

Local Practices and Accomplishments of Confucian Education as Reflected in the Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War

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Abstract The Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War, engraved in the 20th year of the Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty (1894), documents the practices and accomplishments of Zhou Jingzeng, the magistrate of Gongchang Prefecture, highlighting his efforts to promote Confucian moral governance within the local society of Gansu Province during the late Qing Dynasty, a period marked by frequent wars and disasters. The inscription indicates that following Zhou Jingzeng's assumption of office, he resolved outstanding cases, renovated the Nan'an Academy, promoted agriculture and commerce, constructed embankments and reclaimed land, and implemented the Baojia system alongside relief measures. This article, drawing upon inscriptions on steles and pertinent documents, examines the social challenges faced by Gongchang Prefecture during the Guangxu reign. It demonstrates that Zhou Jingzeng's governance embodies Confucian principles emphasizing the prioritization of education and the welfare of the populace. His policies effectively facilitated economic recovery and social stability in the region, serving as a representative example of the implementation of Confucian education in the northwest during the late Qing Dynasty.

Key words Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War, Confucian education, Gongchang Prefecture, Renovation of Nan'an Academy, Restoration of agriculture, Construction of water conservancy projects

0 Introduction

Gansu is situated at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures and has historically been regarded as a region of significant importance. During the middle to late Qing Dynasty, the province experienced a succession of tumultuous events, including the Hui people's uprising and the incursion of the southern border by the Kokand officer Mohammad Yaqub Beg. These conflicts resulted in widespread population displacement and the abandonment of agricultural land, which substantially impacted the economy, education, agriculture, and other sectors within Gansu Province. In the 16th year of the Guangxu reign, the Qing government appointed Zhou Jingzeng to transfer from the Ministry of Punishments to serve as the magistrate of Gongchang Prefecture. Upon assuming office, Zhou Jingzeng resolved the issue concerning the location of Nan'an Academy and effectively managed land reclamation, commercial markets, water conservancy, and public security in an orderly manner. In recognition of his contributions, the people of Longxi erected the Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War. The inscription on the stele elaborates on Zhou Jingzeng's Confucian moral governance princi-

ples and his accomplishments in administration.

1 Content of the inscription

This stele is an annular headstone, measuring 182.4 cm in height and 87.8 cm in width, although its thickness remains undetermined. It bears an inscription comprising over one thousand characters. Currently, the stele is embedded in the west wall inside the main gate of Longxi Normal University. The inscription features four characters "Jiao Ze Chang Su" at the top, followed by an initial sequence of twenty-seven characters (monument to the virtues and teachings of Zhou Shiru, magistrate of Gongchang Prefecture, who was conferred the title of Fengyi Daifu and awarded the Jinshi degree by imperial decree). Beneath the three characters "Shou Ye Sheng" in the inscription, no strokes remain, and the remainder of the text has been nearly completely eroded. The inscriptions on the steles are included in the *Longxi Art Collection*. They primarily document the dilapidated condition of Gongchang Prefecture and the abandonment of its academies following the war. Upon assuming office, Zhou Jingzeng took it upon himself to restore the local region. He demonstrated proficiency in adjudicating cases and maintaining peace, implementing several measures including the allocation of financial resources, reclamation of uncultivated fields, attraction of merchants, prohibition of poppy cultivation, and promotion of tree planting. Additionally, he oversaw the construction of river embankments, the establishment of the Baojia system, the advancement of the cowpox inoculation bureau and fellow practitioner bureau, as well as the distribution of winter clothing and coffins. Subsequently, he concen-

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trated on the restoration of the academies, endeavoring to relocate them to their original site. He successfully raised substantial funds for renovation, oversaw the construction of the Kuiwen Tower, acquired Confucian classics, inscribed the term "Lilian" on the horizontal plaque above the lecture hall, and established new monthly class regulations. Additionally, he personally conducted visits and taught. Ultimately, a monument was erected to honor his distinguished contributions to education.

2 Overview of Gongchang Prefecture during the reign of Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty

During the reign of Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty, Gongchang Prefecture was engaged in a challenging process of post-war reconstruction and the restoration of the traditional order. Administratively, the prefectural capital was situated in Longxi County, which exercised jurisdiction over seven counties: Longxi, Anding, Huining, Tongwei, Ningyuan, Fuqiang, and Xihe. In addition, it encompassed two county-level administrative regions, Minzhou and Taozhou Prefecture. Above this structure was the Gongqin Circuit, serving as a supervisory district.

