather than as a royal figure within the hierarchy of political rank. On the one hand, this title highlights Confucius's status as an educational exemplar; on the other, it can reduce the tension between Confucius's ritual status and the ritual system centered on the emperor. The Ming Jiajing-period adjustment of Confucius's title and sacrificial system precisely reflects this transformation from "king" to "teacher."

Names such as Confucian learning temple, *xuegong*, *hongxue*, county school, and prefectural

school indicate the integration of the Confucian temple with the school system. At the local level, Confucian temples often formed an educational-sacrificial complex together with prefectural, subprefectural, and county schools. Students not only studied Confucian classics there, but also entered the state ritual order through participation in ceremonies such as the shidian rite. The Confucian temple thus became an important site for the formation of scholar-official identity (Xinian, 2017).

The diversity of Confucian temple names therefore does not indicate disorder. On the contrary, it reveals the compound functions of the Confucian temple. It was a shrine to sages and worthies, a school space, a local center of moral instruction, and a part of the state ritual network. It commemorated Confucius as an individual, while also symbolizing Confucian orthodoxy. Different names emphasized different aspects, but together they constituted the complex institutional meaning of the Confucian temple.

The Shidian Rite and the Ritual Function of the Confucian Temple

The central activity of the Confucian temple was sacrifice to Confucius, and the shidian rite was the most institutionally representative form of this sacrificial practice. The term *shidian* originally referred to an important rite in ancient schools for sacrificing to former sages and former teachers. It later developed into the major sacrificial ceremony to Confucius held regularly by the state and by local schools. Within the space of the Confucian temple, the shidian rite was not merely an act of sacrifice, but a ritual performance (Goldin, 2017). Through officiants, offerings, music, dance, ritual vessels, and spatial order, it presented in concrete form the hierarchy, order, distinctions of rank, and moral instruction emphasized by Confucianism.

From the perspective of ritual, one key issue in the shidian rite was rank. Different sacrificial objects required different ritual specifications.

Ancient Chinese ritual placed great emphasis on names and ranks: sacrificial specifications could be neither too low nor excessive. As a sage, Confucius naturally deserved a higher sacrificial rank than ordinary former worthies. But whether Confucius could receive rituals corresponding to the Son of Heaven involved deeper political and ethical questions. If the sacrifice to Confucius adopted excessively high specifications, it might create a symbolic structure close to, or even in tension with, imperial ritual. If the specifications were too low, however, they could fail to express the state's reverence for Confucius and Confucian learning. For this reason, the institutional design of the Confucian temple shidian rite was always situated in a balance between honoring Confucius and honoring the ruler.

Music and dance were especially important in the shidian rite. In the traditional Chinese ritual system, "ritual" and "music" were inseparable. Ritual emphasized order and hierarchy, while music gave this order a sensory form through sound, rhythm, and bodily movement. The number of rows in the dance formation possessed particularly clear hierarchical meaning. The six-row dance consisted of six rows and six columns, for a total of thirty-six dancers. The eight-row dance consisted of eight rows and eight columns, for a total of sixty-four dancers. In general, the eight-row dance represented a higher specification and carried the symbolism of imperial ritual, while the six-row dance was lower in rank and was usually associated with the rank of feudal lords. Therefore, whether the Confucian temple shidian rite used the six-row or eight-row dance was not merely a matter of choreographic arrangement. It concerned what kind of ritual treatment Confucius should receive within the state sacrificial system (Chin and Huang, 2020).

The specifications of ritual music likewise possessed hierarchical significance. The source document notes that in the twenty-sixth year of Hongwu, the musical component of the Confucian

temple shidian rite was regulated as *dengge*, while the dance used the six-row formation. By the ninth year of Hongzhi, the Court of Imperial Sacrifices requested a further elevation, arguing that since the Confucian temple had already been permitted to use rites corresponding to those of the Son of Heaven, its musical instruments should also be elevated to imperial specifications, with the number of instrumental musicians fixed at seventy-two. Here we can see that musical and dance systems together constituted a hierarchy of ritual rank (Lam, 1998). The number of instruments, the size of the ensemble, and the scale of the dance formation were all visible signs of the state ritual order.

Therefore, the study of the Confucian temple should not focus only on the building itself, but also on the ritual practices that took place within it. The Confucian temple was a ritual building precisely because its spatial meaning had to be repeatedly activated through the shidian rite. Without sacrificial ceremony, the Confucian temple would be merely a static building; through the shidian rite, it became a dynamic space in which state ritual, Confucian orthodoxy, and political ethics operated together.

The Rise and Fall of Musical and Dance Specifications in the Ming Shidian Rite

The source document describes the transformation of musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite as a "roller-coaster-like" fluctuation. This description is vivid and appropriate. The system of music and dance in the Ming Confucian temple shidian rite did not develop in a linear manner. Rather, it underwent elevation, expansion, and reduction at different moments.

