

# A Textual Study of Two Anecdotes from the Life of Yang Gongyi, a Scholar in the Early Yuan Dynasty

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**Abstract:** Yang Gongyi, styled Yuanfu, was a scholar from Gaoling during the early Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). He was also renowned for his literary pseudonym, Master Qianzhai. He was primarily active during the reign of Emperor Shizu (Kublai Khan, reign: 1260 – 1295). Yang Gongyi entered officialdom in the 11th year (1274) of the Zhiyuan era (the title of Kublai Khan's reign) and rose to the position of *Jixian Xueshi* (a scholarly title in the Imperial Academy). He also served as a scholar in the *taishiyuan* (Imperial Astronomical Bureau). In addition, he was a renowned Neo-Confucianist and an astronomer of the Yuan Dynasty. His life story is documented in the main biographies found in *The History of Yuan* and *Biographical Sketches of the Famous Ministers of the Yuan Dynasty*, as well as in Yao Sui's *Epitaph for Lord Yang, Director of the Imperial Astronomical Bureau*. In the early part of the 12th year (1275) of the Zhiyuan era, Yang Gongyi was granted an audience at the imperial court to treat an illness for Kublai Khan. Soon after, he, along with Yao Shu and others, participated in a debate with Tudan Gonglü regarding the examination subjects and their selection for civil service recruitment. However, the accounts of these two significant events in the aforementioned three historical texts are often vague and contradictory. Therefore, it is important to study and compare them with other supplementary materials to reconstruct a comprehensive and accurate picture of these events.

**Keywords:** The early Yuan Dynasty; Gaoling; Yang Gongyi

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Yang Gongyi (1225 – 1294), styled Yuanfu, was a scholar from Gaoling County (present-day Gaoling District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province), Fengyuan Prefecture, Shaanxi Province during the Yuan Dynasty. He was also known by his literary pseudonym, Master Qianzhai. He was primarily active during the reign of Emperor Shizu (Kublai Khan, reign: 1260 – 1295). Yang Gongyi entered official service in the 11th year (1274) of the Zhiyuan era and eventually rose to the position of *Jixian Xueshi* (a prestigious scholarly title in the Imperial Academy). He also served as a scholar in the *taishiyuan* (Imperial Astronomical Bureau). In addition, he was a renowned Neo-Confucian philosopher and an astronomer of the Yuan Dynasty. His life is mainly documented in the *Biography of Yang Gongyi* in Volume 164 of *The History of Yuan*, *Lord Yang Wenkang, the Court Historian* in Volume 13 of *Biographical Sketches of the Famous Ministers of the Yuan Dynasty* by Su Tianjue, and Yao Sui's *Epitaph for Lord Yang, Director of the Imperial Astronomical Bureau*. The first two sources mainly base their information on Yang Gongyi's epitaph. However, the accounts of these two significant events in Yang Gongyi's life, as presented in the aforementioned historical texts, are often filled with ambiguities and contradictions. Thus, it is imperative to examine and compare these accounts with other supplementary materials in order to elucidate and reconstruct a comprehensive narrative of these events.

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## 1. Performing Divination for the Emperor

On the second day of the first lunar month in the 12th year (1275) of the Zhiyuan era, Yang Gongyi was granted an audience at the imperial court to treat an illness for Kublai Khan. The divination to be carried out was, in fact, a form of “military divinatory art,” a practice that was relatively common at the time. “Military divinatory art” refers to the practical use of divinatory techniques, such as astronomy, *wuxing* (the Five Elements), tortoise shells, milfoil, and other forms of fortune-telling, in military matters. In ancient China, it was also referred to as *bing yinyang* (literally, military Yin and Yang).<sup>[1]</sup> The epitaph of Yang Gongyi recounts this event as follows:

“On the second day of the first lunar month of the following year, His Majesty (Kublai Khan) was at the Fragrant Palace. When no messenger arrived with updates about the main forces for the southern campaign for a long period, His Majesty became deeply concerned and decided to consult the divination. At that time, more than a hundred diviners were waiting to be summoned to the court. However, he chose to entrust this task to you alone (note: “you” refers to Yang Gongyi). This decision was presumably due to your well-established virtue and moral character. These qualities were considered suitable for communicating with the Divine. The words you spoke during the divination were kept in strict confidence.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Based on the historical texts mentioned above, we can derive the following information: First, Kublai Khan was anxious due to the prolonged absence of recent updates on his southern expeditionary forces. This prompted him to seek divination for guidance. Second, although he had many individuals with divinatory skills under his command, Kublai Khan specifically chose Yang Gongyi to conduct the divination. However, this brief historical account obviously does not provide a full picture of the event, as two critical questions remain unanswered. First, which particular military campaign during the Southern Conquest did this divination pertain to? Second, what were the details and outcomes of the divination session? Unfortunately, the historical record barely mentions these matters. It simply states, “The words you spoke during the divination were kept in strict confidence,” which is undeniably too brief.

