Academia and Cultural Production: 
Yu Dan and Her *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today’s World*

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**ABSTRACT**

Chinese professor Yu Dan and her book *Yu Dan Lunyu xinde*, (Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today’s World), became an immediate cultural success, contributing to the promotion and the popularity of people's interest in the Chinese classics and national studies. As a work which bears the marks of both Confucian ideology and popular Confucian cultural traits, the Yu Dan phenomenon captures the development of the national studies craze, in particular those areas relevant to Confucian ideas and principles in contemporary China. Yu Dan's popularity indicates a recent revival of ancient Chinese cultural, philosophical, and moral traditions in their relationship with modern Chinese society, and their use by contemporary Chinese people. This article analyses the development of the Yu Dan phenomenon and the intense debate it has stimulated, reviewing its subtle collaboration with official discourse and propaganda, and its success as a cultural product. It also analyses the role the Yu Dan phenomenon plays in changing the social status and functions of intellectuals in the contemporary Chinese political-social-cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** Yu Dan, Confucianism, the *Analects*, national studies craze, academia

**Introduction**

Yu Dan (b. 1965), a media professor at Beijing Normal University, and her well-known book, *Yu Dan Lunyu xinde*, (published in the West with the English title *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today’s World*, hereafter *Confucius*), have been controversial topics in cultural discussions of contemporary China. James Leibold notes that in mainland China today, “one cannot enter a bookstore without encountering Professor Yu Dan's depoliticized, self-help musings on the *Analects*, which has sold ten million legitimate and another six million pirated copies, inviting comparisons with Mao’s little red book” (Leibold 2010, 18). Recently, *Confucius* was published in the West, and Yu's total royalties for the book have reached 2.6 million RMB. *Confucius* is a collection of Yu's lectures about the *Analects*, which were broadcast via the China Central Television Station's (CCTV's) prime time science and education programme *Lecture Room (Baijia jiangtan)* in October 2006.¹ Due to its popularity, the programme's lectures were collected into a book in November of the same year. With the combined success of the programme and the book, Yu Dan became known across China, enjoying popularity in academic circles as well as acquiring the status of a celebrity among the general
Lecture Room is a popular programme aired by CCTV, China’s official media platform, which invites scholars to give public lectures on interesting historical, literary, and cultural topics. Lecture Room is a programme that explores the humanities, combining entertainment and academic features, enjoys great popularity among its Chinese audience, and has created many celebrity scholars, such as Yu Dan, Yi Zhongtian, and Ji Lianhai. For more on Lecture Room, see Ying Zhu, Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China (New York: The New Press, 2012); Daniel Bell, China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

The Yu Dan phenomenon is illustrative of the changing contemporary Chinese cultural landscape. Yu Dan’s presentation of a therapeutic stoicism wrapped in Confucian fabric to a Chinese public that is weary of cultural self-doubt, economic dislocation, and political disempowerment has become an unavoidable subject that confronts and challenges intellectuals who courageously shoulder the responsibility of honestly presenting facts to the public, fulfilling their duties of criticising social injustice, and questioning the government. Through an analysis of the Yu Dan phenomenon this article considers the reasons for the intense debate Confucius has stimulated, its subtle collaboration with official discourse and ideology, its success as an exemplary cultural product, and its function in changing the roles and social status of intellectuals in the contemporary Chinese political-social-cultural milieu.

Confucian Ideas and the National Studies Craze in Modern and Post-Mao China

During most of Chinese history, Confucian ideas, in one form or another, were a dominant force. From the turn of the twentieth century, these ideas, the issue of China’s traditional culture, and the “national studies craze” have become matters of continuous and intense controversy in China (Chen 2011, 22). Over the past century Confucian thought has been judged and evaluated, usually negatively, by the ruling powers and cultural elites. In the May Fourth Movement (1919), progressive and innovative Chinese intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, adopted a critical attitude toward traditional thought and culture. “Down with official Confucianism!” was the slogan that symbolized this intellectual trend (Chen 2011, 22). Thus, Confucianism was condemned as the custodian of feudal thought and behavior, preventing the emancipation of people’s thinking and shackling their spiritual freedom.

To better understand the trajectory of the Confucian discourse and the “national studies craze,” it might be helpful to mention the “national essence campaign,” which was initiated in the early 1900s by conservative elite thinkers and literati and continued in earnest into the Republican period. The product of the concerns of elite intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, who worried about the military and cultural invasion from the West and the potential replacement of Chinese traditional culture by Western culture (although he did support the selective adoption of Western culture), this campaign sought to protect China’s “national essence” (guocui) (Ding 1995, 2). This led to the appeal to revive not only guoxue...
(national learning) but also national painting, national theatre, national language, national medicine, national martial arts, national dress, and so forth.

These endeavors to salvage and revive the cultural essence of the Chinese nation were not only due to the sense of pride the intellectuals had in their own civilization and culture, but also to the national crisis that besieged a China facing invasion by Japanese and Western forces. However, the “national essence campaign” reveals a conundrum: on one hand there was a belief in “perpetuating a national essence that is crucial to national existence and well-being,” whereas on the other hand, it seemed necessary to supply the national essence with “Euro-modern tools to eradicate and rewrite the past that produced that essence, because it had become an obstacle to national progress” (Dirlik 2011, 6).

The “national essence campaign” also had political ends concerning race and patriotism, which had the implication of contesting not only the “alien” rule of the Qing dynasty, but also “Europeanization.” One aspect of the focus of nativism in the early stage of the “national essence campaign” was its criticism of ruixue (Confucian learning), a position that contrasts sharply with the present-day national studies craze that privileges learning and texts associated with Confucianism (Makeham 2011, 16; Ding 1995, 10).

