

## 1 Introduction

It is customary to stress the importance of so-called “New Text” Confucianism in the genesis of Kang Youwei’s philosophy. Indeed, Kang is mostly renowned for having liberally reinterpreted—in a New Text vein—Confucian teachings and textual traditions, so as to advance the cause of institutional reform. His theoretical innovations, geared toward China’s social and political survival in the midst of unprecedented challenges in the nineteenth century, have often been depicted as an iconoclastic reinvention of “traditional” Confucian thought and values. For example, Hsiao Kung-ch’uan goes as far as to wonder whether Kang could “still be considered a loyal member of the Confucian school” and if he was “a faithful follower or a camouflaged apostate”;<sup>1</sup> before suggesting that he was “a revisionist rather than a traditionalist.”<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the present article is not to refute the importance of New Text orientations in the development of Kang’s philosophy. However, upon close inspection it would seem to be somewhat reductive to consider New Text Confucianism as being the most representative aspect of this philosophy; and Kang’s shift toward it as being the defining moment of his overall intellectual development. Other factors would seem to be of equal—if not greater—importance. In fact, arguably the most constant characteristic across all of the phases of this development is Kang’s moral philosophy (*yili* 義理), understood as the quest to bring about the advent of perfect humanness (*ren* 仁) in society. Indeed, as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) points out, “The sole guiding principle of [Kang’s] theories is *ren*.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Hsiao 1975, 41 f.

2 Ibid., 43 f.

3 See *Kang Nanhai zhuan* 康南海傳 (Biography of Kang Nanhai) [1901], in Liang [1936] 2015, 3:521. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author’s own.

So much attention has been paid to the more controversial aspects of Kang's thought—the frequently arbitrary nature of his disqualification of “false” Confucian classics and extravagant descriptions of a utopian future—that his moral philosophy has in comparison often been overlooked. And yet this dimension of his thought might rightfully be deemed an invaluable measure for understanding, as a more or less coherent whole, an extensive corpus of writings spanning a period of more than four decades.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly instructive in this regard is the relationship between Kang's thought and Neo-Confucianism, which Kang consistently criticized throughout his lifetime.<sup>5</sup> This criticism clearly predates—and survives—his espousal of New Text Confucianism, which, rather than an overriding philosophical ideal per se, seems in fact to be one expression among others of his attitudes toward the Cheng-Zhu paradigm.<sup>6</sup> In other words, while certainly central to the de-

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- 4 Except where indicated, all quotations from Kang's works are from: Kang Youwei 康有為 (2007). *Kang Youwei quanji* 康有為全集. 12 vols. Beijing: Renmin daxue (The complete works of Kang Youwei). Hereafter abbreviated as *KYWQJ*.
- 5 In this paper, the term “Neo-Confucianism” refers to the branch of Confucian thinking commonly known as the “School of Principle” (*lixue* 理學), which started to fully develop in the eleventh century in response to what were considered to be Buddhist influences on Chinese society and philosophy. Confronting Buddhism on a “metaphysical” level around the key notion of an all-pervading “principle” which informs and underpins human reality and moral development, and characterized by the ideas of such thinkers as Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193), and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), this school of thought was raised to the position of state-recognized orthodoxy from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) onwards. Kang Youwei's criticism, as analyzed in this paper, is primarily directed toward the thought of Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi—so-called Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. For more information on Neo-Confucianism, see, among others, Bol 2008; Huang 1999; Makeham 2010
- 6 Here, the term “New Text” (*jimwen* 今文) refers to a direction in Confucian thinking and textual interpretation which developed during the Qing dynasty through the work of such figures as Zhuang Cunyu 莊存與 (1719–1788), Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841), Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), and Liao Ping 廖平 (1852–1932); and which purported to resurrect debates on textual authenticity and his-

velopment of the reformist and utopian dimensions of Kang's philosophy, New Text Confucianism seems to fit into a larger theoretical structure which goes beyond merely these two aspects; a structure which seems to be more deeply informed by Kang's attitudes toward Neo-Confucianism than one might normally be inclined to think.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin A. Elman points out that:

A century ago Kang was willing to jettison late imperial Neo-Confucianism in the name of Confucian modernism. Today we are told that Neo-Confucian

