China Perspectives

2009/4 | 2009

Religious Reconfigurations in the People's Republic of China

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4928>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4928

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 décembre 2009

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

David Ownby, « Kang Xiaoguang: Social Science, Civil Society, and Confucian Religion », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2009/4 | 2009, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2012, consulté le 28 octobre 2019.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4928> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4928

Kang Xiaoguang: Social Science, Civil Society, and Confucian Religion

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This article examines the academic and intellectual career of Kang Xiaoguang, a prominent advocate of Confucianism and of the establishment of Confucianism as China's state religion. It argues that Kang's advocacy is rooted in a utilitarian vision of religion, and a pragmatic desire to encourage the development of healthy state-society relations in twenty-first century China.

A common narrative of China's three-decades old religious revival foregrounds the ongoing conflict between religious groups and a secularising state apparatus, which continues to impose a heavy, top-down regulatory regime on China's religions, despite a recent embrace of proper religion as a positive force in the construction of a "harmonious society."⁽¹⁾ Since the basic objective of such regulation is to ensure religion's subservience to common national interests as defined by the party-state, this narrative blends readily with others focusing on questions of freedom of belief, freedom of speech, and democratic rights in Reform Era China. The Confucian revival offers a number of interesting wrinkles on these narratives.⁽²⁾ Despite the selective revival of the Confucian cult and the growing practice of "Confucian cultivation"—both of which suggest the religious dimensions of the movement⁽³⁾—Confucianism is *not* generally treated as a religion in China, and instead is most often subsumed in the less problematic category of "traditional culture."⁽⁴⁾ Consequently, the diffuse if broadly influential Confucian revival escapes most of the regulatory regime imposed on religion (or on its "evil twin," superstition, which is condemned—or on occasion ignored—rather than regulated). Similarly, because Confucianism exists more as a "floating signifier" and less as an organised, recognised religion in today's China, Chinese authorities can embrace and exploit elements of the revival that are useful to its own search for legitimacy by selectively re-appropriating certain aspects of China's traditional cultural heritage, thus creating the impression that they are making common cause with Confucian enthusiasts among the broader population. In other words, Confucianism's ambiguous character in contemporary China, and above all its *non-*

inclusion within the category of religion, have allowed for considerable flexibility both for citizen-activists who seek to promote a Confucian revival in their local communities, and for state authorities who remain ambivalent about the ultimate value of Confucianism to the future of an avowedly Marxist government.

In this context, this essay examines the scholarship and advocacy of Kang Xiaoguang, a prominent Chinese intellectual and academic who since the early 2000s has been a vocal champion of the importance of Confucianism to the cultural, political, social, and spiritual revivals he believes necessary to the future stability and legitimacy of the current regime.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, Kang goes further than most of those attracted to Confucian education and cultivation as lived moral projects, and advocates the creation of a state-supported Confucian church.⁽⁶⁾ According to Kang, the restoration of China's theocratic tradition (with appropriate twenty-first

1. See for example, Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *China Quarterly* 174 (2003), 317-37.
2. On the Confucian revival, see among others the series of articles by Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval: "Jiaohua: The Confucian Revival Today as an Educative Project," *China Perspectives*, no. 2007/4; "Anshen liming or the Religious Dimension of Confucianism," *China Perspectives*, no. 2008/3; and "Lijiao: The Return of the Ceremonies to Honour Confucius in Mainland China Today," included in the current issue; also Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.
3. See particularly Billioud and Thoraval, "Lijiao."
4. See Sébastien Billioud, "Confucianism, 'Cultural Tradition,' and Official Discourse in China at the Start of the New Century," *China Perspectives*, no. 2007/3.
5. Kang is discussed in Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 20; Billioud, "Confucianism, 'Cultural Tradition,' and Official Discourse," 63; Billioud and Thoraval, "Anshen liming," 103-104.
6. Jiang Qing, another prominent figure in the Confucian revival, has made similar proposals. See Bell, *China's New Confucianism*.

century upgrades, to be sure) will provide the Chinese Communist Party with a new legitimacy grounded in benevolent authoritarian rule, and will simultaneously solve China's religious problem by creating a religion whose interests and priorities will be aligned with those of the state. Moreover, as a religion based on traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism will possess a cultural nationalist appeal that should win converts from low-quality "cults" such as Falun Gong or—presumably—from foreign faiths such as Christianity.

Kang is a member of important research groups and think tanks and publishes in high-profile journals. He once served as an advisor to Premier Zhu Rongji and can be seen as having a certain influence in elite circles. That being said, Kang's writings are interesting not necessarily because of their value as future predictions (indeed, many of Kang's proposals seem far-fetched at first glance), but because they illustrate some of the discursive possibilities available in contemporary China. While Kang "walks the walk" by personally embracing some aspects of Confucianism, he writes more as a social engineer and less as a devout Confucian convert or a religious reformer. He has an undergraduate degree in applied mathematics, an M.A. in ecology, read up on Confucianism on his own in the 1990s, and was inspired to Confucian advocacy by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Even Kang's scholarship is highly utilitarian. Although he praises Confucian scholars, his own scholarly style is closer to the contemporary American model of intellectual-political lobbying than to traditional Confucian exegesis (which of course had its own tradition of instrumentalism). His goal is to be the mid-wife facilitating the rebirth of a modern Confucian state, heralding the construction of a civil society that can be embraced by China's political elite on the foundations of a vibrant and genuinely popular Confucian revival whose position will be solidified within a state-supported Confucian religion.

