

Kang Youwei: The Trans-Historical Kongjiao Movement and Confucian Universalism

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Abstract: There are two overarching themes that run through Kang Youwei's writings: the reform of laws as a means to save China, and the concept of "Datong Shijie (大同世界)". In his response to the profound transformations taking place in the world, which he referred to as the "unprecedented changes of three thousand years," Kang Youwei sought to adapt traditional Confucian teachings (jingxue) and other conventional ideologies. However, his ambitious endeavor to establish a Confucian national cult ultimately met with failure. The academic community has long held divergent views on Kang Youwei. While his early ideas and efforts to reform the legal system are generally viewed positively, his later ideas supporting monarchy are often dismissed. This paper analyzes Kang Youwei's thought and the formation and inclination of the concept of Datong, as well as its interconnections with the Kongjiao movement. It can be concluded that the lack of historical precedent for establishing Kongjiao as a system in China and people's apprehensions about the potential political implications of Kongjiao led to the failure of Kang Youwei's reform movement. Moreover, Kang Youwei's advocacy of Datong through the establishment of Kongjiao failed to resonate with the literati of that time. Undeniably, there is a possibility that Kongjiao could become a new locus of power outside imperial authority.

Keywords: Kongjiao movement, Confucian universalism, Kang Youwei

1. Introduction

Kang Youwei's intellectual stance can be best characterized as both radical and conservative, which has caused confusion among historians. As aptly noted by Fredric Wakeman, "Kang is the most intriguing - if seemingly inconsistent - Chinese intellectual [1]." In broad terms, the study of Kang Youwei can be categorized into three main orientations:

First, those with a communist perspective focus on examining *Datongshu* (大同书), exploring the origins of modern idealistic communist or utopian thought. They emphasize the radical and revolutionary nature of these ideas, their unfinished ideological mission, as well as their inherent limitations.

Second, the reformist school centers around Kang's works such as *Examination of the False Scriptures of the New School*, *Examination of the Reform of Confucius*, and the *Spring and Autumn Study of Dong*. This approach explores the pursuit of modern change in China and its failures, placing

emphasis on the essence of reform. It views Kang's writings as reflections of a specific historical context intertwined with the ancient traditions of radical reformation, indicative of an ideology unable to transcend its historical constraints.

Third, cultural conservatism focuses on Kang Youwei's endeavors to reinterpret classical texts and establish Confucianism in response to the wave of radical republican revolutions that followed the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform. This perspective delves into Kang's thoughts on scripture and his commitment to preserving cultural traditions.

This paper examines the historical groundwork that laid the foundation for the concept of Datong, explores the universal inclination inherent in the Datong Idea, and analyzes the interconnections between the Kongjiao movement and the concept of Datong, thus helping to gain a comprehensive understanding of Kang Youwei's thought.

2. Historical Basis for the Formation of the Concept of Datong

Kang Youwei firmly believed that the fundamental principle of Confucianism resided in the concept of "ren (仁)", or "humaneness" [2]. To him, "ren" encompassed a compassionate mindset, similar to that of Buddhism, where one couldn't bear witness to the suffering of others and the world. Drawing inspiration from Mencius and Wang Yangming, Kang asserted that human nature inherently possessed goodness, as every individual possessed "ren". He regarded "ren" as a virtue bestowed by Heaven, citing a passage from Dong that affirmed, "Man receives his mandate from Heaven. He takes 'ren' from Heaven and thus becomes a man of 'ren'... 'ren' is the mind of Heaven." In Kang's view, "ren" provided the means for humans to achieve unity with Heaven. In his work, *Datongshu*, he expressed that "ren" meant "forming one body with all things," and that when the boundaries between oneself and others dissolved, when all things melded into one, and when compassion awakened, then one had discovered the shortcut to "ren".

