

A Study on the Dissemination Paths and Localized Evolution of Southern Confucianism in Quzhou from the Song to the Ming-Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: After Confucius' direct descendants moved south to Quzhou in the Southern Song Dynasty, Southern Confucianism took root in western Zhejiang. Between the Song and MingQing dynasties, this culture evolved from a clan-based learning tradition into a regional public culture through interactions among the Kong clan, local governments, scholars, gentry and ordinary residents. Based on local gazetteers, genealogies and stone inscriptions, this paper analyzes its communication routes and localized transformations marked by popularized rituals, widespread education and Confucian-influenced folk customs. The culture gained local grounding in the Song-Yuan era and became broadly popular in the Ming-Qing period. This study clarifies a key case of Jiangnan Confucian regional development and offers historical references for modern-day cultural inheritance and urbanbrand construction in Quzhou.

Keywords: Southern Confucianism; Quzhou; communication path; localization

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1.Introduction

When the Jingkang Crisis forced the Song court to retreat south, Kong Duanyou, the 48th-generation direct descendant of Confucius and hereditary Duke Yansheng, followed the imperial household and settled in Quzhou. From that point onward, the Southern Confucian lineage became a tangible symbol of Confucian orthodoxy in Jiangnan, later known as “the Quli in the Southeast”. Over centuries, its cultural legacy moved beyond the boundaries of one single clan and permeated Quzhou's local society.

Existing research has covered institutional arrangements of the Southern Confucian ancestral temple, sacrificial rituals and genealogy sorting, as well as modern-day inheritance practices. Wu Xibiao analyzed how the Southern Confucian lineage generated unique cultural symbols and maintained interactions with

Jiangnan communities^[1]. Wang Xiaobing's field-based work traced how sacrificial ceremonies shifted from clan-only observances toward public-oriented performances^[2]. Gan Chunsong placed the Southern Confucian experience within larger discussions of Confucian southward expansion across Jiangnan^[3]. A small number of papers have touched on local cultural mentality formed by the presence of sage descendants, such as the "near-sage" collective consciousness in Quzhou^[4]. Even so, few works trace continuous changes across Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing. Many existing publications focus heavily on official documents and institutional frameworks, while paying less attention to two-way exchanges between state policies, clan operations and grassroots folk practice. The multi-volume Document Series of the Southern Confucian Lineage in Quzhou, compiled by Wu Xibiao, collects scattered gazetteer excerpts, stone inscriptions and clan manuscripts, and provides essential primary sources for this topic, yet long-term analyses of dissemination and localization still require deeper development^[5].

Political transitions and shifting social structures repeatedly reshaped the living context for Southern Confucianism from the Song through the Qing. Imperial appointments, temple reconstruction projects, academy teaching, clan moral instruction and folk-norm adjustments jointly pushed its circulation and local adaptation. By studying how this imported clan-based tradition was accepted, modified and embedded in Quzhou, we add concrete regional material to Zhejiang and Jiangnan Confucian studies^[6]. Such historical observation can also inform current local practices, including cultural legislation, cultural-tourism planning, and urban cultural construction in Quzhou.

2. Research methods

Guided by historical materialism, this paper employs multiple complementary approaches to overcome the limitations of single-sided institutional or clan-history research.

Historical-document textual criticism: this study sorts out successive editions of Quzhou Prefectural Gazetteer and utilizes genealogies, ancestral-temple records, stone inscriptions and archives collected in Document Series of the Southern Confucian Lineage in Quzhou to verify key events, figures and institutional changes and consolidate historical foundations.

Cultural discourse analysis: it interprets imperial edicts, ancestral-temple stele records, academy regulations, prefaces to clan genealogies and literati writings to reconstruct the logic of Confucian-value construction by imperial authorities, clans and scholar-officials.

Mutual verification of social-cultural history: this research situates Southern Confucianism within Quzhou's social structure. It cross-checks institutional regulations against real-world folk practices by examining official-school systems, clan organizations, gentry strata and folk rituals, avoiding over-reliance on official texts.