From the Tongzhi period to the early Guangxu period, prolonged warfare precipitated the decline of all industries within Gongchang Prefecture. The local academies were abandoned for several decades, resulting in a loss of talent, and key administrative systems, including the prefecture-level seal and defense mechanisms, became largely incapacitated. Furthermore, frequent natural disasters such as hailstorms and floods afflicted the region, causing widespread famine among the populace. Compounding these challenges, the Qing government faced severe financial constraints, which limited its capacity for effective disaster relief. Consequently, the primary responsibility of local officials during the Guangxu reign was to restore cultural institutions, education, and the livelihoods of the people.

During the early years of the Guangxu reign, Magistrate Yan Shizhang initiated reforms aimed at rectifying the officialdom. The economy remained predominantly agrarian, with traditional agriculture as its foundation. Tax revenue was primarily derived from silver collected through land and labor taxes, which imposed a significant burden on the populace. In the 16th year of the Guangxu reign (1890), following the appointment of Zhou Jingzeng, he undertook a personal review of longstanding legal cases, restored the Confucian Temple, reconstructed the Nan'an Academy, and secured funding from diverse sources. Concurrently, he reinstated previously suspended systems related to the prefecture-level seal and defense mechanisms. This period also marked the commencement of compiling the final Gongchangfu annals of the Qing Dynasty, specifically the *Draft of the Continuation of Gongchangfu Annals* in the Guangxu reign. Nevertheless, both natural disasters and human-induced calamities continued to afflict the region. In the 18th year of the Guangxu reign (1892), Huining County experienced another famine, severely impacting the livelihoods of its inhabitants. Throughout the Guangxu era, Gongchang Prefecture not only endeavored to preserve cultural education and traditional governance amid adversity but also faced the dual challenges of recurrent disasters and institutional transformation. By the fall of

the Qing Dynasty, the administrative system of Gongchang Prefecture was formally abolished. This inscription thus serves as a microcosm of local society in northwest China during the late Qing period.

3 Zhou Jingzeng's accomplishments in Confucian education

According to the content and related documents of the Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War, Zhou Jingzeng's contributions to Confucian education can be summarized in the following three points.

3.1 Rectifying the administration of local officials and resolving accumulated cases Zhou Jing once attained the rank of Jinshi in the imperial examination and subsequently served in the Ministry of Punishments. He possessed extensive expertise in criminal cases and demonstrated a profound understanding of the lived experiences of the common people. He maintained that, following a period of great turmoil, governance should prioritize pacifying the populace, with the essential principle being to avoid causing further disturbance. In adjudicating cases within his jurisdiction, he emphasized the careful consideration of both reason and law, alongside public sentiment, to ensure that the innocent were not wrongfully punished, the guilty were not unjustly acquitted, and the populace was spared from the protracted suffering associated with litigation. Complaints lacking substantive evidence were systematically dismissed to maintain social stability. Consequently, accumulated cases were resolved, administrative processes became more streamlined, and governance tended toward greater integrity.

3.2 Attaching great importance to culture and education, and restoring Nan'an Academy Zhou Jingzeng asserted that regional governance should be grounded in the recognition of talent and that Confucian education must receive appropriate emphasis. He observed that since the establishment of academies in various locations, these institutions had produced talented individuals and fostered a scholarly environment. He further argued that the quality of local customs, as well as the future stability or turmoil of the nation, were intimately connected to the presence and influence of academies. Consequently, in the context of contemporary governance, he questioned whether anything could be considered more important than these academies.

Upon assuming office, Zhou Jingzeng encountered a locality devastated by war, with both public and private institutions in a state of disarray. The academies had been abandoned for more than 20 years. The original site of the Nan'an Academy, situated on Nanshan Mountain, was destroyed during the early years of the conflict and could no longer be identified. In the aftermath of the turmoil, civilian residences designated for educational purposes were repurposed by the military as official quarters. Consequently, students and children lacked appropriate facilities for study, and scheduled examinations were rendered ineffective. The envoy of the school inspector, Cai Jintai, arrived to conduct an inspection of the school administration. Zhou Jingzeng provided a detailed account of the academy's history. Cai Jintai expressed strong agreement and requested Governor Yang to allocate special funds