Kang is frequently mentioned in accounts of the contemporary Confucian revival by Western academics and China-watchers, most of whom lump Kang together with other proponents of Confucianism such as Jiang Qing, Chen Ming, Sheng Hong, and others.⁽⁷⁾ Much of Kang's thinking does indeed grow out of the broader Confucian revival ably analysed by John Makeham,⁽⁸⁾ and a research methodology that situates the particularities of Kang's brand of Confucian advocacy within the broader movement is surely valid. At the same time, I was struck while reading Kang's writings by the particular path he has followed from social science research through civil society building and finally outspoken proponent of the establishment of a Confucian church—par-

ticularly since Kang has been, and remains, an establishment intellectual, if perhaps something of a maverick. My approach in this essay is thus to focus on Kang and his writings, including writings that have little or nothing to do with Confucianism, hoping thereby to understand the broader contexts that have shaped Kang's views and thus to understand his embrace of Confucianism.

Kang Xiaoguang before Confucianism

Kang Xiaoguang is a young man, born in 1963.⁽⁹⁾ While his early schooling may have been disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, he would not have been a Red Guard, a sent-down youth, or a worker-peasant-soldier university student. He entered the National University of Defense Technology in the Department of Systems Engineering and Mathematics in 1981, as the last of the worker-peasant-soldier cohort graduated from university. The following year he transferred to the Dalian University of Technology in the Department of Applied Mathematics, and earned his undergraduate degree in 1986. Between 1986 and 1990 he taught in the Agronomy Department of the Shenyang Agricultural University in his home town of Shenyang. When he mentions the events of 1989 in his writings, he refers only to the "turbulence" of the times and provides little commentary or analysis of the student demonstrations or the government suppression.

In 1990 Kang began his graduate studies in the Department of Ecology at the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing, completing a Master's degree in 1993. His move to the capital coincided with the fashioning by Chinese authorities of a muscular response to Western criticisms of the events of 1989: emphasis on cultural nationalism and patriotism, and defence à l'outrance of Chinese institutions and practices (White Paper on Human Rights, etc.). Whatever Kang may have thought about such arguments, as a young and ambitious researcher he could not but acknowledge them, and such themes appear frequently in his work—alongside, I hasten to add, trenchant criticisms of the regime and advocacy of freedom of the press and freedom of association.

7. See Bell, *China's New Confucianism*; Zhe Ji, "Confucius, les libéraux, et le Parti: Le renouveau du confucianisme politique," *La vie des idées* (May 2005): 9-20; Ji Zhe, "Tianxia, le retour en force d'un concept oublié: Portrait des nouveaux penseurs confucianistes," *La vie des idées* (December 2008); Chen Ming, "Modernity and Confucian Philosophy in a Globalizing World," *Diogenes* 56 (2009): 94-108.

8. John Makeham, *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008.

Clearly a brilliant student, Kang advanced rapidly in his career. In 1993-1994 he was a scholar at the Institute of Policy and Management, and between 1994 and 2005 a fellow at the Research Centre for Eco-Environmental Sciences (both are attached to the Chinese Academy of Sciences). In 2005 he joined the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at People's University, and since 2007 has held a concurrent position as Director of the Institute of Non-Profit Organisations at the School of Public Administration, also at People's University. He has been a wide-ranging and prolific scholar who has won numerous prizes for his research, some of which has been financed by non-Chinese grant agencies such as the Ford Foundation. He has been a visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is not a Party member, and several of his books have been published in Hong Kong or Singapore, presumably to avoid possible censorship in China proper—although he has published extensively within China as well.

Kang's early scholarship dealt with poverty and poverty relief in China, and combined social science research with personal engagement and advocacy. Between September 1994 and September 1995 (his first year at the Research Centre for Eco-Environmental Sciences), he served as Deputy County Chief in charge of scientific and technological affairs in Mashan County, Guangxi. His goal in spending a year in a poor village in disadvantaged Guangxi was to immerse himself in the details of rural poverty so as to find practical solutions, and his work resulted in a number of influential publications in the 1990s, some co-authored with other prominent young intellectuals such as Wang Shaoguang and Hu An'gang.⁽¹⁰⁾ Kang subsequently broadened his focus to examine the thorny question of China's grain imports, arguing that global market forces should play a central role in feeding China and liberating those peasants otherwise condemned to low productivity, low profitability, and misery.⁽¹¹⁾ At the same time, he worked actively with Project Hope in China, and in his writings attacked Chinese neoliberals who blamed China's poor for their own plight by arguing that peasants were of "low quality."⁽¹²⁾ In sum, we see already in Kang's work on poverty the characteristics that will define his career: exacting social science research—often fieldwork—combined with social engagement, a punchy, polemical prose style, and a willingness to engage in public debate on high-profile, timely issues.

The next phase of Kang's career grew organically out of his engagement with Project Hope China and his work with the

China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), the organisation chiefly responsible for the administration of Project Hope.⁽¹³⁾ Kang served on the board of the foundation, which oversaw—and oversees—a large number of rural projects compatible with Kang's view of poverty relief, and at the same time carried out academic research on the CYDF as an agent in the battle against poverty and more broadly as an example of the semi-independent social organisations newly emerging in the China of the 1990s.⁽¹⁴⁾ Subsequently, Kang went on to examine the rise of what he—and others—have called the "third sector" (*disan bumen*), which includes non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations, and other civic organisations enjoying at least arms-length independence from the state. In a series of books and articles, he charted the rise of these semi-independent social organisations, acutely juxtaposing the forces creating such organisations and those constraining them.⁽¹⁵⁾ The constraints grew out of the regime's habitual view of independent social groups as potential sources of dissent, a reflex heightened by the events of the spring and summer of 1989. At the same time, the effects of market forces, together with the dismantling of the *danwei* system and much of the planned economy over the course of the 1990s, created new and important social needs and opportunities that the regime was no longer able to address. Grudgingly, the state sanctioned the