3. The dissemination paths of Southern Confucianism in Quzhou from the Song to the Ming–Qing Dynasties

The spread of Southern Confucianism cannot be simplified as top-down imperial indoctrination. In reality, multiple social groups jointly sustained its transmission. Their capacity and real-world impact rose and fell alongside dynastic changes, fiscal conditions and local socioeconomic gaps^[3]. The whole communication network kept adjusting itself rather than staying static. This section analyses main agents, multi-level

operational channels, tangible material-space carriers, and chronological shifts across four dynasties.

3.1. Communication agents

Four major interconnected social groups acted as key agents, but their relative importance changed noticeably in different historical periods^[1].

First, descendants of the Southern Confucian lineage were the intrinsic cultural bearers. In the Southern Song, the lineage held noble rank and state stipends. Clan leaders presided over major ancestral sacrifices, compiled genealogies and ran internal clan teaching, with material support mainly coming from state-endowed sacrificial farmland granted in the Shaoxing reign. After Kong Zhu surrendered the Duke Yansheng title in the Yuan, most state privileges disappeared. Without stable imperial financial backing, educated Confucian descendants took teaching posts in local schools and academies, extending Confucian influence beyond clan boundaries rather than counting on court honours alone^[7]. Some members even took administrative positions in well-known academies outside Quzhou, such as Wansong Academy in Hangzhou, spreading Southern Confucian-related ideas to broader Zhejiang scholarly circles. When the Ming Zhengde court restored the hereditary Hanlin Academy Five-Class Doctor, the Southern Confucian branch regained formal institutional status. Its descendants resumed sacrificial obligations and maintained close contacts with local academies and gentry networks^[8]. Even in periods of weakened political standing, the Kong clan still supplied core ritual models and moral reference points for Quzhou society.

Second, imperial and local officials functioned as institutional promoters. The Southern Song court legitimized the Southern Confucian branch by granting land, construction funds and noble titles, embedding the lineage within official state Confucianism^[5]. County-level magistrates exerted more direct influence on day-to-day cultural circulation: they initiated ancestral-temple restoration, supervised prefectural and county schools, printed Confucian texts and encouraged local gentry to follow ritual norms. Official support was nevertheless inconsistent. Yuan governments offered almost no regular fiscal input for maintaining the Quzhou ancestral temple. By contrast, Ming-Qing local authorities repeatedly allocated funds for temple repairs and sacrificial supplies^[9]. Even in Ming-Qing reconstruction projects, public finance seldom covered all costs; most large-scale renovations combined government funding with voluntary gentry donations.

Third, scholar-officials and academy Confucians worked as interpretive intermediaries. Academies including Keshan Academy and Qingxian Academy gathered local and visiting Neo-Confucian thinkers in Quzhou^[1]. These scholars did not mechanically repeat clan doctrines. Instead, they reinterpreted Southern Confucian history within Neo-Confucian ideological frameworks. They linked the physical existence of the Southern Confucian ancestral temple to abstract debates on Confucian orthodoxy, turning a local clan story^[3] into intellectual resources for Jiangnan scholarly communities. Such interpretive work became especially valuable in the Yuan, when official endorsement receded. Local literati also embedded Southern Confucian anecdotes in gazetteer prefaces, poems and prose, continuously reproducing its cultural reputation for later generations^[10].

Fourth, local gentry and ordinary residents constituted the receiving and feedback layer of cultural communication. Gentry families drew on Kong-clan ritual examples when drafting genealogies and compiling clan rules. They financed shrine repairs and community free schools, translating elite Confucian ideals into community-level practice. Ordinary townsfolk and peasants rarely read Confucian classics directly. They gained exposure mainly through public sacrificial ceremonies, village covenant lectures and

observable gentry behaviour. Crucially, grassroots communities were not passive receivers. They selectively accepted or adjusted Confucian norms according to existing local customs. Such local responses in turn pushed clan and elite groups to modify their cultural strategies^[2]. This selective acceptance partly explains uneven implementation of Confucian norms between Quzhou's flat plains and remote mountainous zones.