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torical and political interpretations which had occurred during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220). During the Han, texts written in “new” script—the written forms which had developed with the advent of the dynasty following the textual destructions of the preceding Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE)—were pitted against supposedly more ancient forms (*guwen* 古文) which had survived such destructions, and which some claimed had more accurately recorded historical events. Proponents of “new script,” on the other hand, claimed that the true teachings of Confucius went beyond the written word, and had previously been at least in part orally transmitted. Of particular importance in this regard was the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), of which the *Gongyang* 公羊 and *Guliang* 穀梁 commentaries proposed interpretations of subtle meanings passed on by Confucius, who was depicted as having in fact possessed the legitimacy to be ruler: an “uncrowned king” (*suwang* 素王). The insistence on practical statecraft in the New Text tradition especially interested numerous thinkers of the Qing era, including Kang, who were concerned with China's incapacity to efficiently respond to unprecedented national and geopolitical challenges. In the 1890s, especially after meeting Liao Ping in 1889, Kang adopted and further developed the idea—in *A Study of the Forged Classics of Xin Learning*—that old-text classics such as the *Zuozhuan* commentary of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were forgeries fabricated by the Han scholar Liu Xin 劉歆 (79–8 BCE). He also combined New Text visions of historical evolution through “three ages”—the “Age of Disorder” (*julanshi* 據亂世), the “Age of Ascending Peace” (*shengpingshi* 升平世), and the “Age of Universal Peace” (*taipingshi* 太平世)—and the idea of *datong* in the *Liyun* 禮運 chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), as the foundations of his reformist ideas and subsequent utopian philosophy. See also, among others, Bai 2006, 194; Elman 1990; Ng 2017; Ess 1994, 1999.

7 See, for example, Elman 2015, 239: “Kang's alternative expressions of legitimate classical learning challenged the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy.”

modernism is in the offing in the coming Pacific Century. But until we have an adequate explanation of why Kang and others at the turn of the twentieth century rejected Neo-Confucianism, the revival of Zhu Xi at the turn of the twenty-first remains suspect.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with the spirit of Elman's remarks, the objective of this article is to examine the way in which Kang constructed his criticism of Neo-Confucianism. After a brief section contextualizing the main intellectual dynamics of the Qing dynasty, the analysis will be undertaken from three perspectives: Kang's refutation of Neo-Confucian metaphysics and austere social philosophy; his claim that Neo-Confucianism was only a partial and ultimately erroneous version of Confucian thought; and his assertion that it led to mistaken conceptions of "authentic Confucianism," seriously hindering the latter's survival and development in the modern world. The analysis will be based on a wide range of Kang's works, covering forty years of his intellectual development, as well as notes taken by students during lectures that he gave in Guangzhou in the 1890s. The objective is to reflect on how certain aspects of Kang's thought need to be understood in terms of humanistic standpoints which remained constant in the midst of apparently iconoclastic variations; and how these standpoints represented continuing reiterations of concerns about Neo-Confucianism voiced by his predecessors in the Qing dynasty.

## 2 Qing Confucianism and Differing Foundations for Moral Philosophy

Kang's moral philosophy and its impact on his thought in general need to be understood within the context of numerous directions of intellectual development which shaped learning in the Qing 清 (1644–1911) era. Although there is a general consensus among scholars as to the key characteristics of these directions, these directions need to be understood not only individually in their own right, but also in terms of a fundamental complementarity between them, which inevitably led to a process of overlapping and convergence. Global appraisals of the history of Qing thought are thus complex and problematic, and to merely

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8 Elman 2010, 386.

compartmentalize and delineate eras and agendas can lead to analytical “blind spots” that hinder a coherent grasp of key developments and their underlying dynamics.

The need to deal with such analytical “blind spots” will continue to be one of the key tasks of researchers approaching the philosophy of the Qing era, and this article in no way claims to be able to adequately address this issue. Much of the philosophical and cultural legacy of the Qing period continues to be relatively overlooked, in comparison with the amount of scholarly attention dedicated to the philosophy of the Song 宋 (960–1279) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) eras. This has often resulted in tropes whereby Qing thought systematically pales in comparison with its predecessors, which are often seen as representing the more “philosophical” elements in Chinese thought. However, the large degree of opposition to Song and Ming dynamics that underpinned Qing thought does not necessarily indicate a lack of philosophical validity.<sup>9</sup> And the aspects of Neo-Confucian thought that resonate more easily with Eurocentric philosophical reasoning should not automatically disqualify other dimensions of Confucian philosophy that found different forms of expression in the Qing era.

The approach to Kang’s thought developed in this article is premised upon the idea that, from its very beginnings, Confucian philosophy has always been a multifaceted system, comprising both investigations into what it means to be human and theories concerning the just governing of political affairs. And although more attention was indeed given to one or another of these dimensions at different times in Chinese history, the desire to see their combined fulfillment was an aspiration shared by countless scholars from different eras and historical contexts. Recognizing the complementarity between these two dimensions thus helps us to understand the various phases of the evolution of Confucian thought as a constant process of contrast and permanence—a sort of dialectical development in which innovation and continuation combine and evolve. It is helpful, therefore, to also situate Kang’s thought in this process, as a prolongation of

9 Liang Qichao defines Qing thought primarily in terms of this opposition to Neo-Confucianism and a “return to old ways” (*fugu* 復古). See, for example, his *Introduction to Qing Learning* (*Qingdai xueshu gailun* 清代學術概論), in Liang [1936] 2015, 25:6769.

numerous concerns and approaches in the context of China's path toward the twentieth century.