9. Much of the information in the following paragraphs is drawn from Kang's English-language web page: <http://ard.ruc.edu.cn/en/20838.html>.
10. "Woguo nongye bodong de zhengzhi yu jingji fenxi" (Political and economic analysis of changes in Chinese agriculture), *Zhanlue yu guanli* 1994.5: 71-75; "90 niandai woguo de pinkun yu fanpinkun wenti fenxi" (Analysis of poverty and anti-poverty issues in the 1990s), *Zhanlue yu guanli* 1995.4: 64-71; *Zhongguo diqu chaju baogao* (A report on geographical inequality in China) (volume coauthored with Wang Shaoguang and Hu An'gang), Shenyang, Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1995; and *Zhongguo pinkun yu fanpinkun lilun* (Poverty and anti-poverty theory in China), Nanning, Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1995.
11. "2000-2050 nian: Zhongguo de liangshi guoyi maoyi jiqi quanqiu yingxiang" (Chinese grain, international trade, and planetary impact between 2000 and 2050), *Zhanlue yu guanli* 1996.4: 37-48; "Zhongguo jinkou liangshi youhai ma?" (Is it harmful for China to import grain?), *Zhanlue yu guanli* 1997.1-2: 19-23; *Diqiu cun shidai de liangshi gongji celüe—Zhongguo de liangshi guoji maoyi yu liangshi anquan* (A plan for grain supply in the age of the global village: Chinese grain, international commerce and grain security), Tianjin, Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1998.
12. See Zhang Xiaoming, "Kang Xiaoguang: Tanqiu shehui gongzheng de 'zhengzhi liangxin'."
13. See CYDF's web site at <http://www.cydf.org.cn/> in Chinese, <http://www.cydf.org.cn/en/> in English. Information on Project Hope China is available on the CYDF web sites.
14. Zhang Xiaoming, "Kang Xiaoguang: Tanqiu shehui gongzheng de 'zhengzhi liangxin,'" mentions for example *Chuyu shizi lukou de Zhongguo shetuan* (Chinese Social Groups at the Crossroads), Tianjin, Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2001; and "Guanyu guanban shetuan zizhihua de ge'an yanjiu" (Case Studies of the Autonomization of Officially Managed Social Groups), an article penned by Kang appearing in the *Crossroads* volume.
15. "Zhuanxing shiqi de Zhongguo shetuan" (Chinese social organization in a period of transition), *Zhongguo qingnian keji* 1999 (Spring): 1-14; *Quanli de zhuanxing: Zhuanxing shiqi Zhongguo quanli geju de bianqian* (The transformation of power: The changing framework of power in transitional China), Hangzhou, Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999.

actions of social groups, even while requiring them to register and submit to regulations, which often proved onerous. Kang saw these social organisations as the wave of the future and, in large measure, the salvation of China. He acknowledged that much remained to be done to regularise the relations between social groups and the state, arguing that in late-developing countries, society is often weak and subject to undue control by the state. Nonetheless his writings of this period reflect considerable optimism, a pride in the accomplishments that the third sector had realised over the course of the 1990s in spite of sometimes inflexible state attitudes, and confidence that steady progress in this area would eventuate in the creation of a largely autonomous society and a healthy, cooperative relation between state and social forces.

At the same time, the emergence of the Falun Gong problem in 1999 illustrated to Kang the possible pitfalls in the path of China's healthy social development. Kang was well aware that the broader category of semi-autonomous social organisations discussed in the context of his work on CYDF and other third-sector groups also included *qigong* organisations and Falun Gong, whose structural relationship with the state was similar to that of non-profit groups seeking to advance social causes. In his work on semi-autonomous social groups, Kang warned of possible dangers, without mentioning Falun Gong directly: "At the same time [as we note improvement in the work of third sector groups], unregistered, informal groups have also increased in number, and their social roles have become increasingly pronounced. At this point, the chief motivation behind the development of Chinese social groups is market-driven social change. More broadly speaking, we are witnessing during this period a functional response... to 'market malfunction,' 'democratic malfunction,' 'the failure of the plan' and 'the failure of central authority.'" (16)

From this perspective, Kang was quick to argue that whatever Falun Gong's shortcomings might be, the particular character of the group was not the core issue in the conflict between Falun Gong and the Chinese state. As Kang put it: "The [real] 'Falun Gong problem' does not include 'short term questions' such as 'is Falun Gong an evil cult?' or 'are the government's measures against Falun Gong appropriate?' Nor is the 'Falun Gong problem' limited to the Falun Gong organisation, but rather extends to 'other social organisations like Falun Gong'... The 'Falun Gong problem' is a problem created by China's modernisation, and will accompany China throughout her entire modernisation process." (17) Courageously, given the government's campaign against

Falun Gong, Kang used the incident to launch a much broader critique of Chinese government and society than in the context of his work on NGOs and NPOs. (18) He argued cogently that while Falun Gong beliefs and practices merit scrutiny and even criticism, they respond nonetheless to widespread social needs for faith, community, security, and justice, needs that went largely unmet in the new China. He continued:

What is China's greatest challenge today? It is not unemployment, not inflation, and not corruption—it's the lack of a compelling ideology! This is an age where beliefs have crumbled. Tradition was long ago swept into the dustbin of history, and at present there is no system of ideas that can provide legitimacy. In a time of rapid change, in a country with 1.2 billion people, to have no spiritual basis is terrifying! To reconstruct the spiritual homeland of the Chinese people, to locate a spiritual support to provide cohesion to the Chinese people is an extremely urgent matter. (19)

Kang went on to propose that China tackle its religious policy head-on, arguing in essence that the over-regulated religious market in China produced products of inferior quality and that if China's leadership wanted Chinese citizens to pursue their legitimate social needs in a healthier fashion, it was up to them to create the necessary conditions. In extremely direct language, Kang continued:

If social groups lose their voluntary, autonomous character, they lose their function. China's current management of social groups stifles their autonomy in the hopes of transforming them into appendages of the government, tools that can help the government to control the citizens. The results are counterproductive, destroying the proper functions of the groups without attaining the goals envisioned by the government, because without independence, groups lose their appeal. Indeed, under the current system of

16. Kang Xiaoguang, "Zhuanxing shiqi de Zhongguo shetuan," p. 12. Kang employs the same language concerning 'market failure,' etc., in his writings on Falun Gong as well. See for example Kang Xiaoguang, "Falun Gong wenti de zhengzhi xiaoying" (The political effect of the Falun Gong problem), *Zhongguo shehui daokan* 33 (2000).

