The cultural trends of China during the past three decades have so far manifested fast-shifting motifs. If 1980s can be called the decade of “culture fever” and 1990s the decade of “state learning,” it would not be too off the mark to call the first ten years of the 21st century as the decade of “Confucian revival.” This rather widespread and grassroots Confucian revival is different from Confucian scholarship, which as an integral part of the “state learning” fever has been a part of the intellectual landscape of China since the early 1990s. In defiance of Joseph R. Levenson’s (1968: ix-x) famous declaration that Confucianism had lost its initiative at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and Yu Yingshi’s (1998: 5) lamentation that Confucianism has become a “wandering ghost,” this quiet but steady revitalization of Confucianism as a living tradition was initiated at the grassroots and has made its way into national consciousness as it emerged as a fascinating cultural phenomenon in 21st century China.

The Confucian renaissance is evident in several different but interrelated movements: the campaign of “reading classics” (dujing), the revival of Confucian academies (shuyuan), and the resurgence of traditional Confucian rites (chuantongliyi), among other examples. Starting in the mid-1990s, the “reading classics” campaign has so far involved millions of school children across the nation, converging with the similar movement in Taiwan initiated by Wang Caigui about two decades ago. Although much controversy has emerged about the methods of the campaign and the values it promotes, the event itself reveals a popular zest to reconnect with the cultural heritage claimed for thousands of years.

The revival of Confucian academies (shuyuan) in recent years defies the tedious debate about whether or not Confucianism is a religion and is

---

1 Although the classics include some excerpts from Daoism, Buddhism and other traditions, they are predominantly Confucian.
quietly but steadily taking roots in the public consciousness. Closely modeling Song-Ming Neo-Confucian academies and essentially without official patronage, these newly established academies are strongly committed to a religious ambition: diachronically, to carry on *daotong* (the thread of the Dao) from the hands of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians; and synchronically, to ward off “heresies”—with Christianity being the most convenient candidate. Unlike traditional Confucian academies that were often stranded between the “private” and the “official,” the newly established Confucian academies are very conscious of their non-official, non-governmental role from the very beginning.

The more recent resurgence of traditional Confucian rites has only sporadically made its way into national news and has drawn less attention from the public, yet it testifies to a strong commitment to restoring Confucianism as a holistic tradition. Although traditionally Confucianism claimed to have possessed hundreds of rites to constitute the norms of society, nowadays we have witnessed the restoration of a few only of them, such as the worship of Confucius, the Confucian matrimonial ceremony, and the “pen-opening” ceremony (initiation into school age). In contrast to the state patronage of the sacrifice to the Yellow Emperor or other national ancestors, which undoubtedly ferments nationalistic sentiments, these newly restored rites are steadfastly trying to adhere to Confucian norms and to recruit loyal followers.

By surveying the varied manifestations of Confucianism as a living tradition from the grassroots, my chapter is intended to investigate the social mechanisms that give rise to this Confucian renaissance and what it means to a rapidly modernizing society where no single ideology can claim to have taken hold of public consciousness. It has been argued that, in order to regain its contemporary relevance, Confucianism has to be engaged in daily practices and to serve as a meaning system for society. It is in this sense that my chapter will provide a perspective for understanding how the Chinese people have striven to employ Confucianism to search for meaning and solidarity in post-Confucian times.

The Campaign for Reciting Confucian Classics

The campaign for reciting Confucian classics has come into public consciousness in recent years and has been involved in recurrent controversies. The campaign was formally initiated on mainland China in 1993 by Wang Caigui, a disciple of the late New Confucian scholar Mou Zongsan.