

## BOOK REVIEW

*Confucian Concord: Reform, Utopia and Global Teleology in Kang Youwei's Datong Shu*. Federico Brusadelli. Leiden : Brill, 2020. Pp.197. Hardback \*, ISBN: 978-90-04-43444-8



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*Confucian Concord: Reform, Utopia and Global Teleology in Kang Youwei's Datong Shu* analyses the thought of the late Qing reformer Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927). His well-known *Datongshu* 大同書 (*Great Concord*), conceived in 1884 and finally published in 1935, functions as a prism. The research interest of Federico Brusadelli, Lecturer in Chinese History at the University of Naples L'Orientale, reaches beyond Kang's thought to the production of histories and their political relevance in the two last centuries. The author presents the *Great Concord* as an early “global history” in which Kang developed his vision of the whole world's past, present and future. That future would ultimately lead to the Age of Great Concord (*Datong* 大同) or Supreme Equality (*Taiping* 太平), characterized by social stability and individual equality for everybody.

Brusadelli's two major claims are: first, that Kang's *Great Concord* is profoundly rooted in Chinese intellectual trends and not primarily a response to the shock of Western intrusion; and second, that *Datongshu* is not some extreme, utopian fantasy but largely consistent with Kang's other political writings. The combined claim is then that *Great Concord* is an important reflection on Chinese modernity. Brusadelli's study convincingly challenges and replaces the once dominant default narrative of “traditional China” facing “modernity”—conceived as inherently Western—when forcefully confronted by a superior culture. The portrayal of the West as the sole protagonist is no longer convincing nor fruitful. Kang's *Datongshu* is, on the one hand, profoundly inspired by a wide variety of predominantly indigenous ideas and, on the other hand, very influential in currently lively reflections on China's global role. Like in Kang's time, China stands again at a critical turning point defining its identity and role in the world. From the perspective of this long tradition, the twentieth century with its Western dominance and successive revolutions, appears no more than one episode.

Brusadelli's argument, covering two millennia of intellectual history, is divided into three main parts and subdivided into eight chapters: the *Datongshu*'s “Roots” or sources of inspiration (Classicism, Buddhism, and the West), followed by some of its main lines of interest or “Threads” (Nation, Democracy, and

Socialism), and leading to its “Legacies” in the last two centuries (Mao Zedong in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the booming political reflection in the third millennium).

The first Part, “Roots,” begins with a chapter on Kang’s Confucian or rather Classicist (Ru 儒) inspiration. It traces these roots to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) of Lu (722 to 481 BCE) attributed to the Master, via the Gongyang transmission to the *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露, which Kang unreservedly attributed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (195–105 BCE), the well-known advisor of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 140–87 BCE). After Dong’s Eastern Han commentator He Xiu 何休 (129–182) followed a low tide for the Gongyang tradition. It revived in the eighteenth-century New Text scholarship of the Jiangnan region, eventually finding its way to Guangzhou where Kang Youwei lived. One fascinating characteristic of this intellectual genealogy is that it shows how Kang Youwei’s optimistic and linear vision of historical progress gradually came into being over the centuries and was not suddenly imposed from outside. Another interesting point is that throughout history Gongyang scholarship supported very different political positions: the central court during the Han, more local power in the late Qing Jiangnan region, and a strong bureaucratic state at the turn of the twentieth century.

These Classicist roots are not only presented in this first chapter, but also recur in the rest of the monograph, demonstrating the “internal Chinese dynamics (both local and central) [that] were at play long before the so-called Western shock, and were subsequently merged into the later confrontation with—and importation of—foreign concepts and theories” (pp. 39–40). Other than Ru elements were also sources of inspiration for Kang. Chapter 2 explores the undeniable Buddhist influence, more particularly of Huayan 華嚴, and to a lesser extent Tiantai 天臺 and Chan 禪. Examples are Kang’s meditation practices, his deep sense of suffering, his vision of the universal connection of everything, the syncretic vision on all Buddhist teaching, and his promotion of vegetarianism, to name only some. Chapter 3 identifies equally undeniable instances of Western influence, often indirectly, since Kang did not have a talent for languages. From the West (often via Japan) came such notions as scientific development and technical advancements, a stress on material wellbeing, and models for state-building. Other contemporaries, such as Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), were more interested in Social Darwinism than was Kang.

While Part I beautifully traces the wide variety of Kang’s intellectual roots, I wonder how clearly Buddhist notions can be distinguished from Ru trends from at least the Song dynasty onward. More profoundly, I also suspect that Brusadelli may have failed to give Mohism its due recognition. It seems to me—admittedly a Mozi 墨子 scholar—that ideas first encountered in the *Mozi* or explicitly attributed to him in pre-Han texts, played a larger role than they receive in this and most other Kang Youwei studies. At the very least, the *Liji*’s 禮記 “Liyun” 禮運 chapter that played such a crucial role in the notion of Great

Concord, can hardly be disconnected from Mohist thought. Lee Ting-mien has moreover argued that Kang's plea for a Confucian religion would not have been possible without the detour via Mohism.<sup>1</sup> Even though fused with Ru ideas much earlier than Buddhism, I would suggest that the Mohist roots of Kang's thought still await to be explored.