Historians have frequently stressed the practical, “this-worldly” character of intellectual concerns of the Qing era.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis given by such early Qing thinkers as Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) to statecraft (*jingshi* 經世)—itself seen as a means of countering what Gu and numerous contemporaries considered to be excessive leaning toward metaphysical speculation in the late Ming period—is particularly emblematic in this sense; as is the subsequent development of philological expertise aimed at precisely elucidating the language and meanings of classical Confucian texts, to the point that evidential research (*kaozheng* 考證) became almost synonymous with the overall Qing intellectual zeitgeist.<sup>11</sup> However, such practical and textual tendencies should not be seen as existing in a way that excluded further developments in moral philosophy. And although On-Cho Ng argues that “Qing thought was a distinct aggregate of traits that diverged from the intellectual order of the Song and Ming dynasties,”<sup>12</sup> Yu Yingshi points out that “Six hundred years of Neo-Confucian tradition did not suddenly disappear in the Qing era, but rather was gradually incorporated into textual research of the classics and history.”<sup>13</sup> Qi Yongxiang goes as far as saying that over the course of its history, Confucian scholarship revolved around only two basic modes of learning: textual research and moral philosophy. According to Qi, all of the various debates which marked this history—Old Text vs. New Text Confucianism, Song vs. Han Learning, “honoring virtuous nature” (*zun dexing* 尊德性) vs. “the way of inquiry and learning” (*dao wenxue* 道問學), and so on—were all closely connected to this dichotomy and were even to a large degree its concrete reflection.<sup>14</sup>

Depictions of Qing thought as a sort of skewed intellectual movement which lacked the other fundamental component of Confucian thinking—moral philo-

10 See, for example, Ng 1995, 239.

11 For more on the history of evidential research in the Qing era, see, among others, Elman 1984; Qi 1998.

12 Ng 1995, 239 f.

13 Yu 1976, 153.

14 Qi 1998, 15. According to Qi (p. 16), this combination of textual research and moral philosophy was already central to the teachings of Confucius himself.

sophy—therefore need to be fundamentally revised. The shift in the premises of Qing moral philosophy—away from the paramount and transcendental notion of “principle” (*li* 理) and toward the imminent materiality of a paradigm centered on “material energy” (*qi* 氣)<sup>15</sup>—cannot be misunderstood as a refutation of moral philosophical investigations as such. In fact, far from being a marginal area of research, this materiality underpinned and ultimately interconnected the various intellectual activities of the era. As Ng points out, *qi* “did not become an abstract term confined to the domain of formal thought. Rather, it served as the ontological point of departure from which Qing thinkers launched their manifold intellectual undertakings.” Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) “delves into a host of subjects, such as historical scholarship, institutional studies, and research on the classics. The Qing conception of *qi* gave rise to a particular ontology that [...] was vitalist in nature, appealing not so much to symbolic metaphysical constructs as to the actualities grasped in everyday life.”<sup>16</sup>

It is with the thought of Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777) in the eighteenth century that the true potential of *qi*-based ontological premises—in overt opposition to the intellectual legacy of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism<sup>17</sup>—was fully developed in the area of moral philosophy; although this in itself was the culmination of a long process which started with figures like Wang Fuzhi and Yan Yuan 顏元 (1635–1704).<sup>18</sup> Apart from his renowned expertise in such diverse fields as philology and mathematics, one of Dai’s most important contributions to Qing philosophy was his unequivocal desire to unite the dimensions of textual research and statecraft with a sophisticated theory of *qi*-based moral philosophy which could counter the impact of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism on Chinese society. In Dai’s philosophy, evidential research becomes the very ba-

15 See, among others, Ng 1993; Yang 2007; Zhang 2003, 259.

16 Ng 1993, 49.

17 See, among others, Li and Liu Guancai 2003, 214; Murase 1996, 75. Please note that all transcriptions of Chinese names and notions in secondary sources have been converted to pinyin when necessary.

18 See, for example, Hu Shi 胡適, *The Philosophy of Dai Dongyuan* (*Dai Dongyuan de zhhexue* 戴東原的哲學), in Dai 2010, :7, 472.

sis of moral philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as Elman points out, for Dai, “the role of philological analysis was only preliminary. If it did not serve as a first step to philosophical reconstruction, then its agenda was bankrupt.”<sup>20</sup> According to Zhang Lizhu, Dai’s intention was to “do away with Neo-Confucianism’s moral metaphysics (*daode xingshanxue* 道德形上學) and bring morality back to the empirical realm. He wanted to make morality a practical matter.”<sup>21</sup>