During the rule of the Nationalist Party on the mainland, in particular in the 1930s, a re-identification and reunion of national essence and guoxue with Confucian discourse took place through state patronage of Confucianism (Dirlik 2011, 10). However, by the time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of mainland China, and the launch of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Confucian thought was again labelled as “feudalistic, conservative thought, an impediment that Mao had to demolish in order to push forward his own revolutionary thought, and it was subjected to organised, widespread criticism throughout the country” (Chen 2011, 22). Until the era of opening up, beginning in the late 1970s, when a new process of modernization was implemented by Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues, China’s traditional culture was once again marginalized. China’s liberal intellectuals led the way in the total repudiation of Eastern civilisation in favor of Western civilisation (the popular documentary series River Elegy serves as a good example of this phenomenon). Confucius and his thought, as the most established emblem of Chinese thought and civilisation, were considered too archaic and impractical to serve China’s new situation.

However, the situation changed with the gradual economic transformation of China, and the subsequent increase in national economic strength, which together ushered in a nuanced cultural, social, and psychological awareness among the Chinese people and government. One aspect of this change was the pursuit of an enhanced national self-confidence, which resulted in a heightened regard for traditional cultural heritage, embodied in the resurrection of Confucian thought,
ideology, and practice. There were different catalysts behind this reconfiguration and resurgence of national culture, including government support and promotion, elite intellectuals’ enthusiasm and input in the so-called New Confucianism studies, both domestically and overseas, and an emerging popular fashion for Confucianism among the general public. Gradually, the coalescence of these catalysts led to the emergence of a “national studies craze.”

The government soon appropriated the Confucian discourse, making it a part of a top-down instrumentalization of Confucian cultural legacies which appealed to the ordinary citizens’ identification with their ethnic identity, their country, and their government. In 1984, a government-funded “Chinese Confucian Foundation,” was established with the then State Council member Gu Mu serving as honorary president. In 1986, in the context of the seventh five-year plan, the government sanctioned the foundation of a large research group on contemporary Confucianism directed by Fang Keli, a professor at Nankai University in Tianjin. A key motivating factor for the government support of this research program was the imperative of modernizing the country by embedding the Confucian discourse back into Chinese culture, as this had proven to be key to the economic modernization and development of the four “Asian Tigers” (Billioud 2007, 52).

Around this time, various festivals and ceremonies honoring Confucius were organized and promoted by the government. These were held at the temples of the sage’s hometown Qufu and other localities and were broadcast live by CCTV (Chen 2011, 23; Billioud 2007, 52; Billioud and Thoraval 2009, 82-100). In these cautious appropriations of Confucian cultural traditions, the government made use of Confucian ideas such as harmony (hexie) and the rule of virtue (yidezhiguo) to back up and reinforce its rule and legitimacy (Billioud 2007, 50). This was particularly evident after the crackdown on the June Fourth democratic demonstration in 1989, when the political leadership mobilized traditional concepts to broaden its dwindling legitimacy. Following this, in the 1990s, Confucianism served a dual role for the government: first, its “authoritarian” aspects contributed to a “socialist spiritual civilization”; and second, it aided social unity and provided a cultural antidote to the threat of Westernization and the negative effects of economic reforms on Chinese social and political life (Meissner 2006, 48).

Confucian discourse was also revived within academic circles. In 1985, the founding of the Academy of Chinese Culture (Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan) and the Chinese Confucius Research Institute (Zhonghua Kongzi yanjiusuo), marked the “genuine burgeoning of enlisting Confucianism in the ongoing cultural debates over tradition and Westernization” (Song 2003, 85). Besides this, a number of Hong Kong and Taiwan New Confucianists, including well-known authors, such as Mou Zongsan, Tu Weiming (Du Weiming), and Yu Ying-shih, had their works recommended for publication on the mainland. The core theme of these overseas New Confucianist scholars’ research relates to the “saviour” role that Confucianism could play in the modern world (Song 2003, 93). From the early 1990s, national studies institutes were created in many of the top universities in mainland China (Chen 2011, 23; Makeham 2011, 14). In early 1992, the Research Centre for Traditional Chinese Culture at Peking University was established, followed by the
The national studies craze has continued to be a cultural sensation in the 21st century and has evolved into many popular forms, particularly in the resurrection of Confucian principles and manners, which cannot be simply understood under the rubric of top-down instrumentalisation, as they instead reflect “a much larger popular aspiration” (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 5). This significant progress in the appropriation of “tradition” from the bottom up demonstrates a “progressive transition from the imaginary to the real,” during which “empty, incantatory references to tradition make way for actual appropriation of ancient cultural heritage…[and where] [t]raditional values were no longer merely invoked; an effort was made to actually live according to them in various ways” (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 5). For example, popular books relating to Confucianism and traditional culture became bestsellers.³ The Confucius MBA (Master of Business Administration) programmes, which are specifically tailored for business people and run by prestigious universities, have become popular among the commercial elites. Also, the international Confucius Institutes sponsored by the Chinese government triggered a revived interest in Confucius, traditional classics, and national studies in both the domestic and international spheres. The popular national studies craze fuels the culture industry as national studies can provide cultural content for it, including an abundance of cultural symbols, such as dragons and red lanterns, as well as “cultural material,” such as classical texts and accounts of historical persons. Therefore, having “undergone an appropriate process of creative conversion,” the national studies craze has become a renewable resource of cultural capital (Makeham 2011, 15).