3.2. Major communication channels

Each channel operated at specific social strata and complemented rather than replaced one another. Their practical reach was constrained by local economic levels, literacy rates and transportation conditions.

Official school education represented the formal state-driven channel. Quzhou prefectural and county schools integrated Confucius veneration into daily academic routines. The combined layout of Confucian temple and official school allowed student-scholars to join seasonal sacrificial rituals alongside book learning^[6]. Before the mid-Ming, however, official-school influence largely stayed limited to examination-oriented literate elites and barely touched illiterate rural populations. Within official schooling, the symbolic meaning of the Southern Confucian lineage was mostly transmitted via ritual performance instead of systematic textbook teaching.

Academy-based lectures expanded intellectual influence beyond state-run schools. Quzhou possessed more than ten notable academies in the Southern Song^[14]. Many academy activities included visits to the Southern Confucian ancestral temple, treating the lineage as tangible proof of Confucian orthodoxy moving southward. In the Yuan, as the Confucian lineage's political position declined, academies partially took over the task of disseminating Southern Confucian-related ideas. Xianxi Academy, founded by the Southern Confucian lineage in the Ming, further opened educational access to young people outside the clan^[3]. In Ming-Qing times, academies maintained close ties with both officials and gentry, forming an intermediate public sphere between state bureaucracy and kin-based communities. Still, academy resources were concentrated in county seats and market towns, and remote mountain villages had very limited access.

Clan-centred edification spread Confucian norms through kinship networks. Genealogy compilation, ancestral rituals and clan regulations embedded loyalty, filial piety and propriety into domestic life. Other influential Quzhou clans consciously referenced Confucian-clan models when setting up family disciplines. Clan-level transmission helped Confucian values penetrate rural areas poorly covered by state schooling. Its effectiveness, however, depended heavily on clan wealth and internal cohesion. Poor or fragmented lineages could hardly afford large-scale ritual or educational undertakings.

Sacrificial rituals functioned as performative communication. Ceremonies held at the Southern Confucian ancestral temple were never purely private family events^[2]. Southern-Song imperial-backed rituals drew official observers. After the Yuan-Ming transition, local magistrates increasingly joined sacrificial activities. Ritual procedures conveyed hierarchical concepts and moral teaching through bodily performance, visual symbols and oral recitation. Even illiterate onlookers could feel the solemn Confucian moral order when watching ceremonies. That said, ordinary villagers seldom entered the inner ritual area. Their understanding mostly came from public spectacle and oral accounts passed among local residents.

Village covenants served as the main grassroots-level channel in Ming-Qing. Local covenants advocated virtues such as filial piety, respect and neighbourly harmony. Local elites translated the abstract idea of "propriety" into concrete behavioral rules for daily social interactions. Implementation differed sharply across Quzhou's territory: covenants operated much more thoroughly in economically developed plains than

in isolated mountain districts short of gentry manpower and fiscal resources.

3.3. Material communication carriers

Tangible material carriers made cross-generational transmission of abstract Confucian ideas possible^[5]. The physical core was the Southern Confucian ancestral temple, which experienced multiple relocation and reconstructions: the Linghu site in the Southern Song, the converted Chongwenfang residence-temple in the Yuan, and the well-documented major reconstruction during the Ming Zhengde reign^[6]. Every move and rebuild reshaped ritual capacity, spatial layout and public accessibility. Most reconstruction projects relied on mixed official-gentry donations rather than full imperial funding. Prefectural-county Confucian temples, academy shrines and scattered stone inscriptions across Quzhou formed auxiliary spatial carriers. Stone inscriptions recorded temple-building processes, sacrificial-land endowments, and official eulogies for the Confucian lineage, creating durable public memory visible to local inhabitants.

