I was silent. Above my roof like a conscience. In the mornings, I took a cup of coffee outside and listened to the wakeup sounds next door: the brush of a broom across the flagstones, the squeak of a faucet, the hectoring of the magpie overhead. I had survived. Confucius, who was born 2,557th birthday by unveiling what they called a "standardized" portrait: a kindly old figure with a lustrous beard, his hands crossed at his chest. The Chinese Association for the Study of Confucius, supported by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, introduced traditions that had never existed before. It arranged for couples to renew their wedding vows in front of a statue of the sage.

As a gentler alternative to Mao, Confucius has been enlisted as an avatar on the world stage. The opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics made no mention of the Chairman but featured recurring references to harmony and to the classics. In the past decade, China has opened more than four hundred Confucius Institutes around the world to teach language, culture, and history. Many universities have welcomed them—the program provides teaching materials and cash. In 2006, a team of government-backed historians marked Confucius' birthyear by writing a book, "Confucius from the Heart," that is said to have sold ten million copies. Today, she occupies a position in Chinese pop culture somewhere between Bernard-Henri Lévy and Dr. Phil. She plays down themes that iritate modern readers—such as Confucius' observation that "women and small people are hard to deal with"—and writes reassuringly, "The truths that Confucius gives us are always the easiest of truths." Scholars mock her work—one critic signed book signings in a T-shirt that read "Confucius is deeply worried"—but within a year Yu became the second-highest-paid author in China, after Guo Jingming, a writer of young-adult fiction who travelled with guards to hold back the crowds.

At Yu Dan's headquarters in Beijing, a suite of offices on a high floor at the edge of the campus, her assistant ushered me into a modern conference room. Yu Dan arrived, smiling broadly, and asked the assistant, "Yu Dan, this is Guo Qiang, my lawyer, and my assistant." She precribed, "The Real Thing," with a writer of young-adult fiction who travelled with guards to hold back the crowds.

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classics. She said that, like others her age, she had grown up1 denouncing the 
another era. "When I began to reac-
upfensive Confucius from the Heart, a lot 
People asked, "Why are you writing 
I said, I am astoning for the 
I thought of my generation, because we 
we and I criticized him mercilessly."

She paused, and turned her atten-
cion to the assistant director. "Child, how could you be so stupid?" Yu said. "This tea has been steeping for too long!" She looked at me, and the smile returned. "Children today do not know how to make tea."

After Yu became popular, the Party in-
vited her to conferences, and she began 
itive government, but his reforms threatened other 
oficials, and as legend has it, he 
cepted a plan to drive him out. They 
sent his superior eighty beautiful girls, 
who succeeded in occupying the boss so 
ther he disappeared for three days and had to 
leave. Humiliated, Confucius began 
travelling about the country, pointing 
out abuses. He met a woman whose 
husband and son had been eaten by ti-
gers, and he told his disciples, "An op-
pressive government is more terrible than tigers."

Confucius was so radical that a fellow-age, Laozi (said to be the 
founder of Taoism), warned him against 
"all this huffing and puffing, as though 
you were carrying a big drum and 
searching for a lost child." To Confu-
cius, Laozi was a companion in 
formity. It required loyalty.

A country at war, he said, when a prince 
believes that "the only joy in being a 
prince is that no one opposes what one 
does.""Warlords ignored him or tried to 
tell him li

Confucius never imagined that 
he would become an icon. "He liked con-
versations. They helped him think, but 
he never expected anyone to write them 
down," the historian Ann ping Chin ob-
served, in "The Authentic Confucius: A 
Life of Thought and Politics" (2007). 
Confucius did not wish to have his 
works end up as rules," she wrote, 
because "he loved the idea of being human. 
He loved the entirely private journey of 
finding what was right and feasible 
among life's many variables."

After thirteen years of wandering, 
Confucius returned home to his books, 
and he died, in his seventies, convinced 
that a fellow-sage, Laozi (said to be the 
founder of Taoism) had become an icon. 
"Laozi followed a regular schedule: every hour, 
the daily musical shows, but in the 
later the student leader of the propa-
ganda Department, and he had a mind 
clearer. Before being posted to run the 
temple, he had spent most of his career 
in the research office of the city's Propa-
ganda Department."

"This show has attracted people 
who are familiar with the classics.

Wu had succeeded in making the 
Confucius Temple into his own com-
munity theatre, and he was savouring 
his role. "In junior middle school, I was al-
ways the student leader of the propa-
ganda section of the student council," he 
said. "I love reading aloud, and music 
and art. In my spare time, I still did 
cross-talk comedy routines, the 
Chinese version of standup. He had plans for 
the temple's future. "We're building a 
new building that will have ceramic statues of 
the Confucius and the Communist Party. A pamphlet 
explained that it conveyed the "harmon-
ous ideology and harmonious society 
of the ancient people, which will have a 
positive influence on the construction of 
modern harmonious society."

I read the book that Wu gave me, 
and the depth of detail about ancient 
events was impressive: it recorded who 
planted trees on the temple grounds 
seven hundred years ago. But it 
was conspicuously silent on other mat-
ters, including the years between 1905 
and 1981. In the official history of the 
Confucius Temple, most of the twenti-
hith century was left blank.

During my time in China, I had 
early understood that renderings of his 
time came with holes, like the dropsouts in 
aud with a recording when the music 
goes silent and resumes if nothing 
had happened. Some of those edits 
were ordained from above: for years the 
people had been barred from discussing 
the crackdown at Tiananmen Square or 
the famine of the Great Leap Forward, 
which took between thirty million and 
fifty-four million lives, because the 
Party had never repudiated or accepted 
responsibility for those events. Ordinary 
Chinese had few choices: some accepted 
the forgetting, because they were too 
determined to get on with their lives; 
some raged against it, but lacked the 
political means to resist.

There were other books about 
the Confucius Temple, and these filled 
in the blanks—especially about the 
night of August 23, 1966, during the 
edition of the Cultural Revolution.

The order to "Smash the Four Olds" had 
devolved into a chaotic assault on 
authority of all kinds. That afternoon, a group 
of Red Guards summoned one of Chi-
a's most famous writers, Lao She, 
to the temple's front gate.

Lao She was sixty-seven and one 
of China's best hopes for the Nobel Prize in 
Literature. He had grown up not far 
from the temple, in poverty, the son of 
an imperial guard who died in battle 
against foreign armies. In 1924, he went 
to London and stayed for five years,
lived near Bloomsbury and reading
a young rickshaw puller whose encoun-
1936, he wrote
selfish, hapless product of
America, for more than three years—on
a sick
Manhattan's
came to Beijing what Victor Hugo was
ist."