At the grass-roots level, popular Confucian practices may be found in the rapid dissemination of a campaign to encourage children to read classical literature (xiao er du jing),⁴ and in the spread of private schools where students study classics of ancient cultural heritage and imitate Confucian living routines and manners (Billioud 2007, 58; Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 4; Billioud and Thoraval 2009, 82-100). An example of this grass-roots popularity of Confucianism can be found in Yidan Xuetang (Yidan School), a traditional-style private school where children study Chinese classics and practice Confucian manners. The motto of the school is, “less talk, more action,” which elucidates that self-transformation is not a simple intellectual practice. The teaching of the school focuses on the engagement of the whole person, including the body. The morning reading sessions normally start with a series of gymnastics exercises which involve a process that can be described

³ The Analects, Mencius (Mengzi), 5000 Years of Ups and Downs (Shangxia wuqian nian), Twenty-Four Histories (Ershishi shi), and Historical Records (Shiji) have all become bestselling books, and the popularity of these classic works reflects the revival of traditional Chinese philosophy and culture among the population.

⁴ According to John Makeham, between 2000 and 2003, a private company, Beijing Sihai Children’s Recitation of the Classics Recitation Guidance Education Center (Beijing sihai etong dujing daodu jiaoyu zhongxin), had a total of 3.5 million students in several tens of cities who participated in recitation of the classics programs. See John Makeham, Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 319.
as “incorporation of the text, an experience of savouring and impregnation, facilitated by physical exercises, breathing, and slowness” (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 14).

Another example of popular Confucianism in practice is the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre (Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin) located in rural Anhui province. Every six months, the Lujiang Centre admits a group of thirty students from a local village to receive an education based on traditional culture. During their study and training periods, all the trainees are required to submit to ascetic Confucian rituals and practice Confucian manners, such as using the correct words when greeting someone and asking after their wellbeing. The Lujiang Centre aligns its pedagogy to the doctrinal pillars of Confucian virtues such as filial piety, loyalty, and honesty. The teaching and behavioural principles of the Lujiang Centre explain that “Confucius is alive and is with you, me, him, and the mentality of the Chinese people” (Detournier and Ji 2009, 73). Confucianism is no longer an ideology of a certain class; it has become a major part of the Chinese national character or a “psycho-cultural construct (wenhua xinli jiegou)” (Song 2003, 88). After graduation, the students disseminate what they have learned at the Centre to other people of the village, thus providing the potential for a positive transformation of the whole village, and in order to maximize this potential, the Centre and the program received support from the local government. The Centre is still a “relatively isolated case, but it is indicative of the potential for the insertion of Confucianist themes into new political-cultural constructions,” and it is “inventing, somewhere between political control and moral proselytism, a new form of governmentality that could gain widespread acceptance” (Detournier and Ji 2009, 73).

While the national studies phenomenon continues to gain favor from both the government and civil society, some activist intellectuals have gone a step further and recommend a “Confucian fundamentalism.” Jiang Qing, the main promoter of this concept, suggests that Confucianism should be turned into the “state religion” and “state ideology.” China could achieve this by “implementing a political system allying religion (Confucianism) and state in which the state would take on the responsibility of moral education…by establishing a system of ‘Confucian constitutional government’ and making Confucianism the foundation of the state’s legitimacy.” This idea of Confucian fundamentalism has been criticized, with one critic charging that it is “reactionary to modern democratic government and tramples on the concept of ‘equality’” (Chen 2011, 26). In their arguments against Jiang Qing’s proposal and its unsuitability for the Chinese situation, scholars point out that basic modern values, such as human rights, as well as the concepts of democracy and rule of law are lacking in Confucianism (Chen 2011, 26).

The Confucian revival trend of the national studies craze has caused concern and criticism among many contemporary Chinese intellectuals. One leading argument is that the national studies craze is really just a marginalized position in China’s modernization process, and the present phenomenon is really just the last whimper of traditional culture as it becomes assimilated in the modern era of a new Chinese dawn. Other scholars hold that “Confucian doctrine was
negated back during the May Fourth movement, and that to restore it now to such high esteem is historical revisionism” (Chen 2011, 25). The 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Chinese writer and political dissident Liu Xiaobo also protested that, “The ideal Confucian personality amounts to nothing more than a ‘self-enslaving personality’ (zijue de nuxing renge).” Further, he pointed out that the submission of Chinese intellectuals—with their great sense of duty and responsibility—to their rulers, indicates “the ultimate level of enslavement (nuhua jijing), [which] has not only prevented the Chinese people from developing analytical skills, but has also stunted individuality and creativity” (Song 2003, 90).

The overall trend of the national studies craze is understood and articulated by most scholars as either a top-down government instrumentalization or a bottom-up popular Confucianism. Yu Dan stands apart from these scholars through her “middle-ground” position between the top-down and bottom-up paradigms. It is therefore important to examine what makes Yu Dan, a once unknown female scholar, so exceptional and different from other scholars, and what makes her so popular among both academics and the general public. The following examination and discussion of this topic seeks to decode and deconstruct this phenomenon.

**Yu Dan’s Explanation of the Analects**

The success of Yu Dan’s *Confucius* owes much to the CCTV programme *Lecture Room*. This media platform enabled Yu to transform the *Analects*, an intricate and obscure Chinese national studies classic, into a vivid duanzi (piece of storytelling). The delivery style of *Lecture Room* is similar to that of the traditional Chinese pingshu performance (storytelling or recounting of history), a traditional performing art. Normally, the storytellers stand behind a prop desk and relate a fragment of a novel or historical legend from memory. During the performance, the performer can adjust and stimulate the mood of the audience and control the storytelling through employing body language, such as gestures and facial expressions, and through modifying their speaking voice and tone.