This development of moral philosophy in conjunction with—rather than in opposition to—textual research and visions of practical statecraft is in itself so challenging that some assumptions concerning Confucian moral philosophy and Neo-Confucianism’s place in history might need to be reconsidered. Is Confucian moral philosophy conceivable in terms of a paradigm which is in such overt opposition to the Cheng-Zhu one? Did Dai consider himself to be a Neo-Confucian? According to Liu Shu-hsien, “Clearly, Dai Zhen no longer accepted the paradigm of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. To label Dai Zhen a Neo-Confucian philosopher, as Fung Yu-lan did in his *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, is clearly an error.”<sup>22</sup> While Zhang Lizhu points out that:

Dai Zhen is generally considered by scholars to be a master of Han Learning, a scholar who “honored the Han and disparaged the Song” (*zun Han yi Song* 尊漢抑宋). He accomplished major achievements in evidential research. However, he was the first scholar of the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras to dare to openly advocate the study of moral philosophy [...]. If we differentiate between evidential research and moral philosophy as being Han and Song Learning respectively, then to which one does Dai Zhen primarily belong?<sup>23</sup>

19 Zhang 2003, 252. See also Luo 2006, 52. According to Elman 2015, 230 f. “Though most evidential scholars preferred an empirical program for research, a few, led by Dai Zhen, saw in linguistic analysis, historical phonology, and glossing of terms a new and more precise textual approach to traditional philosophical questions. As a result of Dai’s influence, important classical concepts and ideals were subjected to philological study. A methodology that had proven fruitful in textual criticism, it was hoped, would prove equally productive in moral philosophy.”

20 Elman 1993, 65.

21 Zhang 2003, 271.

22 S.-h. Liu 2003, 12.

23 Zhang 2003, 238.

The answer to these questions is to be found in the ultimate motivation—avowed or not—of such thinkers as Dai; namely, to wrest moral philosophy from the hold of Neo-Confucianism. This implies that moral philosophy is not—and cannot be—a monopoly of the Neo-Confucians; and the two cannot unquestioningly be considered synonymous. As such, even the Song-Han divide itself—despite being used by Qing scholars themselves to differentiate between rival schools—is fundamentally superfluous;<sup>24</sup> since it fails to fathom a new reality: the possibility of an updated and elaborate moral philosophy which can thrive beyond the contours of Cheng-Zhu metaphysics. This also means that modern interpretations of preimperial Confucianism need to look beyond the hermeneutical prism established by Neo-Confucianism and acknowledge that the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius can indeed be analyzed without the conceptual scaffolding constructed by the Cheng-Zhu tradition. And even though Kang Youwei would have been reluctant to acknowledge his indebtedness to this shift, his moral philosophy—and the binding role it played in the rest of his thought—is unmistakably defined by this very same propensity to detach it from Neo-Confucian logics. Overlooking this point leads to a fundamental misconception of all the other components of his thought, which would then appear superficial, arbitrary, or without any historical justification.

Elman tells us that:

The popularity of moral philosophy and practical statecraft in the nineteenth century has usually been explained as a revival of Song and Ming neo-Confucianism. By opposing the earlier turn to philology, some scholars argue, nineteenth-century Confucians initiated a reaffirmation of neo-Confucian forms of moral cultivation. The reappearance of philosophical concerns among Qing literati, however, was also the result in part of an important turn in the evidential research movement in the late eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

24 Luo Jianqiu, for example, points out that although the Han Learning of the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras rejected Song Learning, there were nevertheless cases of aspects from the latter being incorporated into the former, primarily as the equal emphasis of “the way of inquiry and learning” and “honoring virtuous nature.” See Luo 2006, 51.

25 Elman 1993, 65.

Rather than a revival of Neo-Confucianism, it would therefore seem more appropriate to understand these dynamics as the convergence of the aforementioned complementary aspects of Confucianism. This process of convergence also incorporated other areas of scholarship such as New Text Confucianism, giving Qing thought its most clearly identifiable configuration in the ensuing decades and during Kang's lifetime. Elman goes on to say that:

In the nineteenth century, however, the academic climate changed. Scholars were increasingly receptive to philosophic issues, and once again they stressed the theoretical aspects of Confucian discourse. Nor could the *kaozheng* agenda remain untouched by the political and social tremors that began to affect the society at large. The revival of Song Learning and New Text studies was paralleled and in part provoked by an intense moral concern for the state of the country and involvement with administrative problems growing out of the social and political pressures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup>

### 3 The Context of Kang's Attitudes Toward Neo-Confucianism

Given these developments of the nineteenth century, one might say that the fusion in Kang's thought of moral philosophy on the one hand, and the ideal of the practical management of state affairs (*jingshi* 經世) on the other,<sup>27</sup> is very

26 Elman 1993, 66. Here, Elman seems to equate moral philosophy with Neo-Confucianism; whereas, as mentioned above, it might be more useful to think in terms of moral philosophy which can also be expressed in a way that differs from the Cheng-Zhu paradigm.