17. Kang Xiaoguang, "Falun Gong wenti de zhengzhi xiaoying."

18. See Kang Xiaoguang, *Falungong shijian quan toushi* (The full story of the Falun Gong affair), Hong Kong, Mingbao chubanshe, 2000, ch. 7.

19. Kang Xiaoguang, "Falun Gong wenti de zhengzhi xiaoying."

management...only illegal groups [maintain their appeal and thus] can be autonomous and active...History has proven over and over again that when proper religions are suppressed, cults multiply; when normal social groups are controlled, criminal groups thrive.⁽²⁰⁾

To Kang, China's dilemma was crystal clear. The logic of the social changes underway since the late 1970s meant that China simply could not function in the long term without independent social organisations. Moreover, Chinese society was fully capable of generating such organisations, as demonstrated by the admirable work of third-sector groups. At the same time, a misstep by a group like Falun Gong put the entire process in jeopardy by seeming to question the authority of a government whose legitimacy was already shaky for other reasons. And the government's overreaction threatened the stability China needed for further economic and political development.

Kang's Discovery of Confucianism

During the Spring Festival vacation in 2002, Kang penned an essay entitled "Outline of a Theory of Cultural Nationalism," which should be read as his personal manifesto for the promotion of Confucianism in today's China.⁽²¹⁾ The essay begins, appropriately enough, with a 1912 quotation from Kang Youwei on the occasion of the founding of the Confucian Society (Kongjiaohui), the goal of which was to promote the idea of Confucianism as the state religion of the new Republic of China. Kang Youwei had argued that the very essence of Chineseness is an identification with centuries of traditional civilisation and *jiaohua*—the Confucian transformative project, dubbed by contemporary Confucian Tu Wei-ming as "the process of becoming human."⁽²²⁾ Kang Xiaoguang proposes much the same plan for the salvation of the People's Republic at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Kang Xiaoguang is very straightforward in describing his motivations and the intellectual path he followed to arrive at an embrace of Confucianism. He had begun reading the Confucian classics for personal reasons during the 1990s, under the influence of the "traditional culture craze" that marked the early part of that decade. At the same time, he followed closely the discussion—in influential journals such as *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), where Kang published many of his own essays—of Chinese nationalism and cultural nationalism within China, as well as the

rise of the "China threat" discourse internationally, noting correctly that the two were closely intertwined. He also read, and was deeply influenced by, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and the worldwide debate the publication of Huntington's essay, and later his book, inspired. But what really brought home to Kang the importance of culture—and eventually of religion—to contemporary China, was once again the Falun Gong affair.

Prior to the Falun Gong affair, I was a simple-minded economic determinist, believing the basic principle of historical materialism that "everything is decided by the economic base." But the Falun Gong affair convinced me that, at least in the short term, culture and politics are independent from economics, and possess decisive power to influence the course of social development. Subsequently, I became interested in Weber and Gramsci. I believe that politics and culture will have a deep and lasting influence on China's development.⁽²³⁾

In addition, Kang found himself in the United States as a visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington D.C. at the moment of the attacks on the World Trade Center, affording him a front-row seat on the cultural nationalist drama that was the Bush administration's response to the attack on the Twin Towers.

The climate of strong American nationalism led me to pay even more attention to the relationship between culture and global politics and economics. It was in this atmosphere that I reread Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations and the Reconstruction of the World Order, which had a considerable influence on me. The year spent in Washington also allowed me to observe American religion up close, and to appreciate the influence of religion on all aspects of American life. I then went on to read about the history of Chinese religion, especially the works of Kang Youwei and others like him. Carrying out these readings and

20. *Ibid.*

21. "'Wenhua minzu zhuyi' ganglun" (Outline of a theory of cultural nationalism), available online at <http://www.tecn.cn/data/detail.php?id=3553> and published in *Zhanlue yu guanli* 2003.2: 9-27. My translations are from the online version.

22. See for example Tu's "The Confucian World," an address delivered at Colorado College's 125th Anniversary Symposium on "Cultures in the 21st Century: Conflicts and Convergences," 5 February 1999. Available online at <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/anniversary/Transcripts/TuTXT.htm>.

23. Kang Xiaoguang, "'Wenhua minzu zhuyi' ganglun."

reflections on foreign soil increased my understanding of the new Confucianism and of Kang Youwei.⁽²⁴⁾

These various experiences—Kang's work with NGOs and NPOs, his horror at the consequences of the Falun Gong affair, his presence in the United States in the fall of 2001, and his rereading of Huntington's wide-ranging analysis of the post-Cold War world in terms of competing cultures and civilisations—seem to have had an electrifying effect on Kang. His manifesto, which he wrote within a few months of his return to China from the United States, takes Huntington's analysis as the basis for a *prescriptive program* designed to provide China with the muscular culture—and thus strong, stable state, and above all, healthy state-society relations—necessary to survive, prosper, and even dominate in the world to come. *Clash of Civilizations* can—and has been—read and critiqued from a variety of perspectives; Kang Xiaoguang read it as a twenty-first century *Plan for a Prince*, and most of Kang's manifesto is an explanation of Huntington and an adaptation of his theories to China's particular needs.