As a true storyteller in *Lecture Room*, Yu Dan did not present a lecture revolving around focal topics and themes, but instead offered a combination of stories and anecdotes (Li 2010, 159; Li, Mei 2007, 54). This method transforms the classics into collections of interesting tales, and it was this mode of presentation which led to her popularity. Yu's interpretation, exposition, and eloquence enabled her to explain profound classical phrases in simple terms, and allowed her to add Chinese and foreign fables, historical stories, anecdotes of famous people, personal life stories, unofficial histories, and stories circulated on the internet into her recounting of the *Analects*. Yu Dan deftly adopted these stories and anecdotes to clarify her ideas and arguments and add flavor and interest to her speech, leaving her audience with the impression that she is erudite, yet also modest and unassuming. For example, as evidence to substantiate her interpretations and ideas, Yu referred to the Eastern Jin dynasty poet Tao Yuanming’s experiences as an official, anecdotes of the famous Northern Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo, Buddhism, Tolstoy’s allegories, and stories about a British tennis player.
Yu’s interpretation of the Analects can be labelled as xishuo (playful narrative).\(^5\) Xishuo adopts a casual and relaxed manner when discussing historical, official, and serious topics or events in novels, films, and television shows. This playful organisation of the contents of Confucius aligns with the popular books that often are labelled “for self-improvement,” with themes focussing on such issues as achieving personal goals, improving personal relations, generating wealth, and tips regarding how to become successful, such as Xinling jitang (Chicken Soup for the Unsinkable Soul); Fu baba, qiong baba (Rich Dad, Poor Dad);\(^6\) and so forth.

To readers who are familiar with these works, it is not difficult to discern that those books that are successful use anecdotes, stories of famous people, unofficial histories, and fables to fuel and enhance the interest of the audience. Using a cordial and unassuming tone, which is similar to that used when speaking, these bestselling books claim to offer an immediate, practical approach to achieving instant results; this is usually hinted at by the book titles. It is suggested that whoever reads Chicken Soup for the Unsinkable Soul will instantly become wiser, and whoever reads Rich Dad, Poor Dad will immediately become a smart investor. Attracted by these promises of instant and effective solutions to their needs, readers expect much from these bestselling books, which have great appeal to readers who want to become rich and successful overnight.

According to this logic, if intelligence and fortune can be duplicated, why not attitude and mentality? Yu Dan's Confucius is dedicated to providing an omnipotent “prescription” that can give each person a more optimistic outlook (Wu 2008, 8), thus the “[Chinese] should buy her book, if they mean to be happy, orderly and content to stay in their places” (Nylan and Thomas 2010, 222). The selling point of the book is that it tries to offer a comprehensive answer to the perplexities and bewilderments confronting contemporary Chinese people. Accordingly, an essential theme of Confucius is its emphasis on one's attitude towards life. Yu states:

> Every person has their difficult times and regrets and we can do nothing about it. However, what we can do is to change our attitude and mood toward them. One of the essences of the Analects is that it tells us how to deal with these misgivings and difficulties with a positive attitude.

Here, the overall argument of Yu's Confucius suggests that an optimistic attitude and a placid mood will defeat all life’s misfortunes. Yu’s interpretation resurrects and renews the principal ideas of Confucian thought in relation to their current utility and value in serving the needs of contemporary Chinese society. In doing so, Yu adds her personal perceptions to her elucidation of the Analects, and

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5 The playful narrative method has been widely used in creating contemporary Chinese novels, television dramas, and films. In 1991, companies in mainland China and Taiwan co-produced the television drama, Playful Narrative of the Qianlong Emperor. This became very popular and successful, which established an example that was followed by similarly themed literary and cultural products.

6 These bestselling books are widely read by contemporary Chinese readers who seek “quick tips” to enable a successful career and life in contemporary China's extremely competitive and harsh economy and society.
shortens the distance between the audience and the classic. Speaking in a humble manner, Yu seeks to share with others what she has learned from reading the *Analects*. Her own understanding of this timeless Classic is that the “philosophically inspiring ideas and arguments about human existence have jumped the barrier of time and space and shed new light for the future of every human being.” *Confucius* is an attempt by Yu to convert her own comprehension of the classics into “serving the people.”

Yu Dan’s *Confucius* happened to be written in an ideal historical moment. The policy of openness had been in place for over thirty years, and when the negative consequences of this reform became apparent, such as political corruption, social injustice, and the collapse of morality (Zhang 2007, 58), many Chinese people were disadvantaged and most were confused. They complained about the social repercussions of economic reforms, becoming disgruntled and uneasy. As Yu observes, “We often hear people complaining that society is not fair, that their lives are difficult. Actually, instead of blaming everyone but yourself, why not examine yourself?” People without a peaceful mind feel continually dissatisfied, jealous, cynical, and melancholy. Conversely, people with a positive mentality examine themselves, and engage in self-reflection, as Confucius did. Yu Dan believes that “a thoughtful citizenry with ‘settled hearts’ makes for a more secure society that eventually will achieve the greatest good for the greatest number” (Nylan and Thomas 2010, 221). Here, Yu’s consideration of the spiritual core of Confucianism appears very orthodox, as there is “a consensus amongst Confucians that the path best manifests itself as a spiritual ideal that is embodied in a system of values and attitudes of mind” (Guo 2004, 82), and she projects moral engagement—“what classical Confucians called *de*, or ‘moral power’—and clearly seems to believe what she is saying” (Bell 2008, 164).