27 This ideal is certainly one of the defining characteristics of Kang's thought in general. See, for example, the affirmation in his autobiography that it was his objective from a young age: "Seeing the great hardships endured by the people, and having received from *tian* the intelligence and abilities to save them, I lamented the state of things and resolved to involve myself with the management of worldly affairs" 既念民生艱難，天與我聰明才力拯救之，乃哀物悼世，以經營天下為志。 See *Wo shi* 我史 (My history), in *KYWQJ*, 5:62–63. For a criticism of this autobiography, and what he considers to be its problematic use in the construction of Kang as a historical figure, see Kwong 1984, 5–10. See also Chang 1987, 24. Kang's autobiography may very well be more a reflection of his state of mind when

much a product of the Qing era; insofar as all of the key characteristics, components, concerns, and directions expressed through this fusion are iterations of paths developed by his Qing predecessors. And although one might reasonably argue that Kang failed to achieve the same level of excellence as these predecessors in numerous individual fields, that does not necessarily disqualify the value of his thought as a unique combination of these elements. In other words, the apparent originality of Kang's means of addressing the issues of his day might most usefully be seen as a continuation of dynamics which others had started earlier in the Qing era, dynamics and logics that were in this way combined and brought into direct contact with the issues confronting China at the end of the nineteenth century.

In some cases—not only his New Text theories and his ideas on institutional reform, but also his moral philosophy and its *qi*-based paradigm—certain components of his thought could even be considered the last iterations of those directions, embers of intellectual developments which were subsequently burned up by the events of the twentieth century and the concomitant denigration of the legacy of the Qing. To a certain degree, despite the extravagance of his character and the apparent iconoclasm of his most emblematic ideas, Kang might also reasonably be seen as the last vehicle of philosophical concerns that had emerged long before he was born and that in many cases also largely surpassed what he himself might have been aware of.

Notwithstanding a frequent lack of philological and methodological rigor when compared to such illustrious scholars as Dai, Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪 (1757–1809), and Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), and despite a notorious and frustrating tendency to avoid acknowledging the influence of recent or contemporary scholars,<sup>28</sup> Kang's works are evidently very much rooted in the philosophy that these figures helped to develop. This is particularly the case of the materialist *qi*-based paradigm which informs his moral philosophy and criticisms of Cheng-

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he wrote it in the late 1890s than a faithful account of the events he mentions, and it therefore needs to be approached critically.

28 See, for example, Brusadelli 2020, 25, for comments on “Kang's difficulty in acknowledging his sources or his inspirations.”

Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and which permeates many other aspects of his philosophy.

In fact, the earliest stages of Kang's intellectual development seem to be informed by an underlying vision with striking similarities to Dai's philosophy, without the latter ever being credited or cited in this regard.<sup>29</sup> These similarities have yet to be the subject of detailed scholarly analysis, an issue beyond the scope of this article. However, a reading of the *Inner and Outer Essays of Master Kang* (*Kangzi neiwaipian* 康子內外篇), a collection of fifteen texts written in the mid-1880s, reveals the development of ideas which follow a logic similar to Dai's magnum opus, the *Evidential Commentary on the Meaning of the Words of Mencius* (*Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證).

This vision may be roughly summed up as having the following key characteristics: a rejection of Cheng-Zhu interpretations of "principle" (*li* 理); a desire to thus "release" Confucian moral philosophy (*yili*) from the "hold" of Neo-Confucian paradigms; a fundamental ontological materialism based on the primacy of "material energy" (*qi* 氣); a subsequent rejection of the Cheng-Zhu dualism between "principle" and "material energy"; the positive validation of human desires as a fundamental requisite in the development of moral philosophy; and an antagonistic approach to Buddhism and its rejection of human desires.<sup>30</sup> All of these aspects are central to Kang's attitudes toward Cheng-Zhu

29 Kang fleetingly mentions Dai in his autobiography, stating under the entry for the year 1878 that as a young man he had taken a loathing to being immersed in piles of books, and wondered what the point was in the work of scholars of evidential research such as Dai. See *KYWQJ*, 5:62.

30 Scholars have often insisted upon a certain influence of Buddhism on Kang's thought, especially in light of a short-lived existential crisis he went through as a young man, as described in his autobiography [See *Wo shi*, Kang Youwei 2007, 5:62]; and the Buddhist-inspired evocations of the sufferings of mankind which form part of the structure of his *Book of Great Unity*. However, in his earliest works, Kang often refers to Buddhism in extremely negative terms; while elsewhere references to this philosophy are often extremely powerful descriptions of hardships which ultimately call for unequivocally Confucian "solutions." As Chan Wing-tsit points out, in such contexts Kang's "stress on suffering was but an emphatic way of posing the problem, and that his central objective was the application

Neo-Confucianism and survive into the later phases of his intellectual development, underpinning the visions and aspirations characteristic of his New Text phase and after.