Fortunately, there was another person involved in this divination named Jiao Deyu. He also had an epitaph that has been passed down through history. Remarkably, this epitaph helps fill in the gaps in the record of Yang Gongyi’s epitaph. The text of Jiao Deyu’s epitaph reads:

“After Xiangyang fell the following year, Emperor (Kublai Khan) issued an edict instructing the former Grand Tutor, General Boyan, and the Grand Marshal, General Shi Tianze (posthumously honored as Zhongwu), to lead the armies that had besieged Xiangyang, along with newly recruited troops, to launch a campaign against the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279). They advanced along the Han River toward Yingzhou. However, General Shi Tianze fell ill and had to return. As a result, communication with the main forces was interrupted for a long period, causing the Emperor to grow increasingly concerned. Unable to send a single envoy to inquire, he summoned Yang Gongyi, a former Scholar of the Library for Book Collection and Preservation, to perform divination three times within one day. This event took place on the day following the first day of the first lunar month in the 12th year of the Zhiyuan era.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Based on the aforementioned historical sources, including the epitaph of Jiao Deyu and relevant records from the *History of Yuan: Chronicle of Emperor Shizu* and the *History of Yuan: Biography of Shi Tianze*, we can roughly reconstruct the background, process, and outcome of this divination. In the ninth month of the 11th year of the Zhiyuan era, Kublai Khan appointed Boyan and Shi Tianze as commanders-in-chief. They were tasked with leading a large army to set out from Xiangyang and advance further south to attack the Yingzhou region of the Southern Song Dynasty. Shortly after arriving in Yingzhou, Shi Tianze suddenly fell ill and had to return to Xiangyang with a small contingent of troops.<sup>[4]</sup> However, for reasons unknown at the time, the southern expeditionary forces lost contact with the imperial court, and this situation persisted for nearly three months.<sup>[5]</sup> This caused great anxiety for Kublai Khan. As a result, he summoned Yang Gongyi to the Palace for divination. Yang Gongyi performed divination for the Emperor three times. The first result was “*Guai* with the first line changing” ( 夬初九 ). This line implied, “Advancing

without victory brings blame." The second result was "Yi with the third line changing" ( 颐六三 ). This line means "Opposing the principles of nourishment; steadfastness brings misfortune. Do not act for ten years, as there will be no advantage." The interpretations of these two hexagrams indicated that a hasty advancement would be unfavorable and that it was essential to delay the campaign.<sup>[6]</sup> This outcome displeased Kublai Khan, prompting him to instruct Yang Gongyi to perform a third divination. The result of the third divination was "Jié, ninth yang line ( 得节九五 )," which implied that "Exercising restraint in the use of military forces is what brings auspiciousness."<sup>[7]</sup> The Emperor only expressed a reluctant satisfaction with this result. This clearly shows that the specific outcomes of military divination arts during this period were almost entirely influenced by the Monarch's will. They served mainly as a tool for the Ruler to seek a positive psychological affirmation under the guise of divine will, having little impact on actual military decision-making.

## 2. Discussion on the Imperial Examination System for Selecting Officials

During the early years of the Zhiyuan era, a debate arose within the Yuan court concerning the subject setup and the imperial examination system for selecting officials. However, the disputes centering on this issue were ultimately superficial. The core conflict in this debate epitomized the struggle for dominance over the official ideology between Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*, the Confucian School of idealist philosophy) and the study of Confucian Classics (*jingxue*). To better understand Yang Gongyi's role and influence in this controversy, we need to review and explore his academic thoughts.