However, the premise that a positive attitude and moral self-discipline will lead to positive change and eliminate social inequity is not proven; perhaps it is merely a self-pleasing and self-deceiving anaesthetic. For example, a recent human-interest news feature depicted the day’s work of a manual labourer in Beijing named Lao Nie. Forty-year-old Lao Nie came from Henan Province and works as an express delivery worker. This news feature showed his harsh living conditions: his six-square meter windowless temporary living quarters, his three-yuan (around 0.5 US dollar) lunch, and a close-up of his bent back and the tears rolling down his wrinkled face. Despite his hard work, Lao Nie could not afford his daughter’s university tuition fees, and he also had to worry about losing his current job in the near future. According to Yu’s logic, Lao Nie should examine himself and contemplate how his behaviour may have led to his difficult living conditions. However, it is dubious whether such an examination is justified, as it is unlikely that Lao Nie himself is responsible for his difficulties. Furthermore, if Lao Nie finds nothing wrong with himself, should he pretend that he is living a satisfying life? Or should the government take responsibility to change his situation?

Thus, there is a flaw in Yu Dan’s logic, and her construct of the *Analects* may be seen in two opposing ways. While her work helps ordinary people relax and
accept the reality of their lives, and “detoxes” and “purifies” the soul of the people,\(^7\) it can also be regarded as stifling people’s critical thinking. Lao Nie’s case can be used here to analyse Yu’s viewpoint. If Lao Nie could imitate Ah Q’s behaviour and copy his spiritual victories, his life would be easier, at least mentally. Yu’s reading and perception of the *Analects* is essentially an updated version of Ah Q’s spiritual victories, which are lampooned and castigated by China’s most famous modern writer, Lu Xun, in his novella *The True Story of Ah Q* (Wu 2008, 9; Yan and Yang 2009, 65). The story traces the “adventures” of Ah Q, a man from the rural farmer class with little education and no fixed vocation. Ah Q is famous for his “spiritual victories” (Lu Xun’s euphemism for self-delusion even when confronted with tremendous defeat or shame). Ah Q encourages himself psychologically to be spiritually “superior” to his opponents even as he surrenders to their attacks. Lu Xun exposes Ah Q’s extreme delusions as characteristic of China’s own delusion at this time. Ah Q’s spiritual victory is categorised as one of the most distinctive features of the deep-rooted bad habits of the Chinese people, which are judged and disparaged by Lu Xun as the true problem of the backward China of his time. The literary figure Ah Q, one might note sarcastically, epitomises the idealised gentleman with a “modest” attitude imagined in *Confucius* by Yu Dan. The correlation between the two characters therefore leads to a re-evaluation of the classic, of Confucius’s thought, and of Yu’s interpretation of it.

It is clear that the sceptical and rebellious spirit called for by Lu Xun almost one hundred years ago is left behind by Yu Dan, as such passion and excess are not encouraged and appreciated in Confucian thought. Here, I argue that Yu Dan’s explanation of a Confucian mentality and personality represents a regression of history. In other words, the cynicism and individualism that Lu Xun hoped that the Chinese people could acquire is still necessary for the present-day China, which needs a democratic turn in its socio-political domain. Although China’s current economic and political transformation is occurring under the rubric of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” it may also be succinctly summarised by two phrases—“economically capitalised” and “politically stalled.” China requires a makeover of its political system if it is to become more democratic, rather than merely await for a humane government managed by the group of competent and compassionate “gentlemen” that is suggested by Confucius’s political ideals. If this makeover is not carried out, a post-socialist, post-revolutionary China will be unable to survive its own social turmoils and the instabilities caused by corruption and social injustice. Thus, from this point of view, the Yu Dan-style of spiritual victories may temporarily contribute to the building of a harmonious society, while, in the long run, it will be an obstacle to the Chinese people achieving supreme political enlightenment.

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\(^7\) As Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson have observed in *Civilization’s Greatest Sage through the Ages*. “The 2006 PRC annual state reports speaks of 87,000 violent incidents involving one hundred people or more. Yu Dan nonetheless insists that the ‘harmony’ advocated in the *Analects* can already be found in today’s blessed PRC…citing PRC polls that claim the Chinese are happier than Euro-Americans—polls that contradict other polls conducted elsewhere…” (221-22).
Yu Dan's *Confucius* and the Debates It Stimulates

As an instant success, Yu Dan's *Confucius* attracted considerable attention and sparked stimulating debate. Some critics consider Yu a contemporary preacher of traditional Chinese classical culture and a leading light of this form of scholarship. However others, including the well-known scholar, Li Zehou, believe that Yu has just popularised the classics via the platform of contemporary media, rather than conducting serious research on Confucius (Li cited in Wu 2008, 5). Yet, Yi Zhongtian, a professor of literature at Xiamen University and another celebrity academic from *Lecture Room*, offers positive feedback about Yu's television show: “This programme aroused the common people's interest, and rekindled their enthusiasm to learn about Chinese history and traditional Chinese culture, and any in-depth analysis should be left to the historians” (Yu Dan zhizheng: wenhua fuhao haishi liyi boyi 2013). Daniel Bell (2008, 166), also comments on Yu Dan's *Confucius*:

Yu Dan is addressing a popular audience, not experts. Let me be more positive. There’s a kind of division of labor between experts and popularizers, and the division can be mutually beneficial. Popularizers can learn from and incorporate the insights of experts, and experts can learn from attempts to show the value of the classics for the contemporary world. We, meaning those of us teaching and writing on the classics, should be grateful for Yu Dan's contribution. She shows that our work can and should have relevance beyond academic circles.