Undoubtedly, nineteenth-century China and the wider world were characterized by social suffering, wars, and intense international rivalries. It was a world that lacked the Confucian virtue of "ren". During this period, China underwent a "great change not seen in thousands of years." The turning point came with the Opium War of 1840, which brought this realization to the Chinese people. Kang Youwei's (1858-1927) breakthrough was to analyze and articulate another type of monumental change, namely, the eruption of the republican revolution, the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, and the establishment of the first Asian republic. From Kang's perspective, the republican revolution represented an unprecedented transformation, surpassing the changes brought about by the Great Powers. He placed great emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of this revolution: it encompassed a simultaneous upheaval at both the cultural and political levels, challenging the deeply-rooted imperial rule and its associated cultural foundations that had endured for thousands of years. Unlike previous revolutions, it went beyond simply excluding the Manchurian rulers; instead, it aimed to revolutionize the entire Manchurian dynasty and dismantle the entire imperial system with its cultural underpinnings.

Understanding these aspects helps shed light on why Kang Youwei advocated for the revival of Confucianism. During that time, Confucianism faced significant challenges in terms of its motivation and meaning. China was grappling with political and religious decay, as well as internal and external struggles [3].

3. Universal Inclination Inherent in the Concept of Datong

While engaging in the practice of national transformation, Kang Youwei consistently focused on another, more distant question: the concept of Datong, or how to overcome the boundaries of nations and create a universal world. Starting around 1884, he explored the principles of geometry and

astronomy, discussing “basic principles” and “basic laws.” This culminated in the extensive writing and revision of the book *Datongshu* and continued throughout his life with his later work, *Zhutianjiang*, which involved contemplation on the concept of Datong in the context of the world and even the universe.

In the *Datong shu*, Kang Youwei imbued “ren” with profound cosmic and historical significance. Similar to the concept of the spirit in Hegelian philosophy, Kang believed that “ren” evolves and matures progressively, advancing to higher stages of development throughout history. Utilizing the doctrine of the Three Ages, Kang envisioned history as a journey from the tumultuous Age of Disorder, through the transformative Age of Approaching Peace, ultimately culminating in the harmonious Age of Universal Peace.

Within this historical progression towards the Age of Universal Peace, “ren” gradually and steadily eliminates the boundaries that hinder humanity from attaining the utopia of Datong. These boundaries encompass various aspects, such as social class, gender, race, and nationality. In Kang’s utopian vision [4], social structures, including the traditional family unit, will dissolve, and their functions will be taken over by public institutions. Women will achieve absolute equality with men in political, economic, and social spheres. Nation-states will wither away, giving way to a global governance system comprising representatives from all corners of the world. Kang’s utopian society will witness material abundance and abolish the existence of social classes, eradicating both private property and poverty. Significantly, Kang Youwei held the firm belief that within the construct of Datong, the concept of nation-state sovereignty served as the underlying catalyst for turmoil. He adamantly opposed the capitalist political framework built upon the notion of nation-states, which historically originated from the dominance of maritime military power. Instead, he embraced a universalist perspective firmly rooted in the principles of Datong.

Kang Youwei actively engaged in nation-building while also dedicating his efforts to overcoming the consequences of the nation-state. This paradoxical motivation stems primarily from Kang’s assessment of the “great changes not seen in three thousand years.” Kang believed that this unprecedented shift required the overturning of old paradigms and the exploration of solutions beyond the scope of the nation-state and its historical context.

In 1864, the first complete translation of “International Law” into Chinese was presented to the Chinese people through the hands of missionaries. The title “Public Law (wanguogongfa)” clearly conveyed the following messages to people: Firstly, “public law” is a universal principle that transcends Chinese etiquette, regulations, and principles. Secondly, the Confucian classics that were long regarded as the “law for all generations” and their associated ceremonial norms are outdated, inapplicable, and lack universal value as regional knowledge. Thirdly, in order to be included in the “world,” “China” must abide by this universal public law rather than the Confucian “law for all generations.”