In the post-Cold War world, Kang begins, culture rules. He never defines culture precisely, but his discussions reflect Gramsci's recasting of the linkages between material base and ideological/cultural superstructure—as well as Kang's experience of the United States, where the role of religion was clearly a revelation for Kang. At the same time, it is clear that Kang is not using the term neutrally, as an anthropologist might, but is instead referring to measurable, and desirable, qualities of peoples and nations often discussed under the rubric of “soft power.” “People often think of culture as something imaginary or weak, and that only economics or politics has true strength. Actually, culture is not a passive force, nor an appendage of something else, and cannot be simply or easily changed by economic or political forces. Quite the opposite—culture is an active force which, while being affected by economics and politics, affects economics and politics in its turn. Culture can even, in some circumstances, have a determining capacity, and become a key force deciding the fate of a people or a nation.”⁽²⁵⁾

China's problem, however, is that her culture is in a shambles, largely as a result of a disastrous twentieth century in which China turned her back on her traditional civilisation, which Kang defines as “a theocracy in which politics and culture were unified, in which the state promoted Confucian culture, and Confucian culture supported the state.”⁽²⁶⁾ If the imperialist incursions of the nineteenth century are to blame for the rapid decline of China's traditional cultural confidence, it was during the May Fourth era in the early twenti-

eth century that China's elite turned its back on Chinese tradition and set its sites on complete Westernisation. The adoption of Marxism was but one form of Westernisation, and if Kang appreciates the contribution of the Communist Party to the salvation of the Chinese nation in political-territorial terms, he renders a harsh judgment of Mao's China from a cultural perspective: “The culture of the Maoist period was a composite of the dregs of Chinese traditional culture and the dregs of Marxism-Leninism, perhaps the worst cultural synthesis in the history of mankind. Compared to the Jews, the Chinese people did not lose their geographical homeland, but instead lost their spiritual homeland.”⁽²⁷⁾ The Deng Xiaoping era witnessed the repudiation of much of Maoism, but the decade of the 1980s also saw renewed calls to reject China's tradition in favour of out-and-out Westernisation. Although Kang is discreet in his discussions of 1989, it seems nonetheless clear that he interprets the events to mean that China is not ready for liberal democracy—which, he insists repeatedly, is not “culturally Chinese” — and that calls for such political change run the risk of plunging China into chaos and instability once again.

By the 1990s, Chinese society had completely lost its way. “The people were no longer willing to accept Marxism, and the government was resolutely opposed to liberalism.” But the problem went well beyond questions of political ideology:

Our generation has endured more than a half century of authoritarian repression, and more than 20 years of market corruption. The spiritual world of the Chinese has been thoroughly destroyed. The Chinese people have lost the ability to pursue ideals, morality, and the meaning of life, and find themselves unable to imagine or understand the value of such concepts. Greed, indifference, and mediocrity rule our spiritual world. Outside of money, power, and sex, we don't know what else to strive for...and ideals, morality, and principles are the things most often scorned. In this consumerist age, we need the power of imagination and the courage to imagine, we need to strive for ideals and the courage to strive for those ideals. In other words, we need a utopia.⁽²⁸⁾

24. *Ibid.*

25. Kang Xiaoguang, “Fuxing chuantong wenhua xianxiang yanjiu: wenhua yu zhengzhi houguo” (Research on the revival of traditional culture: the effects of culture on politics). Available online at <http://www.tech.cn/data/detail.php?id=20599>.

26. Kang Xiaoguang, “‘Wenhua minzu zhuyi’ ganglun.”

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

Kang's utopia is to be found in a Chinese version of the "Confucian renaissance" underway elsewhere in industrial East Asia since the 1960s, and destined to transform China in the twenty-first century. The basis of this renaissance will be cultural, and Kang—somewhat unusually—takes pains to praise Chiang Kai-shek's rule in China before 1949 and in Taiwan afterwards for having accorded greater respect to China's traditional culture than the Communists on the mainland had. Equally important, however, was the rise of East Asia as an economic power and the "discovery" of the vitality of "Confucian capitalism," the champion of which during the 1980s and 1990s was Singapore's Lee Kwan-Yew. Such themes reached China in the 1990s, and were embraced—at least in part—as part of the regime's effort to craft a nationalistic response to Western condemnation of the violence of June 1989. Jiang Zemin made frequent reference in his speeches and writings to the "spiritual" aspects of the nation as well as to cultural independence and cultural competition. Many Chinese intellectuals rallied behind such rhetoric, put off by what they saw as the "China-bashing" tone of Western (and especially American) media commentary on China, and worried by the manifest chaos and lawlessness of post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe. To Kang, this meant that China's political, intellectual, and even economic elite were finding common ground for the first time in nearly a century on a stance of theoretical openness toward traditional Chinese culture.

For Kang it is urgent that China capitalise on this moment of possibility and establish a common program to ensure cultural revitalisation. His concrete proposal is to establish Confucianism as the state religion of China, for a great nation needs a great value system, and these values need to be embraced by all, not just by the elite and certainly not just by the state. "Reviving Confucianism as an academic theory is inadequate. Only if Confucianism becomes a religion that deeply penetrates into the daily lives of the Chinese people can it be considered a genuine revival. For this reason the basis of the revival of national culture is the revival of Confucianism. This is the basic logic of the cultural revival, as well as the basic plan for the new cultural nationalism."⁽²⁹⁾ Although I have yet to run across a direct statement to this effect, one presumes that for Kang, the creation of a Confucian religion would stymie the growth of foreign religions such as Protestant Christianity as well as that of home-grown "cults" such as Falun Gong.