Historical records provide the following accounts of Yang Gongyi's academic thoughts:

"By that time, he had already immersed himself deeply in the study of *The Book of Changes (Yijing)*, *The Book of Rites (Liji)*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu)*. Although he wished to compile and write about these subjects, he held back. He felt ashamed of being just a scholar who focused on the exegesis of classical texts without a deeper understanding. His ambition was to be of practical value to the world. He aimed to acquire knowledge by exploring underlying principles. Through self-reflection, he sought to apply that knowledge, ensuring that both his actions and inaction were guided by a sense of reverence and solemnity."<sup>[8]</sup>

"My late father (note: referring to Yang Gongyi) followed in my grandfather's footsteps, fleeing from chaos and seeking safety. Each day, he immersed himself in the teachings of the Four Books and the Six Classics, never once speaking of poetry or literature. Any works he composed in his youth were all discarded and never recorded."<sup>[9]</sup>

As evidenced by the previous texts, he believed in Neo-Confucianism, which emphasizes practical application and governance. In contrast, he rejected Classical Studies, which focuses on the exegesis and embellishment of literary phrases and clauses. In fact, the formation of Yang Gongyi's academic thoughts was closely tied to the preferences and guidance of his father, Yang Tiande. This is confirmed by the epitaph of Yang Tiande, which states:

"(Note: Yang Tiande) In his later years, Yang Tiande delved into the *Commentary on the Great Learning*. He began critiquing the works of the Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) as well as other Neo-Confucian scholars from the Luoyang region. He developed a deep appreciation for these texts and often said to others, "In my youth, my energy was consumed by examinations and studies for official positions. I was completely unaware of the existence of such profound teachings. Now, I understand that the true transmission of our Way (Dao) lies in these works... I am fortunate to have encountered the Way in my late years, and I can die without any regrets."<sup>[10]</sup>

This clearly shows that although Yang Tiande was a subject of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), he highly regarded the Neo-Confucianism of the Song Dynasty. Yang Gongyi's fondness for Neo-Confucianism was obviously inherited from his father. Moreover, due to this ideological inclination and the fact that Xu Heng (a prominent Neo-Confucian scholar) appreciated his talents, it was only natural for Yang Gongyi to join the Neo-Confucian faction led by Xu Heng when the debate arose.

Concerning the discussion of the imperial examination system for selecting officials, there are three main historical records, as outlined below:

The first is from Yang Gongyi's epitaph:

"Tudan Gonglü, who served as an imperial reader, proposed the establishment of a category for selecting officials through examinations. In response, the Emperor issued an edict, directing the late Grand Preceptor Wenxian Gong (a posthumous title), the Grand Tutor Dou Wenzheng Gong (another posthumous title), and Lord Yang Gongyi to deliberate on the matter together. Following this, Lord Yang submitted a memorial to the throne, which stated, 'It is in strict accordance with the clear imperial edict that Your Majesty has once remarked, 'Scholars who do not study the Confucian classics and the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, while wasting their days composing empty verses.' These words lay the foundation for eternal peace and stability. If we are to select officials now, we should instruct the relevant departments to recommend scholars of exemplary character who are well-versed in the classics and history. These scholars should not be permitted to submit their own applications in a disrespectful manner. Instead, they should be tested on the Five Classics, the Four Books, essential and lesser moral tenets, historical essays, and practical statecraft proposals. By engaging in genuine learning, the academic atmosphere will revert to simplicity, the customs of the people will become more virtuous, and the state will gain talents who understand governance. Your memorial was well-received by the Emperor."<sup>[11]</sup>

The second record is found in the *Record of the Inscribed Names of Successful Candidates from the Prefectural Examination in Shaanxi*, Volume 3 of Su Tianjue's *zixi wengao* (*Essays from Zixi Stream*). It states:

"During the eleventh year of the Zhiyuan era, the Emperor instructed the learned ministers—Marquis Dou Mo, known as Wenzheng; Yao Shu, known as Wenxian; Xu Heng, also known as Wenzheng; and Yang Gongyi, known as Wenkang—to convene and discuss the matter of the imperial examination system (the merit-based system for selecting officials, known as *gongju* in Chinese). The specifics of their deliberations were fully recorded in the imperial edicts. Many capable and virtuous individuals existed at that time. In addition, governance and civilization flourished in harmony. However, the implementation of the examination system was never realized."<sup>[12]</sup>

The third record is from the Biography of Dong Wenzhong found in Volume 148 of *The History of Yuan*:

"(Note: During the eighth year of the Zhiyuan era) Tudan Gonglü, the Imperial Reader and scholar, intended to propose the implementation of the imperial examination system. He likened the examination system to the teachings of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism (*daoxue*) to the Chan school. This comparison angered the Emperor, prompting him to summon Yao Shu, Xu Heng, and the prime ministers to discuss the matter in court. At that moment, Dong Wenzhong entered from outside, and the Emperor said to him, 'You recite the Four Books daily; you, too, are a Neo-Confucian scholar.' Dong Wenzhong replied, 'Your Majesty often says that scholars who do not study the classics or expound on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, but instead compose poetry and rhyme prose, fail to understand the true purpose of self-cultivation. How does this contribute to the governance of the state? As a result, scholars across the realm have gradually shifted towards practical learning. What I recite now are the words of Confucius and Mencius. How could I possibly know what is meant by Neo-Confucianism? However, those pedantic scholars cling to the outdated customs of a fallen dynasty and wish to propagate their views. They have used such arguments to mislead Your Majesty's wise ears. I fear this does not align with Your Majesty's intention to teach the people self-cultivation and govern the state.' As a result, the matter was dropped."<sup>[13]</sup>

After a thorough review of the three historical texts mentioned earlier, it becomes clear that their accounts differ regarding the timing of the event and the individuals involved in the debate. Therefore, it is important for us to clarify these two aspects. First, Yang Gongyi's epitaph does not explicitly specify the exact time of the incident. However, based on the chronological context provided in the epitaph, Mr. Chen Dezhi has inferred that the event likely occurred during the spring or summer of the twelfth year of the Zhiyuan era.<sup>[14]</sup> Considering the general principle of chronological narrative in historical records, it is important to note that Yang Gongyi arrived in Dadu (modern-day

Beijing) in the winter of the eleventh year of the Zhiyuan era. He then performed divination for Emperor Kublai Khan on the second day of the first lunar month the following year. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the debate on the imperial examination system occurred after this divination ceremony. As a result, Mr. Chen's speculation holds considerable merit. Su Tianjue recorded the event as having taken place in the eleventh year of the Zhiyuan era in his *Essays from Zixi Stream*. This discrepancy is likely due to the passage of several decades between the occurrence of the actual event and the composition of his work, which led to a distortion of historical memory.

Furthermore, according to *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong*, this incident is said to have occurred in the eighth year of the Zhiyuan era, which also contradicts Mr. Chen's interpretation based on Yang Gongyi's epitaph. So, which account is correct? Mr. Chen argues that the event should be dated to the twelfth year of the Zhiyuan era.<sup>[15]</sup> His reasoning is as follows: First, Wang Yun composed a poem titled In Celebration of Shidu (Tudan) Daizhi's Birthday, with the inscription "14th of the ninth lunar, eighth year of Zhiyuan."<sup>[16]</sup> This indicates that the poem was composed in the eighth year of the Zhiyuan era. At that time, Tudan Gonglü's<sup>[17]</sup> held the position of *hanlin daizhi* (a lower-ranking academic official in the Hanlin Academy), not *hanlin shijiang xueshi* (a higher-ranking academic official and imperial lecturer), as recorded in *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong*. Second, Wang Yun composed another poem titled Expressions of My Heartfelt Thoughts on the Occasion of Completing My Three-Year Term in Office, Presented to Lecturer Yongxuan. In the title, "Yongxuan" is the courtesy name of Tudan Gonglü. The second line of the first couplet in this poem reads, "For three years, I have toiled amidst mundane official documents."<sup>[18]</sup> From this, Mr. Chen infers that the poem was likely written three years after Wang Yun completed his term as magistrate of Pingyang Prefecture.<sup>[19]</sup> This implies that Tudan Gonglü did not assume the position of *hanlin shijiang xueshi* until the twelfth year of Zhiyuan. Since *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong* refers to Tudan Gonglü as the *shijiang xueshi*, the historical event it records must have occurred after the twelfth year of the Zhiyuan era. Therefore, the record of the eighth year of the Zhiyuan era is likely incorrect.