First, in the twenty-sixth year of Hongwu, namely 1393, the court officially regulated the music and dance of the Confucian temple shidian rite: the ritual music was to use *dengge*, and the dance was to use the six-row formation. This regulation established the basic specifications

of the early Ming Confucian temple shidian rite. The six-row dance consisted of six rows and six columns, totaling thirty-six dancers, and was usually equivalent to the rank of feudal lords (Wilson:2002: pp. 134-172). The early Ming adoption of the six-row dance shows that, although the state revered Confucius, it still kept his sacrificial specifications within certain limits, avoiding a direct equivalence with imperial ritual.

Second, in the Chenghua period, the musical system remained unchanged, but the dance was elevated from six rows to eight rows. The eight-row dance consisted of eight rows and eight columns, totaling sixty-four dancers, and belonged to a higher ritual rank. The Chenghua-period elevation of the dance used in the sacrifice to Confucius indicates that Confucius's ritual status was further raised on the symbolic level. At this moment, the Confucian temple shidian rite began to approach the specifications of imperial ritual, reflecting the Ming state's increasing reverence for Confucius and Confucian learning in the middle period of the dynasty (Fairbank, 1984).

Third, by the ninth year of Hongzhi, namely 1496, the Court of Imperial Sacrifices requested a further elevation of the musical and dance specifications of the Confucian temple shidian rite. It argued that, since the Confucian temple had already been permitted to use rites corresponding to those of the Son of Heaven, its musical instruments should also be elevated to imperial specifications, and the number of instrumental musicians should be fixed at seventy-two (Lu:2017: 21-40). The source document points out that this stage marked the full adoption of imperial institutions in the music and dance of the shidian rite, representing the peak of its ritual rank. In other words, by the Hongzhi period, not only had the dance already adopted the eight-row formation, but the musical system was also being pushed toward imperial ritual. At this point, the Confucian temple shidian rite was brought almost to the highest level of ritual rank.

However, this high specification did not continue in a stable manner. Around thirty years later, from the late Hongzhi period to the early Zhengde period, the title used to praise Confucius changed from "king" to "Former Teacher," and this symbolic transformation bypassed the royal title. The musical and dance specifications then declined accordingly, and the eight-row dance was replaced once again by the six-row dance. The source document notes that sources such as the *Gazetteer of the Imperial Academy* record that in the Chenghua period the dance used in the sacrifice to Confucius was increased from six rows to eight rows, while after the rectification of Confucian temple rites in the ninth year of Jiajing, the Imperial Academy again changed it back to six rows. It is therefore clear that the ninth year of Jiajing was an important turning point in the adjustment of the Ming Confucian temple shidian rite.

This process shows that the Ming Confucian temple ritual system did not simply become increasingly reverential toward Confucius. Rather, it continually adjusted itself between honoring Confucius and maintaining proper ritual measure. The elevation in the Chenghua and Hongzhi periods reflected the state's strengthening of Confucian orthodoxy. The reduction in the Jiajing period, by contrast, reflected a renewed examination of ritual hierarchy and the distinctions between ruler and subject. Confucius could be honored as the teacher for all ages, but whether his sacrificial specifications should approach or equal those of the Son of Heaven required redefinition.

From "King" to "Former Teacher": Change of Title and Ritual Reduction

The deeper reason for the transformation of musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite was closely related to Confucius's title and identity. The source document points out that around thirty years later, the title used to honor Confucius changed from "king" to "Former

Teacher.” This symbolic change avoided the royal title, and the musical and dance specifications declined accordingly. This phenomenon is of great explanatory significance (Meskill, 1982).

“King” is a title of political rank. Confucius’s designation as “King Wenxuan” meant that, within the state’s system of posthumous or honorific titles, he had obtained a symbolic status similar to that of a king. If Confucius was a “king,” then granting his sacrifice a relatively high specification had its own logic. The Chenghua-period elevation from the six-row dance to the eight-row dance, and the Hongzhi-period proposal to further elevate musical specifications, can both be understood within this framework of identity.

However, the royal title could also produce tension within the ritual system. The ancient Chinese state ritual order centered on the emperor as its highest point, and the rites of the Son of Heaven possessed uniqueness and could not be usurped. Although Confucius was a sage, he was nevertheless not the ruler within the actual political order (Murray: 2009: 317-411). If the Confucian temple shidian rite were to use imperial specifications for a long period, it might blur the hierarchy of ritual rank at the symbolic level. Especially in the Ming dynasty, which attached great importance to the order of names and ranks, the question of how to honor Confucius without allowing his ritual status to conflict with that of the emperor was one that institutional design had to confront.

The title “Former Teacher” offered a solution. When Confucius was called the “Former Teacher,” his status was no longer expressed primarily through royal rank, but through the tradition of teaching and the lineage of the Way (Shryock, 1966). In this way, Confucius’s exalted status was not cancelled. Rather, it was re-situated within education and Confucian tradition. Confucius remained the model teacher for all generations, but his dignity no longer needed to be expressed through ritual specifications approaching those of

the Son of Heaven. The reduction of the dance from eight rows to six rows thus became the institutional consequence of this adjustment of identity (Sommer:2002: 95-133).