Therefore, it can be argued that the late Qing Confucian universalism originated not so much from the expansion of the empire, but rather from a tension that arose from an inability to grasp the distinction between the “external” and the “internal” (often expressed as the “external” permeating the “internal”). There was a concern that the “law for all generations” would transform into “local knowledge.” Without a comprehensive understanding of China’s geography, institutions, economy, culture, and other aspects, without recognizing non-Confucian books, knowledge, and beliefs, and without a clear understanding of the “external,” there would be no driving force for the reconstruction of Confucian universalism. Kang Youwei attributed the new dynamics of the 19th century to a transition from an era of centralization to an era of competing nations, and the distinctive characteristic of Confucian universalism was to overcome the era of “nations” and reconstruct a “centralized” system on another level.

It is worth noting in this context that the cultural consequences of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement encompass two aspects. Firstly, it created or disseminated a new universalistic knowledge that opposed Confucian universalism. Secondly, with its immense mobilizing power, it reintroduced the necessity of distinguishing between “internal/external” and “barbarians/Chinese.” In essence, it challenged the imperial political system within the framework of a quasi-nationalistic orientation based on the universalistic framework of the worship of God, shaking the foundations of Confucian “law for all generations” like never before. During the late Qing period, nationalism and republican politics went hand in hand, not only undermining the ruling foundation of the Qing Dynasty but also posing an unprecedented challenge to the political system and its value system that had endured for over two thousand years. If a framework that could accommodate this “global knowledge” within Confucianism cannot be found, and if a blueprint for transformative change based on this new Confucian universalism cannot be designed, Confucianism will inevitably face decline, and China will have no means of revitalization.

The logic of “Datong” provides a critical examination of the state, tracing its evolution from traditional society to its current form, and ultimately envisioning its transformation into “Datong.” Thus, the pursuit of surpassing the state necessitates its own premises within the state itself. “Datong” embodies a blend of tension and contradiction, transcending both the logic of “Datong” and the logic of prosperity and strength. It exists as a prolonged amalgamation of entanglement, contradiction, and disconnection between the post-ethnic-nationalistic logic of “Datong” and the aspiration for prosperity in building a formidable nation. This intricate interplay sets the fundamental tone of Kang Youwei’s ideology.

In the late Qing era, Confucian universalism extended its focus beyond the plight of China and encompassed the broader concept of “world governance.” Its realization does not follow a linear historical trajectory; instead, it necessitates a non-historical approach - the establishment of a new national cult (lijiao) - to reconstruct the relation between China and the world, as well as between China and tradition. This reconstruction essentially involves manufacturing tradition in order to reshape its historical path. Consequently, whether discussing the principles and institutions of “Datong” within the framework of cosmology or exploring the mandate of Confucius to govern the world, there is an inherent impetus to transcend the confines of historical progression and establish a new order.

The endeavor to transform Confucianism into a religion finds theoretical justification. In fact, Liang Qichao, in 1901, referred to his teacher as a “religionist” who, in reviving Confucianism to its authentic state, assumed the role of the “Martin Luther of the Confucian religion.” Scholars such as Tu Weiming and Rodney Taylor contended that Confucianism can be perceived not only as a rationalistic philosophy or ethical system but also as a religious tradition with the integration of the self and Heaven as its central focus [5,6].

Rodney argued that the religious aspect of Confucianism revolves around the Confucian understanding of “Tian”, a term denoting “Heaven”, the revered deity of the early Chou people [6]. This religious essence lies in the relationship between humankind and Heaven. Contrary to the claim that Heaven is merely an abstract philosophical absolute devoid of religious significance, in Classical Confucian tradition, it serves as a religious authority or absolute, often embracing theistic portrayals. In later Neo-Confucianism, Heaven, or the principle of Heaven known as Tian-li, also functions as a religious authority or absolute, frequently adopting a monistic structure.