In addition, Sun Yuanming (cited in Yan and Yang 2009, 65), the director of the Centre for Psychology Studies at Chongqing Institute of Social Sciences states that:

Star academics such as Yi Zhongtian and Yu Dan proficiently combine knowledge and mass communication media to offer a series of popular feasts of Chinese national studies. These modern scholars have special expertise and are skilled at expressing thoughts and feelings. Their dissemination of the national essence and traditional Chinese cultures has positive effects.

Despite these scholars acknowledging Yu Dan's motivation and the efforts she has made to spreading traditional Chinese culture and its ancient classics, there are others who take a critical attitude towards this cultural sensation. Some researchers state that Yu's analysis of the *Analects* has many inaccuracies. Thus, some argue that some of her translations and ideas are factually incorrect and that her attitude towards knowledge is questionable (Zhang 2007, 58). To take one instance, due to her inadequate level of understanding of classical Chinese, Yu Dan regularly mistranslates the phrase “petty person” (xiaoren) as “little person” or “child” (Nylan and Thomas 2010, 220). Daniel Bell (2008, 167) has pointed out that Yu Dan states in her explanation of the *Analects* that everybody has an equal opportunity to become an exemplary person, which might distort Confucius's original belief in which he “takes it for granted that a minority of exemplary people can and should rule over common people…. [Confucius] also suggests that common people have intellectual limitations.…” Yu Dan does not mention such passages, perhaps because these views would not play well with her intended readership, but through
such omissions she may be deviating substantially from Confucius's original views. In another instance, Yu Dan interprets Confucius as teaching that “we should help the people nearest to us, and we should do so immediately, without any delay,” which seems inconsistent with Confucius's own views which held that “what we do depends on the roles we occupy vis-a-vis the people we’re dealing with. I owe more obligations to my father than to total strangers” (Bell 2008, 169).

Among the academics who are dubious about Yu Dan’s Confucius, there are ten scholars from Tsinghua University (the top university in China) who published a collection of essays criticizing Yu entitled Jiedu Yu Dan: gaosu ni yige meibei zaota de kongzi he zhugzi (Detoxing Yu Dan: To inform you of an unspoiled Confucius and Zhuangzi). In addition to publishing this critique, they demanded that Yu deliver an open apology to the general public for her irresponsible explanation of the Analects. In addition to Detoxing Yu Dan, books entitled Kongzi hen zhaoji: cong Yu Dan hong xianxiang shuoqi (Confucius is deeply worried: Discussions about the “Yu Dan/Red Poison” phenomenon) edited by Li Jian (2007) and Zhuangzi hen shengqi (Zhuangzi is deeply angry) by Yan Shenghua (2007) also denounced Yu’s work and actually called for a boycott of it. Comparing Yu Dan to Sudan Red, a highly poisonous traditional Chinese herbal medicine through an allusion to the literal meaning of Dan (cinnabar red), a fierce attack was launched against Yu Dan’s “distorted” interpretation of the Analects.

The well-known writers Li Yue and Li Fang joined the movement to denounce Yu Dan by writing a book entitled Pipan Yu Dan: zhengshuo Lunyu zhihui (Criticizing Yu Dan: An orthodox interpretation of the Analects). In this book, they systematically scrutinize and deconstruct Yu’s reading through chapters such as “Yu Dan doesn’t deserve to be ‘a watcher of culture.’” These writers seek to deprecate and de-authorise Yu and her ideas. In the conclusion of their arguments, the authors also metaphorically describe Yu as Sudan Red, a poison. More dramatically, one Chinese netizen, in order to show his discontent, wore a T-shirt with the words, “Confucius is deeply worried,” when he disrupted a Yu Dan book promotion (Sohu News 2013).

Yu Dan and her Confucius have made many people feel uneasy and offended, and this sentiment is also prevalent among Chinese intellectuals and scholars. Gender is also a factor. To have a previously unknown female scholar unexpectedly intrude into the male-dominated scholarly discourse of Chinese national studies triggered discontent and jealousy among male scholars. For example, Professor Yi Zhongtian tried to tease Yu when he asked her, “Are you, beautiful women, also interested in Confucius?” “Beautiful woman” (meinü) is a popular phrase often used by young Chinese netizens to describe women, regardless of their appearance, stature, and age. Yi borrowed this phrase to emphasize Yu’s female identity, thus adding a gender perspective to the Yu Dan phenomenon. When Yu replied to Yi’s question, he responded, “What a smart little girl and what a brilliant response.” Through this condescending remark, Yi exposed his belief in masculine superiority. From Yi’s comments, to the labels given to Yu—such as “academic Super Girl,” “scholar beauty,” “cultural nanny,” and “spiritual nurse” (Wu 2009)—Yu's female status adds to the reasons why she is disliked in some academic and cultural circles.
Yu’s “unluckiness” stems from the fact that she is a female professor. However, while suffering from her female identity, Yu also uses it to her advantage. As she expressed in an interview, “Being on TV and having people see that a young woman could be so into Confucius was a very important tool for me” and, “I want to popularise Confucius; not to have him as someone elitist whom only older male scholars are interested in” (Interview with Yu Dan 2009). As Yu noted, Confucius’s “old man” and “conservative” image is deeply embedded in the Chinese people’s minds. Therefore, Yu’s casual and subtle reintroduction of Confucius and Confucianism from a contemporary young woman’s perspective has rejuvenated Confucian thought. In so doing, Yu strategically transferred her “inferior,” female label into a successful marketing device that has contributed significantly to her success.