Considered from this angle, Kang's philosophy appears to be less in contradiction with earlier Confucian thought than one might imagine. An analysis of his attitudes toward Neo-Confucianism therefore allows one not only to better understand his philosophy in particular; it also offers a different perspective from which to view the development of Confucian thought in changing historical contexts. And although a systematic comparison of Kang and other Qing thinkers goes beyond the scope of this article, one needs to bear in mind that the intellectual legacy they left behind underpins Kang's works to a much greater degree than he himself was willing to acknowledge. And while scholars have analyzed Kang's philosophy against the backdrop of classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in general,<sup>31</sup> this has yet to be done from the perspective of how criticisms of Cheng-Zhu ideology actually connect all aspects of his philosophy in a way that is not simply fortuitous. This article thus opens up new ways of approaching Kang first and foremost as a Qing thinker.

As has been well documented, as a child Kang received a conventional Neo-Confucian education, especially under the aegis of his grandfather Kang Zanxiu 康贊修.<sup>32</sup> From 1876 until 1879, he studied under the celebrated Cantonese scholar Zhu Ciqi 朱次琦 (1807–1881), whom Liang Qichao describes as “a prominent Confucian in Guangdong [whose] scholarship was rooted in Neo-Confucianism and [who] gave priority to the management of state affairs and the practical application of learning.”<sup>33</sup> Chang Hao points out that Zhu was a leading proponent of Guangdong Learning (*Yuexue* 粵學), which “dominated the province's intellectual climate in the nineteenth century” and which, as well as combining both Old Text and New Text traditions, was characterized by “the convergence of the ‘evidential studies’ of Han Learning and the moral-meta-

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of *ren*, which is fundamentally Confucian in spirit.” See Chen 1967, 359

31 See, for example, Hsiao 1975, 41–96; Tang Wenming 2012, 11–54.

32 See, among others, Hsiao 1975, 8; Kuang 1980, 5; Tang Zhijun 1984, 3.

33 *Kang Nanhai zhuan*, in Liang [1936] 2015, 3:521. See also Lin 1990, 22.

physical studies of Song Learning [i.e., Neo-Confucianism].”<sup>34</sup> Kuang Bolin says that Zhu “was opposed to scholarship which departed from reality” but also that his scholarship was rooted in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism;<sup>35</sup> while Fang Delin emphasizes his dissatisfaction with the “trivialities of Han Learning textual criticism” and the “hollowness of late Neo-Confucian learning.”<sup>36</sup> According to Steven Miles, Zhu Ciqi “emphasised the need for moral exemplars and promoted what can broadly be categorised as a Neo-Confucian agenda.” For Miles, Zhu’s approach to learning thus clearly contrasted with that of the Hall of the Sea of Learning (*Xuehaitang* 學海堂), the renowned academy established by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) in the 1820s, and which Ruan had seen “as a means of propagating *kaozheng* scholarship.”<sup>37</sup>

In his own account of Zhu Ciqi, Kang tells us that he

advocated helping others and the practical governing of worldly affairs and did not indulge in useless empty talk and lofty views [...]. He cleared away the factionalism of Song and Han Learning, and returned to [the original teachings of] Confucius.<sup>38</sup>

According to Hsiao, “It appears that Zhu Ciqi contributed much to the early phases of Kang’s intellectual life.”<sup>39</sup> In his analysis of the place of “humanness” / “humanity” (*ren*) in Kang’s philosophy, Chan Wing-tsit tells us that “The concept of *ren* underlies Kang’s whole career and thought. It may be traced to his teacher [...] who taught him the equal importance of understanding moral principles and putting human affairs in order.”<sup>40</sup> However, Kang showed a certain degree of intellectual independence in the course of his studies under Zhu Ciqi, challenging at times some of his teacher’s opinions. Ma Honglin points out that

34 Chang 1987, 22.

35 Kuang 1980, 6, 7.

36 Fang 1992, 3.

37 Miles 2004, 300. According to Brusadelli, the Xuehaitang had a certain influence on Kang’s formative years: “Ruan Yuan’s legacy is thus strong enough to explain Kang Youwei’s early inclination toward Han Learning.” See Brusadelli 2020, 23.

38 *KYWQJ*, 5:61: 主濟人經世，不為無用之空談高論 ... 掃去漢宋之們戶，而歸宗於孔子。

39 Hsiao 1975, 63.

40 Chan 1967, 356.

in the process of knowledge acquirement, Kang Youwei was apt at thinking for himself and not blindly following others, expressing his own distinctive way of thinking and character, going against his teacher by showing contempt for Cheng-Zhu and a liking for Lu-Wang [Neo-Confucianism].<sup>41</sup>

Kang's supposed preference for the strain of Neo-Confucianism associated with Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming seems to have originally been suggested by Liang Qichao.<sup>42</sup> Numerous scholars have echoed this. However, this affirmation is unsubstantiated upon closer inspection of Kang's works, where references to these two figures are extremely scarce, and in which a fundamentally materialist ontology rules out any obvious parallels between his philosophy and Lu-Wang's "learning of the heart-mind" (*xinxue* 心學).

