

GOVERN THE COUNTRY AND BRING PEACE TO ALL: THE CRISIS IN NEW CONFUCIAN EDUCATION

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ON 31 DECEMBER 2015, Xi Jinping and members of the Politburo held a ‘group study session’ to end the year. They invited Tsinghua University professor Chen Lai 陈来, one of China’s best-known ‘New Confucian’ 新儒家 scholars, to lead the group in a study of the concept of patriotism. Confucianism and patriotism have become deeply intertwined as Chinese elite search for a Chinese path in the twenty-first century.

While condemned during the Cultural Revolution, over the last twenty years Confucianism has returned with a vengeance. The revival has extended from the academy, where it is championed by scholars such as Chen Lai

and Kang Xiaoguang 康晓光 of Renmin University, to the realm of popular culture. Various Communist Party leaders in recent years have spoken of the importance of Confucian values. But not everyone welcomes back the sage. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*, Chapter 7 ‘Fitting Words’, p.396.) Among those who do, opinion is divided between those who emphasise Confucianism as a philosophy integral to Chinese culture and national identity; those who emphasise that its lessons are crucial for the re-inspiring of the Chinese body politic; and those who emphasise it as a religion, with Confucius turned into an object of worship.



The Wenli Academy

Source: wenli.ac.cn

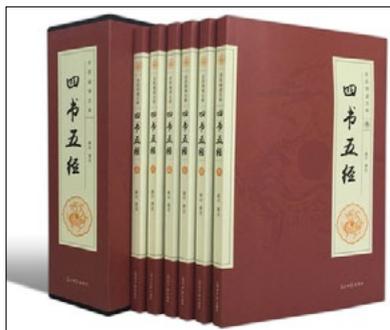
In 2016, the discourse around Confucius became particularly divisive. The reasons for this go back to the National Studies Fever 国学热 of the 1990s. National Studies Fever had swept the country as a new generation of Chinese searched for an approach to modern life beyond the dichotomy of liberalism and Marxism. The 1980s had ended on an ominous note for advocates of liberalism with the violent suppression of the democracy protests of 1989. In 1990, the government launched a massive, concerted Patriotic Education 国情教育 campaign in schools and across the media. Whether motivated by altruism, a belief that patriotism and Confucianism were intertwined, the chance to make money, or all three, private schools for the study of the Confucian Classics began to spring up.

Believing that mastery of the Confucian texts would ensure a good future for their children, or just frustrated with the dominant system of public education, some parents enrolled their children in private Confucian academies for the study of the Classics 读经学校. There are now around 2,000 of these schools in China, although the vast majority are small in scale; few have more than a hundred students.

These schools have adopted a system designed by the Taiwanese Confucian scholar Wang Caigui 王财贵, who also heads China's largest institute for the study of Confucian Classics, the Wenli Academy 文礼书院 in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province. The Wenli Academy has become the school that students aspire to attend after they have memorised the fundamental texts at schools for younger Confucians. Stu-

dents at these priming schools must spend their first ten years memorising the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* 四书五经. They also study some Buddhist texts, as well as important works of philosophy and literature from China, India, and the West, including Shakespeare in the original English. It is not until after ten years of rote learning that students can apply to the Wenli Academy. If they can pass the entrance exam, which requires the flawless recitation of texts totalling 300,000 characters, they can then begin interpreting and discussing the texts. The broader goal extends beyond philosophical education: it aims for nothing less than the promotion of sagely leaders for a much more 'Chinese' China.

On 29 August 2016, the *Beijing News* 新京报 published an article titled 'Broken Dreams of Sageliness for a Youth Reading the Classics' 读经少年圣贤梦碎. Luo Ting 罗亭, one of the authors of the article, met with many students, parents, and former students from these schools. She found that after ten years of reading and re-reading these texts, the students were often left feeling frustrated by the lack of practical applications for their skills, disappointed by their failure to fully grasp the texts they were reading, and



Four Books and Five Classics: the basis of traditional learning since ancient times
Source: AliExpress.com

desperate to escape this alternative system of education. What's more, after years of what is often mockingly termed 'sagely education' 圣贤教育, they found themselves lacking the basic educational requirements for the notoriously difficult *gaokao* 高考 university entrance examinations.

Wang Caigui, as the founder of this system, felt the ire of the Chinese Internet after the article trended on **WeChat**. But the *Beijing News* article had not been the first to criticise Wang's model of Confucian education. On 7 May, Tongji University Professor of Humanities Ke Xiaogang 柯小刚, a scholar of the New Confucian school, made a presentation to the Shanghai Confucianism Association 上海儒学大会, titled 'Contemporary Confucian Education' 当代的儒学教育. The Con-

fucian Net 儒家网 — a website with a reputation for being at the heart of Confucian discourse in China — posted the text of his talk that evening.

Ke argued that the ‘anti-systemic movement to read the Classics’ 反体制读经运动 represented by Wang’s Wenli Academy and schools was as much an organised system as the official education system that it proposed to replace. He criticised its focus on recitation over interpretation, stressing that Confucianism, properly understood, had a critical nature. Academics discussed his critique, but the general public took little notice of it until the issue became a matter of popular debate following publication of the article in the *Beijing News* in August.

Ke Xiaogang responded to that article only days after it was published, on 2 September, with a piece of his own in *The Paper* 澎湃, one of China’s most popular websites for intellectuals since its creation in 2014, despite considerable sustained control by the Party: ‘We don’t want to attack the reading of the Classics, we want to assist the reading of the Classics’ 不是要打到读经, 而是帮助读经. The article simply rebranded his speech from four months earlier for a broader audience. Although there was little new in what he said, Ke suc-



Ke Xiaogang
Source: thepaper.cn

cessfully took hold of the debate. As public interest in the problems with Confucian education was at a high, Ke was asked to do a public web chat through *The Paper*’s website.

During the web chat, Ke Xiaogang was much more forthright in his criticism of the movement and of Wang Caigui himself. *The Paper* called the discussion ‘Prevent the religionisation of the movement to read the Classics’ 防止民间读经走向宗教化. Although Wang and Ke had never met, they were now the de facto leaders of the movements for and against what Wang regularly refers to as ‘the conscientious and extensive pure reading of the Classics’ 老实大量纯读经.

As time passed, Ke became more vociferous in his denunciations of

Wang and his ideas, even accusing those aligned with him of being interested only in financial gain. But Wang's Wenli Academy openly and prophylactically posts all information related to the school's finances each month. The situation is more complex than the feud between Ke and Wang might seem to imply: the Wenli Academy also enjoys support from some figures in the mainland New Confucian 大陆新儒家 community. In mid-2016, the school announced plans for expansion. Whereas the original academy can accommodate less than one hundred students, it plans to build a huge

complex in Taishun County 泰顺县 — a remote area of Zhejiang, that will accommodate thousands of students by 2020. It remains to be seen whether the backlash from the *Beijing News* report and subsequent furore will affect those plans. From the school's perspective, the very future of China is what is at stake. As one of its teachers, Pei Zhiguang 裴志广 explained with a popular quote from the Confucian Classic *The Great Learning* 大学: 'These students are not being trained to be mere teachers! They will govern the country and bring peace to all!'

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