



## China Perspectives

2012/2 | 2012

Mao Today: A Political Icon for an Age of Prosperity

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### Monika Gaenssbauer, Confucianism and Social Issues in China—The Academician Kang Xiaoguang: Investigations Into NGOs in China, the Falun Gong, Chinese Reportage, and the Confucian Tradition

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://>

[chinaperspectives.revues.org/5901](http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/5901)

ISSN: 1996-4617

#### Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 4 juin 2012

Number of pages: 91

#### Electronic reference

David Ownby, « Monika Gaenssbauer, *Confucianism and Social Issues in China—The Academician Kang Xiaoguang: Investigations Into NGOs in China, the Falun Gong, Chinese Reportage, and the Confucian Tradition* », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2012/2 | 2012, Online since 30 June 2012, connection on 30 September 2016. URL : <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/5901>

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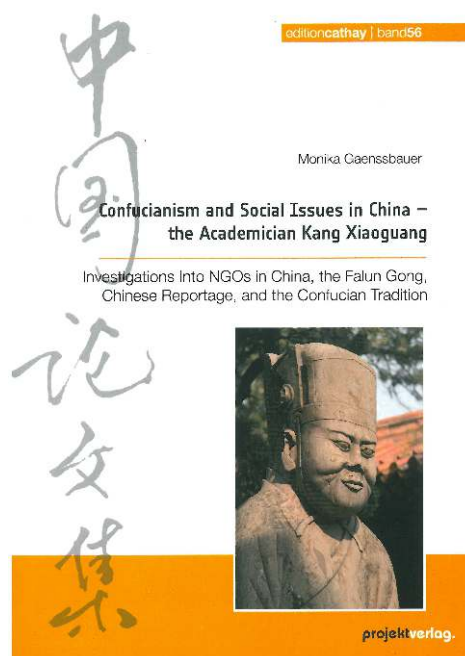
# Monika Gaenssbauer, Confucianism and Social Issues in China—The Academician Kang Xiaoguang: Investigations Into NGOs in China, the Falun Gong, Chinese Reportage, and the Confucian Tradition

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- 1 In this slender volume, Monika Gaenssbauer, Visiting Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Erlangen, explores several facets of the publications and intellectual activism of the Chinese academic Kang Xiaoguang. Kang, Professor of Regional Economics and Politics at the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University in Beijing, is a fascinating case, worthy of study both for the research he undertakes and the ideas he expounds, and as an example of the discursive and political possibilities open to public intellectuals in today's China. Kang is a prolific and wide-ranging author. Born in 1963, Kang graduated from the Dalian University of



Technology in 1986 with a degree in applied mathematics. After teaching for some years, he returned to university studies in 1990 and earned a Master's degree from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Department of Ecology. His first position after graduation was as a scholar at the Institute of Policy and Management, and he subsequently served as a fellow at the Research Centre for Eco-Environmental Sciences before taking up his present post at Renmin University in 2005. Since 2007, he has also been Director of the Institute of Non-Profit Organisations, also at Renmin University. His main academic writings have focused on poverty relief and on "third sector" organisations, including non-governmental, non-profit, and other organisations attempting to function with some degree of independence from the Chinese government. At the same time, as an energetic public intellectual, Kang has frequently addressed topics outside of his academic purview, writing books on Falun Gong and on the need for a Confucian revival in China, for example. Some of Kang's most important works have been published in Hong Kong and Singapore. Although hardly a "dissident" as the term is generally used in the Chinese context (Kang is very critical of Western democracy), Kang is a patriotic maverick whose primary loyalty is to China's future rather than China's present leadership.

- 2 The four substantive chapters of Gaenssbauer's volume address Kang's writings on Falun Gong, on NGO activity in China, on the case of Li Siyi, a three-year old girl who starved to death in her apartment after the arrest of her mother, a drug addict, and the failure of Chinese authorities to respond to the mother's pleas to care for her daughter; and on Kang's proposal to establish a Confucian church. She sees this organisation as chronological – as established by the dates of publication of Kang's writings – and develops each chapter largely independently of the others, while making useful cross-references between them. To my mind it is misleading to begin with Kang's work on Falun Gong. Kang's research on poverty alleviation and his association with NGOs predated his work on Falun Gong by some years. Shocked by the events of June 1989, Kang sought to rebuild something like "civil society" in China through his work with NGOs throughout the 1990s, and despite criticism of certain NGO practices, was generally pleased with the progress such groups had made. The Chinese state's over-reaction to the Falun Gong demonstration of April 1999 illustrated just how fragile this emerging "social contract" remained. Kang's work on Falun Gong thus grew organically out of his concern for NGOs and civil society; he broadened his focus to discuss religion and community, which had been at best secondary concerns up to this point. To my mind, Kang's book on the Li Siyi case was, similarly, a "side project" (as was his work on Falun Gong); Kang's energy and passion clearly allow him to pursue several endeavours at the same time. That said, the tragedies of the Falun Gong and Li Siyi cases obviously nourished Kang's growing enthusiasm for Confucianism and for the idea that the establishment of a Confucian church in China would provide a culturally valid means to reconnect state and society. Kang sees himself as completing the work Kang Youwei began in the early twentieth century to establish Confucianism as a state religion. Indeed, Kang is probably most interesting as an example of those Chinese who hope to locate and modernise elements of Chinese tradition in the hopes of crafting a uniquely Chinese modernity. Kang is by no means a hidebound conservative: he fiercely defends freedom of the press so as to keep China's political and economic elite minimally honest, but rejects democracy (which he witnessed firsthand as a visiting scholar in the United States in 1999) because of the corrupting influence of money on the political process. In any event, Kang is worthy of study for his wide-ranging interests, for the seriousness of his scholarship, for his

polemical (yet highly readable) style, and for his intellectual independence. To date, he has been noticed in the West mainly for his writings on Confucianism, and Gaenssbauer helpfully introduces other aspects of his full range of interests and activities.

- 3 Gaenssbauer's treatment of Kang serves as an excellent introduction to this fascinating figure, although the chapters are perhaps a bit too summary to do him justice. Still, Gaenssbauer has read a good deal of Kang's protean output and makes it available to readers, together with the context necessary to understand Kang's intentions. Gaenssbauer also attempts to treat Kang not solely as an object of sinological study, but as a participant in a cross-cultural dialogue concerning issues of state and society in our globalised world. For example, she criticises Kang's proposal to establish a Confucian church in China under government control, quoting Habermas to the effect that "the executor of power in a modern constitutional state can never refer back to pre-constitutional conditions" (p. 92). Similarly, she gives her own views of the proper functioning of NGOs and comments on the implications of Kang's decision to publish some of his work outside of China (she is "irritated" by the ambiguity this creates). Although this approach is sometimes refreshing, it can be distracting as well, particularly in a broad study that attempts to cover a great deal of material at an introductory level.

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