Kang asserts that traditional China was a thorough-going theocracy where "Confucianism ruled everything and submerging everything, including state and society... People al-

ways say that Confucianism was not a religion because it lacked its own ecclesiastical organisation. This is nonsense. Classical China was a theocratically ruled country, in which religion was completely merged with political power, so that the political system was the same as the religious system, the emperor was the pope, bureaucrats were priests, religious teachings were the country's laws, regulations, and ideology, and citizens were believers."⁽³⁰⁾ Kang surely exaggerates the seamlessness of Confucian rule, but his analysis is less scholarly than political; he hopes to convince China's rulers and China's elite that state religion is a potentially good thing, and might be seen as anticipating the more positive stance on religion that has come to characterise China's pronouncements over the course of the 2000s.

Kang subsequently devotes several pages to Kang Youwei's efforts to protect China and Chinese civilisation by creating a Confucian religion—in the image of Western religions—beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the 1920s. "Sadly, Kang was out of step with the times, his life coincided with the decline of national culture, and he was ultimately unable to reverse the course of events, and instead...came to be ridiculed by his ignorant, worthless descendants."⁽³¹⁾ If Samuel Huntington was Kang Xiaoguang's first source of inspiration, Kang Youwei was his second, and he clearly states that his goal is to succeed where Kang Youwei failed. "My goal is to promote a social movement, and on the strength of that social movement bring about the revival of Chinese culture, and once having achieved that goal, to build a cultural China that transcends national borders."⁽³²⁾

In practical terms, Kang makes a number of propositions. First, someone must "reinterpret the Confucian classics in light of the spirit of our age" so that there will be a stable corpus of Confucian texts available for social use. On this basis, "Confucian education must be integrated into the formal educational system. Primary and middle schools should set up basic courses in Confucianism. In high schools and universities, disciplines related to public management should set up courses for the study of the Confucian classics. Party schools at all levels should [do the same]... Public service exams should include a section on Confucianism."⁽³³⁾ The state will establish Confucianism as China's state religion

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

while protecting freedom of religion as guaranteed in China's constitution. Confucian churches will receive tax advantages, but will be administered locally. "People should make their own choices. Here we must let the market do its work, and let churches and preachers compete. People will vote with their feet, and with their donations" to Confucian churches, which will be self-run and largely independent of the state.⁽³⁴⁾ The establishment of Confucian churches should be accompanied by a state-supported—but not state-run—movement to promote Confucianism at home and abroad. As the movement takes root, Confucianism will become a state-sanctioned religious system, eventuating in the renewal of "the unity of politics and religion" in China. On this basis, China's Confucian "kingly Way" will someday rival the "American dream" on the world stage.

It is difficult to know what to make of such radical propositions, but Kang's essay was soon published in *Strategy and Management* (which, according to its own website, is the Asian equivalent of *Foreign Affairs*⁽³⁵⁾), suggesting that it was read and taken seriously. Part of the audacity of Kang's essay stems from the author's naïve enthusiasm for Confucianism, his personal knowledge of which does not at this point appear to exceed that of any educated, intelligent Chinese with access to the Internet and a decent library. Nor, in his defence, does Kang present himself as a Confucian expert, but rather as an expert in state-society relations. At the most basic level, Kang is promoting Confucianism as a common project, a new language of social relations, a tool for sociopolitical reconciliation. Whether he genuinely believes in the glories of traditional Confucian civilisation and their utility as a recycled twentieth-first century world culture, or simply uses them as selling points, is less clear—and perhaps less important.⁽³⁶⁾ In any event, there is no reason to doubt his personal conviction that an embrace of Confucianism would be a solution to the impasse revealed by the suppression of Falun Gong.

Benevolent government: China's Third Way

Since the writing of his manifesto, Kang has continued to promote his vision for a Confucian revival from a position of considerable influence—among others as a research fellow attached to the Centre for China Study (*Guoqing yanjiu zhongxin*) jointly established by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Tsinghua University in 2000.⁽³⁷⁾ Under the leadership of the well-respected social scientist Hu Angang, the Centre serves as a major think tank whose goal

is to combine academic research and policy prescriptions meant to be of use to the government in such fields as economics, science and technology, education, environmental protection, economic security and developmental strategy, and public policy. Building on his previous work and advocacy, as a CCS research fellow Kang focused in the first half of the 2000s more directly on issues of China's future economic and particularly political development, publishing an impressive series of articles in the review *Strategy and Management*. In 2003 alone, he published "Searching for a Political Development Strategy for China's Next Decade,"⁽³⁸⁾ "Outline of a Theory of Cultural Nationalism,"⁽³⁹⁾ "On China's Exceptionalism,"⁽⁴⁰⁾ and "On a Cooperationist State."⁽⁴¹⁾ In 2004, he published "Benevolent Government: Towards a Theory of Legitimacy for Authoritarian States."⁽⁴²⁾ In 2005, Kang published, in Singapore, a book entitled *Benevolent Government: A Third Path for China's Political Development*⁽⁴³⁾ and made up largely of the articles published in *Strategy and Management*, prefaced by an essay entitled "Why I Advocate Confucianism: Conservative Reflections on China's Future Political Development."⁽⁴⁴⁾

As this preface sums up the major arguments of book and defends Kang's choice of Confucianism as the proper framework for China's future political development, I will confine my remarks on Kang's renewed "call to arms" to the preface. Compared with Kang's manifesto, discussed above, "Why I Advocate Confucianism" is less personal and more pointedly political and even polemical. In reading the "Outline" one has the sense of experiencing Kang's intellectual journey

34. *Ibid.*

35. See http://www.cssm.org.cn/cn_index.html.

36. I have not personally met Kang, but colleagues who have attest to the fervent character of his Confucian advocacy, and I have no reason to question his sincerity. New converts to a religion are often the most committed.

37. See <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/docsn/fzyy/kyjg.html>.

38. "Weilai shinian Zhongguo zhengzhi fazhan celüe tansuo," *Zhanlue et guanli*, 2003.1: 75-81.