Part II, "Threads," begins with the burning issue of the nation during Kang's lifetime. Two important insights concern his multi-ethnic vision of a nation and his insistence on the right timing. As for the former, Kang was all in favor of a strong, centralized, and well-functioning nation, but in the sense of a political entity, a State that would preserve Chinese culture. He did not support the construction of a nation as an entity determined by one nationality (e.g. Han), ethnicity, or race. As opposed to several revolutionary contemporaries, he defended a multi-ethnic constitutional monarchy that protected all the nationalities constituting the Qing empire. It is therefore not clear to me why at one point Brusadelli attributes an anti-Manchu stance to Kang (p. 92). The second major insight, namely into the importance of timing, is inspired by the fact that this particular monarchy and, more specifically, Kang's support for the Imperial system does not always seem to square well with his ideal of a peaceful and united global government without any border, the Great Concord. Here, Brusadelli reminds the reader that in Kang's eyes, the final age had to be preceded by the Age of Comfort (*xiaokang* 小康). This was also the stage at which China could benefit from the support of a Confucian religion. It could not be simply skipped.

The second "thread," chapter 5, focuses on the notion of democracy which was more closely associated with the republican ideal than with the imperial system. Kang, however, dreamed of a totally bottom-up constituted government for the whole world, a "global imperial democracy." Through a multi-layered institutional system, all citizens would be united by the ideal of public-mindedness (*gong* 公). "The new global government, acting *for* the people and *by* the people, will embody the triumph of *gong* against the centrifugal forces of *si* [私]" (p. 109). Kang points out that for democracy to flourish, the sovereign's head must be (symbolically) cut off (p. 113), an idea that strongly resonates in my mind with the metaphor used later by the political philosopher Claude Lefort (1924–2010) when insisting on an "empty place" in politics. Even though in principle not opposed to a Republic and while aiming at a global democracy, Kang was convinced that the time was not ripe yet and that the Chinese people needed more practice. Hence, again, the importance of timing. Rather than identifying countries and cultures with essential characteristics, he tended to range them as differing in their pace toward the same ideal of Great Concord.

The third and last "thread" turns to economic issues and focuses on Kang's vision of socialism. Like many contemporary intellectuals, Kang was concerned about increasing social inequality which, in imperial China, was caused by the fact that people could buy and sell land, a problem that, according to him,

the well-field system had tried to remedy. Kang's solution for his time was a centrally dictated public-minded policy allowing for local autonomy, first on a national scale in the Age of Comfort and later on a global level in the Age of Great Concord. Whether in matters of agriculture, commerce, or industry, the aim was to abolish inequality and poverty, as well as waste and environmental damage. Inspired by his initial determination to get rid of all types of boundaries—between sexes, races, species, classes, nations, etc.—Kang's proposals were sometimes strikingly similar to what the communist regime would implement half a century later.

Part III, "Legacies," contains two chapters reflecting on references to Kang's thought in later generations. Chapter 7 focuses upon the often-discussed connection between Kang and Mao Zedong. Due to his support for the imperial system, including the attempted restoration in 1917, Kang's reform proposals were characterized as reactionary during the "revolutionary" era reaching from the Xinhai revolution and the May Fourth revolts to the communist regime and its Cultural Revolution. Preceding the Open-up and Reform period, this portrayal of Kang may have seemed in stark contrast with the herald of continuous revolution, Mao Zedong. Despite this and other differences—Kang promoted peace, not struggle—the ideal of Great Concord was on Mao's mind as early as 1917. He, moreover, claimed to have succeeded where Kang had failed. Similarities with Kang's ideal of a society without families or private property, and with the State's central planning from cradle to grave, cannot but remind one of Mao's communes.

The last chapter shows how lively and varied Kang's inspiration has become in the last decades. The new left intellectual Wang Hui 汪晖 (°1959) turns to Kang's work in order to rethink the neo-liberal notion of modernity shaped by capitalism. Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳 (°1961) wants to expand the model of *tianxia* 天下 to the whole world in a sort of revived Confucian universalism. Gan Chunsong 干春松 (°1965), finally, focuses on China as a nation supported by a state religion. His New Kanghaiism attributes to Kang Youwei the promotion of a specific Chinese identity. These three thinkers and the surrounding debates illustrate how the rehabilitation of the reformer Kang also inspires a wide variety of political views, predominantly in indigenous terms. They may not agree on a vision for China and its role in the world, but they share a rekindled appreciation of the cultural heritage that was temporarily cast aside.

This summary fails to do justice to the wealth of information and insights of Brusadelli's monograph. His work is equally impressive in two overlapping fields of research, namely Sinology and Intellectual History. Scholars in the former field are treated by a very well-documented and illuminating overview of Kang's thought from its earliest roots to its current legacy, thus spanning a period of more than twenty centuries. For the latter, Kang and his age are placed in a global context of what Jürgen Osterhammel has called the "long 19<sup>th</sup> century" of nation building, democratization, bureaucratization, and the emerging welfare state.<sup>2</sup>

Brusadelli's outstanding book is therefore not just about the *Datongshu*, nor Kang Youwei nor China, but about the world and our perception of its history. It will inspire academic interest and debates within and beyond the field of Chinese Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Ting-mien. 2020. "The Role of Mohism in Kang Youwei's Arguments for His New-Text Theory of Confucianism." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 19.3, 461–477.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World. A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.