It should be noted that across Kang's works, a certain ambiguity toward Neo-Confucianism is frequently encountered. His attitudes toward Zhu Xi are emblematic in this regard. For example, we can see that for Kang, "Master Zhu was exceptionally gifted. He understood everything. His learning was very complete indeed. He wrote commentaries of all of the five classics, his literary compositions were extremely good, and his poetry set a precedent."<sup>43</sup> He even goes as far as saying that after Confucius, "Only Master Zhu can be considered as having had such far-reaching and deep ideas."<sup>44</sup> In fact, since Zhu Xi, "few men have been outstanding, because they have yet to understand [his] writings"<sup>45</sup>—to such an extent that his ideas had permeated Confucian learning ever since.<sup>46</sup>

41 Ma 1994, 39.

42 See *Kang Nanhai zhuan*, in Liang [1936] 2015, 3:521.

43 *Wanmu caotang koushuo* 萬木草堂口說 (Spoken teachings in the thatched hut of ten thousand trees), in *KYWQJ*, 2:139: 朱子天分高極，無所不通。其學問有本有末，遍注五經，詞章甚佳，詩亦自成一家。This text is a collection of notes taken by an unidentified student of Kang's during his lectures in Guangzhou in the mid-1890s, and is a useful insight into how Kang presented his ideas orally

44 *Nanhai shicheng ji* 南海師承記 (A record of studying under [Kang] Nanhai) [Zhang Bozhen 張伯楨], in *KYWQJ*, 2:255: 孔子以後，所謂博大精深者，唯朱子當之。See also Chang 1987, 28–29.

45 *Ibid.*, 255: 朱子之後光明者少。因責朱子之書尚讀不了故也。

46 For example, *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, in *KYWQJ*, 2:139: "Every single word of Ming Learning came from Master Zhu" 明朝無一字不是朱子之學。

At the same time, despite such evident praise, Zhu and Neo-Confucianism in general are somehow considered as lacking legitimacy. According to Kang, “Nobody over the last two thousand years can compare with Zhou [Dunyi], the Cheng brothers, Zhu [Xi] and Zhang [Zai]. They have transmitted Confucius’s learning. However, they are not his true successors (*dipai* 嫡派).”<sup>47</sup> What is behind such an affirmation which seems to suggest a lack of authenticity in Neo-Confucian thinking, and what are the philosophical implications of such an insinuation?<sup>48</sup>

#### 4 Criticisms of Excessive Severity and Buddhism

The most consistent aspect of Kang Youwei’s critique of Neo-Confucianism is undoubtably the idea of its excessive severity. This is a common thread found across all of Kang’s writings, taking root in his philosophy long before his interest in New Text Confucianism. In one of his earliest works, the *Essay on Accomplishments for the People*, Kang states that:

In ancient times, the application of [Confucian] teachings was very lenient. Ever since Song Confucianism, it has been very rigorous [...]. As a result, when teachings are lenient, everyone is joyous and pleased to do good; whereas when

47 This affirmation appears in the Zhonghua shuju edition of the *Wanmu caotang koushuo*; see Kang Youwei 1891–1897, 80: 周、程、朱、張二千年來莫之能及也，其學為孔子傳人，然尚非嫡派也。See also *ibid.*, 81; *KYWQJ*, 2:139: “Zhou, Cheng Zhu, Zhang and Shao were truly able to penetrate the principles behind natural phenomena and human affairs” 周、程、朱、張、邵五子，真能窮天人之理者。

48 According to Hsiao, “Kang generally spoke ill of Confucians of the Old Text tradition, especially Neo-Confucians of Song and Ming times, but did not repudiate all of them. Sometimes he showed a degree of respect for Zhu Xi [...]. It must be emphasized that Kang received from Song and Ming Confucians more formative influence on his own thinking than he admitted” (Hsiao 1975, 59–60). Hsiao also points out (*ibid.*, 47) that “what Kang attempted to do was to discredit the tradition of imperial Confucianism—a tradition that had its roots in the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Zhu Xi and subsequently became the ideological tool of imperial rulers, with political and intellectual implications hardly foreseen by Zhu Xi.”

they are harsh, the average person has a sense of dread towards them and does not exert himself, and as such becomes but a petty person. This is something upon which the noble person should ponder deeply.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, not only is a harsh interpretation of Confucian teachings a hindrance to their development; but it actually fosters—in the form of a culture of “petty” (*xiaoren* 小人) interests—the very opposite of their ultimate purpose.