Secondly, the three historical texts mentioned above also reveal inconsistencies in their accounts of the individuals involved in the debate on the imperial examination system. Yang Gongyi's epitaph mentions Tudan Gonglü, Yao Shu, Dou Mo, and Yang Gongyi himself. The *Essays from Zixi Stream: Inscribed Names of Successful Candidates from the Prefectural Examination in Shaanxi* lists Dou Mo, Yao Shu, Xu Heng, and Yang Gongyi. Meanwhile, *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong* references Tudan Gonglü, Yao Shu, Xu Heng, an unnamed prime minister (possibly Dou Mo or Yang Gongyi), and Dong Wenzhong. These discrepancies reflect the biases and selective nature of historical writing. The intentional omission of Tudan Gonglü's name in *Essays from Zixi Stream: Inscribed Names of Successful Candidates from the Prefectural Examination in Shaanxi*, replaced by Xu Heng, may reflect Su Tianjue's academic affinity for the Neo-Confucianism promoted by Xu Heng. This could be a strategic move to downplay the Daoist-influenced Neo-Confucianism (often associated with Tudan Gonglü's views). Conversely, Yang Gongyi's absence in *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong* is likely a result of the narrative's focus on the biographical subject, Dong Wenzhong. The text mainly focuses on highlighting Dong Wenzhong's significant role in the event. In doing so, it inadvertently overlooks or omits Yang Gongyi's name, merely referring to him as a "prime minister." Given the narrative's emphasis, this oversight is understandable.

Additionally, regarding the reasons for the failure to restore the imperial examination system during that period, Su Tianjue attributed it to "the presence of many capable and virtuous individuals, along with the harmonious flourishing of governance and civilization." However, this may not be entirely true. According to *The History of Yuan: Biography of Dong Wenzhong*, it is highly plausible that the root cause of the failure was Emperor Kublai Khan's dissatisfaction with Tudan Gonglü's remarks. This discontent prompted the Emperor to transfer his resentment onto the very system of selecting officials through examinations, ultimately causing the policy's failure to be implemented.

In summary, this debate between Neo-Confucianism and Classical Learning (*jingxue*, referring to the traditional study of Confucian classics)<sup>[20]</sup> ended with Neo-Confucianism emerging victorious. From that point onward, Neo-Confucianism gradually replaced Dao Learning (a term sometimes used synonymously with earlier forms of



Confucian orthodoxy but here contrasted with the emerging Neo-Confucianism). Neo-Confucianism eventually emerged as the mainstream academic ideology, gaining high regard in society at the time. Therefore, there is no doubt that this victory in the debate marked the beginning of the official institutionalization of Neo-Confucianism during the Yuan Dynasty.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, as a minister of the Yuan Dynasty, Yang Gongyi was tasked with performing divination for Emperor Shizu, Kublai Khan, at the start of the twelfth year of the Zhiyuan era. Shortly thereafter, he took part in a debate with Tudan Gonglü, Yao Shu, and others regarding the establishment of examination subjects for selecting officials. The accounts of these two events in Yang Gongyi's epitaph are filled with ambiguities and inconsistencies. By compiling and analyzing other scattered historical records, the author has sought to supplement and clarify the circumstances surrounding Yang Gongyi's divination for the Emperor, including its causes, development, and outcomes. Moreover, building on previous research, the author has examined and analyzed the background, timing, participants, and the true reasons behind the failure to restore the imperial examination system during this period. A thorough investigation into these issues helps deepen our understanding of the political, military, and cultural landscape of the early Yuan Dynasty.

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- [17]Tudan Gonglü, a scholar of the Jurchen ethnicity during the late Jin and early Yuan dynasties, rose to the position of Academician of the Hanlin Academy and Imperial Lecturer in the Yuan court. Despite the absence of a dedicated biography for him in *The History of Yuan*, scholars have already delved into and conducted research on his life and achievements. For instance, see Shao Chan's Tudan Gonglü's Appointment as Academician of the Hanlin Academy and Imperial Lecturer in the Eighth Year of Zhiyuan and the Issue of Implementing the Imperial Examination System, published in *Collection of Essays on the History of Yuan, Ethnic Groups, and Frontier Studies* (Volume 40) edited by Liu Yingsheng and published by Shanghai Classics Publishing House in 2020. Additionally, Zhang Yongyao's An Examination and Discussion on the Life and Literary Works of Tudan Gonglü, a Jurchen Literatus during the Jin-Yuan Transition, can be found in the *Journal of North China University of Technology*, Issue 5, 2023.
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- [20] For the specific concept of the term daoxue and Kublai Khan's attitude towards this doctrine, refer to Shao Chan's On Tudan Gonglü's Appointment as Academician of the Hanlin Academy and Imperial Lecturer in the Eighth Year of Zhiyuan and the Issue of Implementing the Imperial Examination System: 246, note 7.