In addition to her female identity, the other issue that has caused Yu Dan trouble is her popularity and success. Yu is financially well off and famous, and therefore stands in stark contrast to the majority of Chinese intellectuals. This has, I think, led to jealousy from her scholarly peers. In addition, many academics are angry with Yu for her exclusive possession of the national classics resources. According to them, Yu uses the dominant media platform (CCTV) to exploit traditional Chinese culture, which has led to her monopoly of this market. Furthermore, scholars’ criticism of Yu as being “the shallowest author,” and the judgement that “Chinese culture is at the brink of collapse” indicate that envy is one of the reasons behind personal attacks on Yu (Yu Dan zhizheng: wenhua fuhao haishi liyi boyi 2014).

Apart from personal discrimination and envy, Yu Dan’s Confucius invites questioning due to its “collaboration” with mainstream official ideology and its potential to harm public intellectuals and their function as social critics. The function, (not the content), of Confucianism, according to Yu’s interpretations of the Analects, is similar to the function of early Han dynasty Confucianism. The Wu emperor adopted Confucianism in order to help strengthen the regime’s rule and control the population. In contemporary China, the dominant social discourse is the creation of a harmonious society. Therefore, the resurgence of Confucianism appeals to mainstream ideology. According to Daniel Bell, Yu Dan’s account is “complacent, conservative, and supportive of the status quo” (Bell 2008, 174). The harshest of Yu’s critics in the mainland “compare her unfavourably to the ‘scholar-officials from the feudal society’ who were simply determined to uphold ‘the vestiges of the old society’” (Nylan and Thomas 2010, 221). As Guo Yingjie (2004, 74) states:

Confucianism has little to offer to Marxism, but it certainly has elements [to offer to others], including the concern for the affairs of the state and well-being of the people, the notion of great unity, loyalty to the ruler and love of country, and filial piety.

This correlation between Confucian thought and the official ideology is strengthened and probably exaggerated, especially when Confucius is heard through the dominant official media platform as described by an authority such as Yu Dan.

The movement to criticise Yu Dan reflects another concern that relates to the forfeiture of public intellectuals’ function as social critics. Using Confucian
thought, Yu encourages people to face misery without complaint and live introspectively. However, if everyone obeyed Yu's instruction, no one would criticise social injustice, work on behalf of injured parties, or question the government. Therefore, China's human rights and democratic progress would be postponed to an unknown future.

In summary, what Yu Dan has retrieved is precisely that which Lu Xun and his May Fourth peers were dedicated to removing, the habitual ways of thought and manners of the Chinese people as influenced by Confucian ideas and signified by a modest and compliant mentality. A central problem in Chinese culture has been the suppressing force that restricts people's ability to think against the grain, and limits their scepticism and criticism. Yu's book advocates for this suppressing force.

Related Discussion: A Celebrity Professor, the Media and the Commodification of Culture

Celebrity professor, Ji Lianhai (cited in Yu Dan zhizheng: wenhua fuhao haishi liyi boyi 2014), stated in an interview that “Lecture Room caters to the taste and satisfies the needs of the common people, and through this programme the masses have been familiarized with some traditional cultural classics.” From Ji's words, it is not difficult to discern that as a cultural commodity Chinese traditional classics have been tailored commercially to the demands of the audience. In the process of commodification that is intrinsic to the market economic system, literature and culture have to accommodate themselves to the demands of business and become consumable. The traditional literary and cultural classics, including the Analects, have significant potential for sale as cultural commodities. This commodification of the traditional cultural classics intertwines well with both the top-down instrumentalization of the Confucian discourse, making them a kind of cultural mascot for contemporary Chinese nationalism, and the bottom-up revival of popular Confucianism (such as the foundation of private schools in which Confucian ideas and behavioural manners are taught and practiced). The Yu Dan phenomenon fits well into both the official and popular Confucian discourses, which supports the argument that Confucian thought may not exist independently of an economic-political-social matrix in contemporary China.

Another Chinese scholar, Wu Zequan (2009, 8) also points out that:

In pursuit of profit, classics circulate broadly and rapidly on the market as a special cultural product. And in this so-called classics craze, the status and situation of the classics underwent dramatic alteration; they are no longer unattainable sacred masterworks but commodities which can be purchased with money. The commodification of culture is an indispensable part of a market economy, which it stimulates and improves.

Another distinctive trait of this fashionable trend of the commodification of culture is that it produces academic celebrities, adding another layer to the idiosyncratic classics cultural phenomenon. “Celebrity professor” is a new title that has emerged within Chinese culture in recent years, illustrating a new cultural phenomenon spawned by the intermarriage of cultural products, academics, and the media in the
era of mass culture. By adopting Confucianism for domestic consumption, mainland Chinese intellectuals not only reasserted the image of the “exemplary Confucian scholar,” but also gained a new position of discursive power as transmitters of the great cultural heritage (Song 2003, 98). By following Yu Dan and the Yu Dan phenomenon, many Chinese scholars and intellectuals have realised their potential celebrity status and have gradually moved from an unfavourable position in the periphery to the focal point of public attention. If the recreational reality show programme Super Girl, presented by Hunan satellite television, is the venue that generates artistic celebrities, Lecture Room correspondingly produces academic idols.