39. "Wenhua minzu zhuyi ganglun," *Zhanlue et guanli*, 2003.2: 9-27.

40. "Zhongguo teshulun," *Zhanlue et guanli*, 2003.4: 56-62.

41. "Lun hezuo zhuyi guojia," *Zhanlue et guanli*, 2003.5: 85-95.

42. "Renzheng: quanwei zhuyi guojia de hefaxing lilun," *Zhanlue et guanli*, 2004: 108-117.

43. *Renzheng: Zhongguo zhengzhi fazhan de disan tiao daolu*, Singapore, Shijie keji chubanshe, 2005.

44. Also available on line at <http://www.tech.cn/data/detail.php?id=4908>, where we learn that the essay is based on a talk given by Kang at the Graduate Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on 24 November 2004. The article is available in English translation as "Confucianization: A Future in the Tradition," *Social Research* 73.1 (Spring 2006): 77-121, available online at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2267/is_1_73/ai_n16440008/. In my citations from this essay I use the existing English translation, making corrections as necessary.

with him; “Why I Advocate Confucianism” reads more like a political tract designed to convert the political and intellectual elite of China to his cause (or, failing that, to rally the suffering masses).

Kang begins with a harsh assessment of China’s current situation, praising the market reforms that have transformed China’s economy and catapulted China onto the world stage, but noting at the same time that the effects of market forces have been to subject the Chinese people to unbearable exploitation. Stability has been temporarily achieved through an elite alliance of intellectuals, capitalists, and the government, an evil alliance “whereby the elites collude to pillage the masses.” It goes without saying that as a major member of this unholy alliance, the Chinese government lacks legitimacy. In recent years the regime has shown some openness to traditional Chinese political discourse, but at present this openness is insufficient: “The rulers have failed so far to put forward a theory that can justify the current order. This is why the status quo cannot and should not go on as it is.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

Kang then proceeds to an analysis of liberal democracy as a remedy for China’s ills, addressing himself to what he sees as the majority of China’s intellectual elite who continue to dream of a democratic China. For a number of reasons, Kang finds this enthusiasm misplaced. First, using statistics from the World Bank and Transparency International,⁽⁴⁶⁾ Kang illustrates—to his satisfaction, at least—that there is no clear correlation between democracy, economic development, economic inequality, and lack of corruption. The key factor in eliminating corruption is the absolute level of economic development; in other words, rich countries are less corrupt and have less poverty and less inequality. To Kang this means that developing countries should concentrate on development and leave “procedural questions” such as elections and political parties for later on.

Second, the core values of democracy are flawed. Individualism and the individual moral autonomy are not, Kang argues, obviously superior to communitarianism and other “mainstream values” propagated and defended as social norms. Moreover, the idea, dear to liberal democracy, that the individual is a self-sufficient entity flies in the face of man’s social nature and denies the possibility of virtuous government (seeing it at best as a necessary evil). “As a matter of fact,” Kang notes, “a government is capable of both evil and virtue...and it is sure that there would be no stable soci-

ety without government. Therefore, government is a necessary virtue.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Third, even if one is persuaded by the theory of democratic government, its practice reveals that “liberal democracy is utopian, just like communism.” The social equality necessary to the exercise of genuine democracy is impossible in capitalist societies, and constitutionalism allows the “bourgeoisie to use democracy to whitewash oligarchic politics, while at the same time depriving the broad masses of their democratic rights...The elections are controlled by money. The parliament is controlled by money. The media, the educational institutions, and the research institutions are all controlled by money.” Such remarks lack nuance, perhaps, but liberal critiques of America under the Bush-Cheney administration often sounded similar themes.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Kang concludes, “For China, Western democracy is useless as a tool, and is not helpful as a value.”⁽⁴⁹⁾ The solution to China’s dilemma is “benevolent government” based on Confucian principles, “a dictatorship by the community of Confucian scholars.” These scholars will have understood that man is perfectible if the institutions of the state and society guide him properly toward the achievement of his innate nature. At the same time, Confucian scholars are aware that not all men will be perfected, and thus will require control. Nor will Confucian scholars pander to the baser needs of the imperfect masses—as do the politicians in democratic societies—because the Confucians understand that heavenly principles are more important than polls and pork-barrel politics. Confucians are against multiparty systems and general elections because even if they appear—falsely—to manifest popular will, they in no way ensure virtuous rule. Kang’s arguments have a certain logic, of course, although the extreme optimism he displays in his discussion of virtuous Confucian rule clashes with the utter cynicism of his critique of liberal democracy (and his pronouncement on the record of Confucian rule in traditional China—that when things went well, rulers were practicing benevolence, and

45. Kang Xiaoguang, “Confucianization: A Future in the Tradition,” 85.

46. See <http://www.transparency.org/>.

47. *Ibid.*, 91-92.

48. As one example, see the daily hour of commentary by Amy Goodman on “Democracy Now,” <http://www.democracynow.org/>.

49. Kang Xiaoguang, “Confucianization: A Future in the Tradition,” 93-94.

when things went badly, rulers were not—is at best tautological).