Written carriers included local gazetteers, Confucian-clan genealogies, ancestral-temple records, and literati collected works. Gazetteers compiled by scholar-officials embedded Southern Confucian stories into official regional history and shaped later generations' understanding of Quzhou cultural identity. Clan genealogies preserved internal lineage memory while presenting the Kong household as a moral example for wider society^[5]. Archival excerpts from Qufu's Kongfu Archives supplement local materials by recording official correspondence concerning hereditary titles and tax exemptions for the southern branch. Written sources nevertheless circulated mainly among literate groups. Oral transmission and ritual performance filled information gaps for non-reading populations.

3.4. Dynastic shifts in communication paths

In the Southern Song, dissemination leaned heavily on imperial resources and clan agency. Court grants secured political-cultural prestige, yet influence remained confined to high-ranking scholar-officials and Confucian-clan members, with limited reach among ordinary villagers. State-allocated sacrificial farmland guaranteed ritual operations, but grassroots penetration stayed shallow.

The Yuan Dynasty marked a critical turningpoint. After Kong Zhu's titlesurrender incident, state fiscal support shrank drastically. The ancestral temple fell into disrepair for decades^[7]. Cut off from imperial patronage, the lineage adjusted its strategy. Instead of relying on court prestige, educated clan members spread Confucian ideas through local schools and academies. Dissemination partly shifted from state-centred institutions toward civilsociety-oriented channels, even though overall cultural influence contracted compared with the Southern Song. Paradoxically, reduced official backing forced Southern Confucianism to make greater adaptive adjustments to local social realities.

The Ming Zhengde reign brought institutional recovery. The restored hereditary doctor position reconnected the Southern Confucian lineage to national bureaucratic systems. Official schools and academies flourished, bringing state-driven resources back into play. Gentry groups grew more powerful and participated actively in cultural projects alongside officials and the Kong clan^[8]. Mixed stategentry funding became normal for temple renovation and sacrificial supplies.

In the Qing, authorities largely followed Ming institutional arrangements. Several imperial-supported templerepair projects strengthened official recognition. Meanwhile, mature villagecovenant systems and widespread clan organizations allowed Southern Confucian-related values to penetrate deeper into grassroots

society than in earlier periods^[3]. Regional gaps between plains and mountain hinterland persisted. In general, the whole dissemination system evolved from elite-focused operation in the SongYuan toward multi-layered, broader social diffusion in the MingQing.

4. The localized evolution of Southern Confucianism in Quzhou from the Song to the Ming–Qing Dynasties

Localization describes the adaptive historical process through which Central-Plains-originated Confucianism, represented by the Southern Confucian lineage, interacted with Quzhou's pre-existing regional society, folk beliefs and clan institutions. It did not mean mechanically copying Qufu ritual systems onto Quzhou soil. Instead, it included institutional adaptation, spatial re-grounding, ideological reinterpretation and selective merging with indigenous folk customs^[3]. The Song-Yuan constituted the initial rooting phase, while the Ming-Qing saw maturation and popularisation. This evolution unfolded across four interconnected dimensions, with constant tensions between elite ideal prescriptions and real-world social practice. Localization was not a uniform process; observable divergence existed between urban-plain zones and remote mountain villages within Quzhou prefecture.

4.1. Popularization of ritual systems

The Southern Confucian sacrificial rituals originally followed Qufu ancestral-temple protocols and functioned largely as exclusive clan ceremonies presided over by Confucian-clan leaders across the Song-Yuan^[2]. Under Southern-Song imperial protection, rituals maintained relatively complete standards supported by state-assigned sacrificial farmland. The Yuan dynastic transition created severe institutional shocks. After Kong Zhu gave up the Duke Yansheng title, state-provided sacrificial resources decreased sharply. The Kong clan had to cover part of ritual expenses through private clan estates and intermittent gentry donations^[7]. Due to financial limits, several grand ceremonial segments had to be simplified.