The mainstream media platform (CCTV) guarantees the popularity and eminence of celebrity professors, with significant social implications regarding the status of scholars and their relationship with the public. Along with gaining popularity, celebrity professors’ lectures become best-sellers, and the consequent book sales, news conferences, interviews, paid appearances and guest lectures all enhance their economic and social position. A report entitled “Why Confucius Matters Now: When Yu Dan Updated the Ancient Sage’s Teachings, She Didn't Expect to Sell 10 Million Copies—or to Anger Chinese Academics,” which was published in The Times on April 25, 2009 provides a glance into Yu Dan’s celebrity lifestyle:

The Beijing professor is a picture of petite perfection on a London hotel sofa, wearing what we might call Westernised Chinese Smart: a blindingly white designer tunic, precisely tousled hair, short black skirt and patent-leather ankle-boots. Only a snag down the knee of her tights leavens her impenetrable neatness.

As an expert in media studies, Yu Dan is familiar with the importance of the public impression she makes. “When Yu Dan faces the masses, she thinks more about how to please them than on how her ideas will affect them” (Wu 2009).

The celebrity professor phenomenon has changed the status of contemporary Chinese intellectuals by making them not only the manufacturers of knowledge and culture, but also the salespersons and brokers of this knowledge. During this transformation, contemporary Chinese scholars have moved away from the margins to the centre of the cultural stage of China. Yu Dan’s successful transformation from a professor to a celebrity has changed the traditional designation and connotation of knowledge production and circulation.

As another Chinese scholar, Zhang Min (2009) argues:

The powerful appeal of modern media has completely “fansified” the audiences without many exceptions; and the relationship between fans and idols has changed the structure and nature of the distribution of culture. The “idolization” of professors and the “fansification” of audiences, deviates from, and betrays the scientific spirit of knowledge. What the fans need is neither culture nor knowledge, and not even entertainment, but habit-like mental dependence on their idols.

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8 Super Girl was a famous idol selection programme aired by Hunan satellite television. It is very similar to American Idol in content. The show was cancelled because it challenged state ideology.
While the audiences are “fansified,” the scholars are being “starised” and “white-collarised.” Wang Dongcheng (2009) and Wang Junqi (2007) define the trend of the “white-collarisation” of contemporary Chinese intellectuals:

Along with the development of the Chinese economy and the expanding power of capital, the people and the intellectuals alike are drawn closer to capital and become more pragmatic and secular so that they can have a share of the feast of wealth. And for the intellectuals this means to some degree that they forfeit their function and responsibility as social critics. Yu Dan can be considered as one of the archetypes of these scholars who sacrifice their pursuit of freedom, democracy, and human rights in their effort to pursue profit.

Wang’s comments may be somewhat unfair to Yu, but his arguments about the deterioration of Chinese intellectuals are worth contemplating by every responsible and conscientious Chinese intellectual. From Confucius to Lu Xun, and from Li Ao to Wei Jingsheng and Liu Xiaobo, intellectuals courageously have shouldered the responsibility of honestly presenting facts to the public. However, the commodification of cultural products, and the appeal of wealth might be the greatest obstacles that contemporary Chinese intellectuals have to overcome in order to properly fulfill their duties.

**Conclusion**

Over the past decade, Yu Dan and her book *Confucius* have undoubtedly constituted one of the biggest and most thought-provoking cultural sensations in the socio-media sphere of China. They are representative products of the national studies craze and bear the marks of both top-down ideological instrumentalisation of the Confucian canon and Confucian discourse, and of bottom-up, popular Confucianism. The Yu Dan phenomenon exhibits a nuanced development in national studies, in particular with regard to the meaning of Confucian thought and learning in contemporary China. This signals a revival of the traditional Chinese cultural, philosophical, and moral heritage as relevant to modern Chinese society and helpful to contemporary Chinese people. However, the resurrection of ancient Chinese culture and thought that is embedded in the national studies craze engenders some new concerns and poses new threats in the political, social, and cultural domains. For example, the misalignment of the Confucian style “disciplined” and “loyal” gentleman and the competitive market economy is problematic, as these obedient and modest modern gentlemen and sages do

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9 Li Ao is a well-known contemporary Taiwanese liberal intellectual who was jailed for his critical and anti-government speeches and writing. Wei Jingsheng is a famous mainland liberal and radical figure who supports and promotes changes in the political system of mainland China. A political dissident, he spent eighteen years in prison and currently lives in exile. Liu Xiaobo was the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner and one of the most famous political dissidents of contemporary China. He was imprisoned for his participation in the June 4, 1989 democratic demonstration. After he was released in 1991, he lost his right to make public speeches in the PRC. In addition, he was monitored and subjected to residential surveillance (1995-1996) and was forced to receive reeducation through labour (1996-1999). Liu is currently serving an eleven-year sentence, handed down in 2009, in mainland China for the crime of inciting subversion of state political power.
not appreciate the democratic spirit that requires and promotes an independent personality that is capable of critical thinking, and indispensable for the progress of a democratic political reconfiguration. Therefore, they serve more as an obstacle than as catalyst in this political reconstruction. Moreover, the commodification of classics and the “white-collarisation” of intellectuals have the potential to further postpone the fundamental social and political transformation of contemporary China.

While this paper provides some preliminary observations and discussion about the concerns and problems associated with the national studies craze, there are still many critical questions that are left unanswered and require further study and research. For example, it will be interesting to see how far the Chinese interest in national learning and essence will go, and to what extent it will impede the remodelling of the Chinese tendency to strive for moral perfection and absolute virtue, attempts at which we have seen developed in different forms in the popular Confucian movements, such as those at Yidan xuetang and the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre. These questions of broad national interest will require more time before we can witness their resolution.

GLOSSARY

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