Tu posited that individuals can attain their intrinsic humanity and unite with Heaven through the contemplation of the Tao or Principle of Heaven [5]. This process of transformation and self-improvement extends to the family, society, and the universe, aiming to establish a harmonious fiduciary community, as coined by Tu.

Kang believed that Confucianism held a universal truth for humanity. Through his New Text interpretation of Confucianism, Kang formulated a new vision of modernity not only for China but also for the entire world. Crucially, this Confucian modernity represents the pinnacle of moral progress for humanity, as “ren”, the virtue of benevolence, reaches its fulfillment when individuals transcend their selfishness and greed, achieving unity with “all under Heaven.”

Furthermore, the movement aimed to replace the “Son of Heaven” with Confucius as the emblem of the Chinese nation. It portrays Confucius as the progenitor of the sacred institutions or traditions that define Chinese civilization. Kang embraced the interpretations of Dong Zongshu and other proponents of the New Text school who utilized the “esoteric passages” of the Gongyang Commentary to construct a divine image of Confucius as an uncrowned king or a Prophet of Heaven. However, Kang’s endorsement of Gongyang’s portrayal of Confucius as the transcendental sage should not be solely interpreted as a means to legitimize his political reforms. Like other advocates of the New Text movement, Kang regarded Confucius as the messianic Prophet who unveiled the true teachings of Heaven to humanity.

Kang Youwei’s Confucian universalism is established within the framework of cosmology and essentialism, distinguishing it from earlier forms of Confucianism. It can be considered a supra-historical theory of the relationship between Heaven and man. Kang Youwei sought to find a perspective beyond the issue of “China” to contemplate the relationship between “China” and the world. His approach involved integrating knowledge from geometry and geography with Buddhist worldviews, categorizing the manifold sufferings of the world and overlooking historical causal relationships. By equating natural disasters and social afflictions as fundamental features of humanity and the world, the mission to save China and humanity became not just a national endeavor or globalist mission, but also a tenet of universal religion.

From the perspective of establishing a Confucius religion, Kang Youwei’s theories of reform and centralization had significance beyond the nation-state and imperial authority itself. From the standpoint of reform, the concept of “China” itself carries the meaning of “Datong.” “China” is not merely an ethno-national state or empire but a symbol and carrier of culture. The conflict between China and Western powers is not only an ordinary clash between nations but also a clash of cultural norms, namely the clash between the Way of the Sage-King and hegemonic dominance. The salvation of China, in this sense, encompasses a cultural commitment - overcoming European hegemonism dressed up as universalism and upholding the principles of Confucian universalism. The latter serves as not only the foundation of China’s rituals and laws but also the foundation of rituals and laws for the world.

The absolute monarchy revered by Kang Youwei is not that of historical emperors, but that of Confucius. The sacredness of the royal position he advocates stems from the sacredness of the rituals and systems established by Confucius. On one hand, the Six Classics are attributed to Confucius, and on the other hand, they are organized around the ritual and music system, elevating the sacredness of the ritual and music system above any actual political power. In other words, Kang Youwei restored the sacredness of monarchy by venerating Confucius as the sole spiritual leader, yet this restoration still rests on the primacy of ritual and system. This narrative not only reflects a historical concept and political implications of undivided monarchy, centralized imperial power, and the unification of China but also needs to be understood within the broad concept of “China” mentioned earlier.

The era of competing feudal lords and the disputes among various philosophers in the pre-Qin period can be metaphorically related to the rise of nations and the clash of civilizations in the colonial era. The relationship between unification and feudalism can not only explain the situation of the simultaneous rise of philosophers but can also be applied to the description of foreign religious doctrines. Therefore, one of the important enemies that the revival of Confucianism confronts is Christianity.

Kang's reinvention of Confucianism as a religious-cultural system served two primary purposes: firstly, to safeguard the indigenous faith (baojiao) and secondly, to contend with Christianity for the allegiance of the Chinese people. Kang viewed Christianity as a significant threat, particularly due to its association with imperialism. He believed that Christianity and Western imperialism were mutually reinforcing, as they both intruded upon non-Western societies.