For China to implement benevolent rule, it must install a “trinity” of Confucian orthodoxy, a Confucian system of education, and Confucian political rule. Here Kang repeats many of the proposals already discussed above in the context of his original manifesto. The CCP must be Confucianised, and Marxism must be replaced by doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. Society will be Confucianised through the introduction of Confucianism into the national educational system and by the establishment of a Confucian religion. “Confucianism was the most successful religion in history. The emperor was its pope, the whole of the government was its church, and all the officials were its ministers...Today Confucianism needs to reconstruct its vehicle, which is best in the form of state religion.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ Kang concludes that “there is no fundamental conflict between the CCP and the Chinese nation on the question of Confucianisation. It will be difficult for the CCP to go on with the current situation in any case, [and]...the CCP will have less difficulty accepting Confucianism than democracy. This is why I am optimistic about the possibility of achieving this peaceful evolution.”⁽⁵¹⁾

At the same time, Kang takes pains to argue that Confucianism, even as it represents the distillation of traditional wisdom, will, in the twenty-first century, respect the needs of the modern age.⁽⁵²⁾ The mass media will serve as a check on Confucian power, he notes, sounding a theme mentioned in previous writings.⁽⁵³⁾ He advocates the reorganisation of social groups via corporatism—more particularly the Austrian model, in which government and trade or industrial groups come together in structured discussions to arrive at common approaches to shared problems. He also advocates that China continue and develop what he calls “the administrative absorption of politics”—an idea taken from an analysis of politics in Hong Kong—whereby an authoritarian government consults the governed in the process of decision-making.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In sum, the arguments presented in *Benevolent Government* are largely the same as those discussed in Kang’s original manifesto, although Kang has taken pains to answer critics on the left and on the right. His attack on the corrupt and evil alliance of government, capitalist, and intellectual elites is surely calculated to appeal to those concerned by rising inequalities in China and who might be tempted by a solution offered by members of what was once called China’s “New Left.” His discussions of the importance of freedom of the press and freedom of association should be read in the same light. By the same token, his head-on attack on the theory

and practice of liberal democracy surely targets Chinese who would prefer to see more democratic reforms in China. Kang’s core arguments concerning the role of Confucianism in a necessary cultural revitalisation movement remain unchanged (although he uses more Confucian language and parables).

Concluding remarks

In his classic study of Yan Fu, whose translations of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and others introduced the basic principles of liberalism to China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Benjamin Schwartz argues that Yan embraced liberalism as a means rather than an end. Kang Xiaoguang’s advocacy of Confucianism and Confucian religion, however heartfelt, seems similarly instrumental. Kang wants a functional government, organically connected to the Chinese people, capable of returning China to great-power status on the world stage. For the moment, Confucianism as ideology, as religion, as utopian project, seems to Kang to be the best candidate. Indeed, Kang has continued his research and advocacy, publishing a social-science study of the grass-roots Confucian movement, entitled *The Return of China: Study of the Cultural Nationalist Movement in Contemporary China*, in 2008 in Singapore.⁽⁵⁵⁾ In this volume, Kang attempts to ground his Confucian advocacy less in his personal intellectual arguments and more in popular appeal (even as he repeats many of his own arguments throughout the text).

Kang’s instrumental view of Confucianism and Confucian religion is largely consistent with Chinese authorities’ discourse on religion since the late nineteenth century. This discourse has been driven by a desire to construct religious categories and institutions that the West seemed to have but China did not, and to subjugate these categories and institutions to larger nationalistic projects aiming to achieve modernisation and nation-building. In other words, since the

50. *Ibid.*, 116.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 101-107.

53. See Xu Xifan, “Chengben zuidi de fanfubai shi xinwen jiandu: Fang Qinghua daxue jiaoshou Kang Xiaoguang” (The cheapest way to fight corruption is through the media: An interview with Tsinghua University professor Kang Xiaoguang), *Zhongguo shehui daokan* 2003.4: 24-28.

54. See Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, “Administrative Absorption of Society: A Further Probe into the State-Society Relationship in Chinese Mainland,” *Social Sciences in China* 2007 (summer): 116-128.

55. *Zhongguo guilai: dangdai Zhongguo dalu wenhua minzu zhiyi yundong yanjiu*, Singapore, Shijie keji chubanshe, 2008.

early twentieth century, the twin goals of religious policy have been to establish a secular society governed by science and reason (and politics), and to transform China's religions into tame versions of their Western equivalents, which would remain firmly under secular state control. As Vincent Goossaert and others have argued, such policies resulted in considerable conflict and violence long before the extreme destruction of Mao's Cultural Revolution.⁽⁵⁶⁾ This unfinished project has been revived to cope with the religious revival underway in today's China, despite the more positive spin accorded to religion in slogans emphasising the achievement of a "harmonious society," for the realisation of this positive achievement remains contingent on religion's thorough-going embrace of the secularising developmental ethos at the heart of the Party-state's vision of China's future. As I have argued elsewhere, this policy offers at best a partial solution to ongoing conflicts between China's religions and the Chinese state, because, for complex reasons, the state remains unwilling to accord religion the independent, protected space required by religion in a truly secular regime.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Kang Xiaoguang's proposal to establish a Confucian religion may seem at first glance glib and impractical. Nonetheless, his proposition reflects a pragmatic assessment of the realities of state-society relations as affected by religion rarely found in published commentaries on religion in China, an assessment largely based on a sensitive analysis of the origins and implications of the Falun Gong affair. In essence, Kang proposes that China's government modify its adversarial stance toward religion by creating one of its own, taking advantage of a resurgence of popular enthusiasm for various

aspects of Confucian practice that has yet to congeal as a self-conscious, organised movement. If the project is utopian, it is surely not without a certain logic, even if it implicitly poses the question of the degree to which China has become a genuinely secular society. •

Glossary

Danwei 單位 Disan bumen 第三部門

Falungong 法輪功 Guoqing yanjiu zhongxin 國情研究中心

Jiaohua 教化 Kang Xiaoguang 康曉光

Kongjiaohui 孔教會 Qigong 氣功

Zhanlue yu guanli 戰略與管理

56. Nathalie Kouamé and Vincent Goossaert, "Un vandalisme d'État en Extrême-Orient? Les destructions de lieux de culte dans l'histoire de la Chine et du Japon," *Numen* 53.2 (2006): 177-220.

57. See David Ownby, "Religious Revival and the Rule of Law in China: An Evaluation of 'Secularization with Chinese Characteristics,'" forthcoming.