Therefore, the Jiajing ninth-year rectification of Confucian temple rites did not simply lower Confucius’s status. Rather, it redefined the mode by which Confucius was honored. Confucius was no longer honored as a “king,” but as a “teacher.” The Confucian temple no longer expressed its exalted status primarily through imperial specifications, but maintained its central position through school sacrifice, the Confucian lineage of the Way, and ethical instruction. This transformation made the Confucian temple ritual system more consistent with the Ming state’s understanding of ruler-subject distinctions and ritual hierarchy.

The Comprehensive Significance of the Confucian Temple as a State Ritual Space

The above analysis shows that the meaning of the Confucian temple cannot be understood only through architectural form, nor only from the perspective of religious sacrifice. The Confucian temple was an institutionalized ritual space whose significance may be understood at several levels (Standaert:2006:68-181).

First, the Confucian temple was the spatial expression of the Confucian lineage of the Way. Confucius, his disciples, former worthies, and former Confucians were placed within the temple, meaning that the Confucian genealogy was transformed into a concrete spatial order (Steinhardt, 2019). Who occupied the central position, who was included in associated worship, and who was placed among the subordinate sacrifices all reflected the state’s judgment concerning hierarchy within the Confucian tradition.

Second, the Confucian temple as the symbolic center of the state system of moral instruction. Because Confucian temples were often connected

with *xuegong*, prefectural schools, and county schools, they served not only sacrifice but also education. Students studied the Confucian classics near the temple and participated in state ritual practice through the shidian rite. The Confucian temple thus became an important site for the formation of scholar identity.

Third, the Confucian temple was a space for displaying political and ethical order. Although it did not directly embody imperial power in the same way as a palace, its internal ritual arrangements were still deeply regulated by political order. The rise and fall of musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite demonstrates that the Confucian temple system had to maintain a balance between honoring Confucius and honoring the ruler. The state needed to strengthen Confucian authority through the Confucian temple, but it also had to prevent ritual specifications from exceeding the order centered on imperial authority.

Fourth, the Confucian temple was a site for the practice of ritual and music. The music and dance of the shidian rite were not decorative additions, but important components of ritual hierarchy. The difference between six rows and eight rows was essentially a difference in ritual rank (Wilson:2002: 251-287). Changes in the number of musicians and the specifications of the musical system also reflected the state's redefinition of the sacrificial rank of Confucius. Ritual and music together formed, within the Confucian temple, an institutional order that could be seen, heard, and felt.

Fifth, the Confucian temple was a point of connection between central institutions and local society. Confucian temples existed not only in the capital, but were widely distributed among local prefectural, subprefectural, and county schools. Through a unified or relatively unified shidian rite, the state could transmit Confucian instruction and ritual order to local society. The Confucian temple therefore possessed the significance of an institutional network.

Conclusion

The Confucian temple is a highly representative institutional space within traditional Chinese ritual architecture. According to the source document, it belongs to the category of shrines dedicated to the worship of historical figures within the broader system of temple-and-altar architecture. Yet it also exceeds the limits of an ordinary shrine, combining multiple functions such as sacrifice, education, political symbolism, and ethical instruction. Its diverse names—such as *Wenmiao*, *Zhisheng miao*, *Wenxuanwang miao*, *Xianshi miao*, *xuegong*, county school, and prefectural school—reflect the transformation and accumulation of its identities and functions in different historical contexts.

The changes in musical and dance specifications in the Ming shidian rite especially reveal the complexity of the Confucian temple ritual system. The Hongwu twenty-sixth-year regulation of *dengge* and the six-row dance reflected the basic early Ming positioning of the sacrificial rank of Confucius. The Chenghua-period elevation of dance from six rows to eight rows, and the Hongzhi ninth-year attempt to further raise musical specifications, show that the Confucian temple shidian rite once tended toward the specifications of imperial ritual. The restoration of the six-row dance after the Jiajing ninth-year rectification of Confucian temple rites indicates that the state re-adjusted Confucius's identity and sacrificial rank. The shift from “king” to “Former Teacher” moved Confucius's exalted status from political title to the tradition of teaching, thereby easing the ritual tension between honoring Confucius and honoring the ruler.

Therefore, the central significance of the Confucian temple lies not merely in commemorating Confucius, but in embedding Confucian thought into the structure of state ritual through multiple institutional forms, including architecture, naming, sacrifice, music,

and dance. The Confucian temple was both a symbol of Confucian orthodoxy and a site of state instruction; it was both ritual architecture and a spatial expression of political-ethical order. The rise and fall of musical and dance ranks in the Ming shidian rite shows that the Confucian temple system was always situated within a dynamic balance among cultural reverence, political authority, and ritual hierarchy.

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