The Kongjiao movement aimed to harness Christianity's institutional strength while replacing its theological content with Confucianism. This approach was adopted because the teachings of Confucius embody the sole unifying force in a fragmented and chaotic world. Liang Qichao highlights Kang's belief that the Chinese population lacked civic virtues (gongde), resulting in a spiritual disunity that impeded their ability to thrive in the world. Consequently, Kang sought to foster unity among the people. Recognizing that without a symbol that resonated with the entire nation, emotional solidarity and the nurturing of their innate potential would be unattainable. Therefore, the revitalization of Kongjiao became Kang's utmost priority.

4. Interconnections Between the Kongjiao Movement and the Concept of Datong

Nevertheless, both the concepts and endeavors of Kang Youwei ultimately met with failure. This failure can be attributed to the lack of historical precedent for establishing Kongjiao as a system in China. The concerns and apprehensions of the people regarding the potential political implications of Kongjiao were significant contributing factors to the failure of Kang Youwei's Reform Movement of 1898. Additionally, Kang Youwei's advocacy of Datong through the establishment of Kongjiao failed to resonate with the literati of that time. The argument that Kongjiao could serve as a counterforce against the influence of Western religions fails to address the possibility that Kongjiao itself could become a new locus of power outside imperial authority.

Among the post-May Fourth generation and radical revolutionaries, Kang Youwei's attempt to foster national unity through a religious transformation of Confucianism was seen as a clear failure of cultural nationalism, futilely attempting to preserve "outdated traditions" in the face of the seemingly overwhelming pressure for change emanating from the supposedly "advanced and superior" Western civilization.

However, Kang Youwei's response to the republican revolution entailed a willingness to absorb and integrate global experiences while choosing a path of change on his own. Therefore, it would be incorrect to simply categorize Kang Youwei's approach as "conservatism." What we witnessed in Kang Youwei was the enduring influence of Confucianism in the intellectual landscape of Chinese society.

5. Conclusion

Kang Youwei's concept of Datong serves as an interpretation of the human condition, deriving its foundation and development from the universality of the concept of "China." The notion of "China" presupposes the idea of Tianxia (All Under Heaven), where Confucian universalism goes beyond the limitations of specific regions, ethnicities, or dynasties, transcending the laws and political systems of any particular era. Through the lens of Tianxia or Datong, Kang Youwei reconstructs political institutions, laws, and customs from various historical periods, making the vision of a Datong world a reimagining of China itself. In the Wuxu era, Kang Youwei boldly challenged the centuries-old false classics and counterfeit knowledge with his theory of Confucius as the originator of a new doctrine. His non-historical or supra-historical stance aptly responded to the unprecedented transformation of three thousand years, infusing his strong nationalism with a passion that extended beyond the confines of the nation and universalism that went beyond any particular cultural discourse. We can perceive the theories of reform and institutional change as possessing an atmosphere of

religious revolution. However, in the new context following the establishment of the republic, Kang Youwei's efforts to establish Confucianism as the state religion lost the fervor present in his earlier works, where Confucius stood as the founder. Those revolutionaries who embraced the ideal of Datong shed the external trappings of Confucianism and adopted an inclusive stance that encompassed all, embarking on a non-religious religious revolution and a supra-historical historical movement within the realm of popular politics. Meanwhile, Kang Youwei transformed from a supra-historical figure into a historical one, continuing to place his hopes in a monarchy that had long lost its vitality and a Kongjiao that had no solid foundation. The brilliance of establishing Kongjiao was overshadowed by restorationist practices, awaiting rediscovery and exploration by future generations. History inevitably propels the arrival of non-historical moments, which also serve as opportunities for history to unfold anew. If indeed the Confucian universalism that Kang Youwei envisioned exists, it will eventually emerge in a nameless and formless universalism at some historical/non-historical juncture.

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