From the Ming onward, sacrificial rituals changed gradually. Core sacrificial protocols were kept intact, yet local officials formally joined sacrificial performances. Some ritual segments absorbed Jiangnan local customs and deviated from strict Qufu precedents^[2]. Surviving Qing-period official documents record repeated local applications for adjusting numbers of ritual musicians and dancers according to real-world fiscal capacity. Ceremonies that used to belong to the clan alone acquired public communal attributes. More local literati and gentry gained access to observe rituals. Ritual popularization never removed the clan's presiding role. Even so, sacrifices were no longer purely Kong-family affairs; they turned into symbolic cultural assets belonging to the whole Quzhou community. This institutional adjustment reflected broader Ming-Qing trends in which elite Confucian rituals opened toward local public life^[10]. It should be noted that ordinary commoners could only watch outer-court performances. Core inner-hall sacrificial procedures remained closed to non-elite groups.

4.2. Localization of cultural identity

Southern Confucianism never developed into an organized religion. Nevertheless, veneration of Confucius embodied through the Southern Confucian lineage fostered a distinctive regional cultural psychology among Quzhou residents^[9]. From the Southern Song onward, local literati repeatedly articulated the view

that Quzhou obtained special honour by hosting Confucius' direct descendants. Such discourse appeared frequently in prefaces, stone inscriptions and gazetteer entries and built up collective local memory step-by-step^[5]. Zhou Jihuan and Tong Xianggang described this as a "near-sage" cultural mentality, transferring the Zou-Lu-associated sense of cultural proximity to Quzhou territory^[4].

This local consciousness carried dual features. On one hand, local elites recognized national Confucian orthodoxy represented by the Southern Confucian lineage. On the other hand, they reinterpreted that national orthodoxy to build Quzhou-oriented regional pride. The phrase "the Quli in the Southeast" was not merely neutral historical description. It represented an identity claim constructed by Quzhou's intellectual circles^[10]. In this process, Southern Confucianism stopped being only the heritage of an immigrant clan. It became symbolic capital for the whole prefecture, serving local interests in lifting regional cultural reputation. Such identity-building activities intensified especially in the Ming-Qing, after the Southern Confucian lineage regained official institutional standing. We should keep in mind that this elite-produced regional identity circulated mainly among literate groups. Rural commoners held much more fragmentary, experience-based perceptions.

4.3. Popularization of education

In the Southern Song, educational activities connected with Southern Confucianism were mostly confined to Kong-clan private schooling and examination-oriented students in official schools^[1]. Even with several influential academies, access was limited to male literati preparing for civil-service examinations. Ordinary young people from peasant or merchant families seldom received systematic Confucian teaching.

Important shifts took place from the late Yuan through the Ming-Qing. More Kong descendants took positions as academy directors and local school instructors, pushing educational influence beyond clan boundaries. Xianxi Academy, founded by the Southern Confucian lineage in the Ming, opened enrollment to pupils outside the clan^[3]. Besides official schools and large private academies, clan-run private schools and community free schools multiplied across Quzhou. These community-level institutions did not only train candidates for imperial examinations. They also delivered elementary moral lessons about filial piety, respect and social propriety to broader youth groups, including many who would never sit for official examinations^[6].

The symbolic presence of the Southern Confucian lineage strengthened Quzhou's local ethos of valuing education. Educational popularization, however, remained uneven. Mountain-rural areas still suffer shortages of teachers and school facilities. We should not overestimate actual social penetration. Most grassroots-level schools only offered basic moral instruction rather than complete classical curriculum.

4.4. Confucianization of folk customs

The infiltration of Confucian ethics into daily folk customs constituted the most implicit dimension of localization. At the clan level, many Quzhou lineages modeled their genealogy prefaces and clan rules on Kong-clan moral examples, prioritizing values such as filial piety and clan solidarity. Within village society, Ming-Qing village covenants spread Confucian standards for interpersonal relationships. Local wedding and funeral rituals gradually absorbed Confucian ritual components.