for the construction of a new guerrilla office. Consequently, the old site of the academy was restored. However, the conversion of barracks into academy facilities resulted in numerous systemic inconsistencies, which gave rise to various problems. Zhou Jingzeng successfully raised substantial funds to undertake extensive renovations. The gate, main hall, and colonnade were sequentially expanded. The houses of three courtyards were arranged in close proximity, resulting in a completely renewed appearance that was both spacious and well-appointed. Additionally, he surveyed the terrain and constructed the Kuiwen Tower to the south of the academy. He also acquired a diverse collection of books on classics, history, philosophy, and literature, thereby enabling scholars to study foundational principles and acquire knowledge essential for comprehending core concepts and applying them effectively. The lecture hall was named "Lilian", symbolizing an encouragement for all students to develop integrity, foster good character, and emulate the noble virtues of upright and virtuous sages, rather than focusing solely on the technicalities of writing and rhetoric. Regarding the monthly examinations, new regulations were established with the objective of achieving practical outcomes and enhancing incentives to prevent students from neglecting their studies due to financial hardship. During each examination, he was personally present and provided sincere guidance to those who were diligent and persistent, treating them with care akin to that given to a child. Conversely, he disciplined and punished those who were proud and indolent, adopting the role of a strict instructor. Although the project was not yet completed, students and children from various regions had already arrived upon hearing the news, competing to be the first to enroll. The sounds of reading and construction harmoniously intertwined.

Consequently, the academies in Gongchang Prefecture experienced a revitalization, leading to a resurgence of Confucian education. Subsequently, students from surrounding counties were drawn to Longxi to pursue their studies upon learning of these developments. During this period, the literary environment in Longxi improved significantly. Notably, in the 16th year of the Guangxu reign (1890), Yin Shicai from Minzhou and Wang Haihan from Fuqiang successfully passed the imperial examination. Furthermore, in the 20th year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1894), Liu Qingdu from Huining and Zhang Doulan from Fuqiang also succeeded in the imperial examination, thereby bringing honor to their localities through this esteemed system.

3.3 Prioritizing the agricultural and commercial sectors to promote economic development During the reign of Emperor Guangxu, Gongchang Prefecture and its subordinate regions were not only impacted by warfare but also frequently afflicted by natural disasters. According to the *List of Natural Disasters and Man-made Calamities in China Through the Ages*, in the 13th year of the Guangxu reign (1887), a hailstorm occurred in autumn in Taozhou (under the jurisdiction of Gongchang Prefecture, Gansu Province), followed by a mountain flood. The floodwaters reached several zhang in height, submerging numerous fields, livestock, villages, and houses. The number of drowning victims was incalculable. A few days later, heavy snowfall accumulated to several feet, and its subsequent melting caused further flooding. Many

residents lost entire families, and their crops and livestock suffered severe damage, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries. In the 16th year of the Guangxu reign (1890), hailstorms affected eight prefectures and counties—namely Hezhou, Jinxian, Ningyuan, Tongwei, Qin'an, Qingshui, Jiezhou, and Datong—causing significant damage to crops. Furthermore, in the 18th year of the Guangxu reign (1892), the regions of Huining and Ningping, under the jurisdiction of Gongchang Prefecture, experienced poor grain harvests attributable to drought conditions.

Upon assuming office, Zhou Jingzeng prohibited the cultivation of poppies, promoted afforestation, and conducted investigations into the reclamation of uncultivated land. He clarified tax policies, maximized the reclamation of previously uncultivated areas, and converted land formerly used for poppy cultivation into forested areas. All rivers within Gongchang Prefecture were part of the Wei River system, which traversed the county for over 90 miles. In addition to the First, Second, and Third Canals, water from the Wei River can be directly diverted to irrigate farmland, particularly through the wide river valleys. Building upon this, Zhou Jingzeng constructed additional river embankments to secure and enhance grain production.

In the course of implementing a series of measures to increase production, Zhou Jingzeng actively recruited merchants, encouraged trade, and promoted the circulation of goods, thereby ensuring that the populace experienced no concerns regarding food and clothing, while avoiding expedient measures. He also rigorously enforced the Baojia system, advanced the establishment of the cowpox inoculation bureau and the fellow practitioner bureau, and distributed winter clothing, coffins, and other essential items to demonstrate compassion for the hardships faced by the people and to alleviate their difficulties, with particular emphasis on medical care and relief efforts. This multifaceted approach to governance yielded tangible benefits for the population, reflecting a comprehensive and dedicated commitment to public welfare.

In conclusion, the Stele Commemorating the Virtues and Teachings of Zhou Shiru, the Prefecture Chief Responsible for Managing the Aftermath of the War, documents the governance achievements of Zhou Jing during his tenure as magistrate of Gongchang Prefecture in the 16th year of the Guangxu reign. Zhou Jing demonstrated diligence in administration and a deep concern for the welfare of the people. He renovated the Nan'an Academy and placed significant emphasis on Confucian education. Additionally, he prioritized agricultural development by reclaiming wasteland and constructing river embankments. His promotion of moral governance aimed to benefit the populace. The inscriptions on the stele comprehensively embody his Confucian principles of moral governance and demonstrate the efficacy of his administration.

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