Crucially, folk-custom Confucianization was not a one-sided top-down transformation that erased pre-existing local customs. Instead, it represented selective adaptation. Local communities accepted Confucian norms compatible with existing social practices while retaining long-standing folk habits^[3]. Persistent gaps

existed between ideal Confucian ritual prescriptions advocated by gentry and the real-life behaviors of ordinary villagers. These gaps should not simply be treated as “failure” of cultural dissemination. They reveal the negotiation logic of localization: grassroots populations actively filtered incoming cultural resources rather than accepting them mechanically^[2]. For instance, many mountain villages maintained traditional folk sacrificial practices alongside Confucian-style ancestor worship, producing mixed ritual systems.

4.5. Driving forces behind localized evolution

Localization advanced through constant two-way interactions between top-down state forces and bottom-up local-social demands^[3]. Top-down impulses came from imperial-level Confucian advocacy. Through ennoblement, temple-repair projects, and official-school systems, the imperial court transmitted national Confucian value orientations down to Quzhou. Bottom-up drivers came from local gentry and multiple clans. These groups hoped to elevate Quzhou’s regional cultural prestige by drawing on Southern Confucian symbolic resources. Interplay among state institutions, clan interests and local-society aspirations transformed Southern Confucianism from immigrant-clan heritage into core parts of Quzhou’s regional culture.

This evolutionary process contained inherent tensions. The Southern Confucian lineage’s political status fluctuated repeatedly across the Yuan-Ming transition, and imperial favour waxed and waned. Elite Confucian ritual ideals often clashed with practical folk customs. Local fiscal constraints also limited full implementation of ritual and educational reforms. All these complexities show that localization was not a smooth linear march toward total “Confucianization”. It was an ongoing negotiating process full of compromise, partial realization and periodic setbacks. Socioeconomic gaps further created uneven localization outcomes between urban-plain zones and remote mountain areas within Quzhou.

5. Conclusion

From the Song to the Ming-Qing dynasties, Southern Confucianism in Quzhou evolved from an external clan tradition into regional public culture. Centered on Kong-clan descendants, joint agents including imperial-local authorities, literati, gentry and common people promoted its diffusion. It relied on multi-channel mechanisms: official schools, academies, clan education, sacrificial ceremonies and village conventions. Material carriers such as the ancestral temple, academies, genealogies and stone inscriptions facilitated multi-level transmission. This culture took root locally amid political vicissitudes in the Song-Yuan period. Supported by institutional restoration and cultural-educational prosperity in the Ming-Qing dynasties, it matured and spread widely, featuring popularized rituals, localized cultural identity, expanded education and Confucianized folk customs. Far from one-way ideological imposition, its communication reflected mutual shaping among imperial power, clans and local society, forging Quzhou’s propriety-valuing regional temperament and offering a representative case of Jiangnan Confucian localization.

This historical investigation yields two practical implications. Academically, it supplements regional-case research on Jiangnan Confucianism. When examining southward-spread Confucianism, researchers should pay sufficient attention to clan, ritual and grassroots-social practices instead of focusing merely on Neo-Confucian intellectual trends. Practically, Southern Confucianism is no modern-constructed symbol. Its profound foundations stem from centuries-long immersion within Quzhou’s pre-modern society. For constructing the Southern Confucianism Inheritance and Demonstration Zone, building the “Quzhou Etiquette-Oriented City” brand, advancing local cultural legislation, reviving academies and integrating

culture-tourism, planners should respect this historical background and draw upon historical experience to facilitate creative transformation of traditional culture.

This research builds mainly on transmitted texts and stone-inscription materials. Surviving primary sources from the Song-Yuan period remain limited, and direct records reflecting folk-custom dimensions are scarce. Further research may explore clan genealogies and physical stone inscriptions to deepen understanding of how ordinary residents received Southern Confucianism.

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