Kang explicitly associates Neo-Confucian moral austerity with Buddhist influences in a way that clearly echoes such thinkers as Dai Zhen. The influences—real or supposed—of Buddhism on the emergence and development of Neo-Confucian thought have been copiously documented.<sup>50</sup> According to Kang, “Song Confucians talked in great depth about ‘principle.’ However, in its ex-

49 *Mingong pian* 民功篇 (Essay on accomplishments for the people), in *KYWQJ*, 1:82: 古之敷教在寬。自宋儒後，敷教在嚴。...故以寬為教，人皆歡愉而樂於為善；以嚴為教，中人憚而不勉，適以便小人。此亦君子所宜深思也。 We come across similar affirmations elsewhere in Kang’s writings, whereby the teachings of Confucius are seen as having originally been very lenient. See, for example, *Yidali youji* 義大利遊記 (Italy travelogue), in *KYWQJ*, 7:375: “Confucius was lenient in the application of his teachings. He did not attach importance to superstition, and let human freedom express itself. [His teachings] were the least oppressive” 孔子敷教在寬，不尚迷信，放聽人自由，壓制最少。

50 For example, according to Huang 1999, 5, Neo-Confucianism unconsciously absorbed ideas from both Buddhism and Daoism “just as Confucianism had borrowed from other schools of thought in the Han dynasty.” W. T. De Bary tells us that “Zhu Xi had conceded that before the time of Cheng Yi, Confucianism lacked a true science of the mind, a way of dealing with the inner world of the spirit, while Buddhism had lacked the means which Confucianism always possessed for dealing with the outer world of human affairs. According to him, Cheng Yi, drawing on the resources of the classical tradition, had succeeded in reconciling the two by his discovery of a method of spirituality and mental discipline which was expressed in terms of reverent seriousness” (see Bary 1981, 68). Fung Yu-Lan clearly states that Neo-Confucianism came into existence as a “combination of Confucianism with Buddhism” (Feng 1942, 118). According to Liu Shu-hsien, “The essential teachings of Confucianism were kept intact, only the formulation of thought became much more sophisticated owing to stimuli received from the challenges of Buddhism and Taoism” (S.-h. Liu 1971, 166). Ha Tai Kim says that “The representative philosophers of Neo-Confucianism, borrowing ideas from Buddhism and

treme form this leads to Buddhism. By doing away with desires one distances oneself from human [realities].”<sup>51</sup> In fact, for Kang the very notion of “principle” (*li*) is marginal to classical Confucian concerns: “[Confucians] of ancient times talked a lot about the ‘way’ (*dao* 道), but not so much about ‘principle’. Nowadays, people talk exclusively about the doctrine of principle. This is entirely a theory created by Song Confucians.”<sup>52</sup> The Neo-Confucian incorporation and exaltation of the idea of a transcendental and omnipresent principle, along with a concomitant denigration of the material dimension of human existence, are seen as leading to a negligence of human needs and the most fundamental aspects of the human condition:

Master Zhu explains “human nature is what is endowed by *tian*”, saying that human nature is the same thing as principle. He does not consider it to be material. But [aspects of] human existence such as food, sexual relations, clothing and shelter: are they not all part of the [human] Way?<sup>53</sup>

According to Kang, obliviousness toward the realities of human nature and human needs—the primary cause of excessively harsh moral standards—is caused by a misunderstanding of Mencian Confucianism and the question of human desires, seen by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism as an obstacle to moral development. Both are a result of Buddhist influences: “Buddhism claims that human nature is fundamentally good. Song [scholars] were misled by this. That is why they held Mencius in such high esteem.”<sup>54</sup> Kang also affirms that “All of Song Confucianism originated in Chan Buddhism. In other words, Mencius’s learning of the heart-mind.”<sup>55</sup> Mencius’s idea of the goodness of human

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Taoism, constructed a typically Confucian metaphysics without being absorbed into either Buddhism or Taoism” (Ha 1977, 337).

- 51 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, *KYWQJ*, 2:167: 宋儒言理深，然深之至，則入於佛，絕欲則遠人也。
- 52 *Ibid.*, *KYWQJ*, 2:169: 古人多言道學，不甚言理學。今人專言理學，皆宋儒之說。
- 53 *Kongzi shengdanri yanjiangci* 孔子聖誕日演講辭 (Speech for the birthday of Confucius) [1923], in *KYWQJ*, 11:269: 朱子謂天命之謂性，謂性即理也，不以性為質。則凡人道之飲食、男女、衣服、家室，皆不在道中矣。
- 54 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, *KYWQJ*, 2:140: 佛言性善，宋人惑之，故特提出孟子。
- 55 *Ibid.*, *KYWQJ*, 2:136: 宋儒皆本禪學，即孟子心學。

nature was one of the foundations of Neo-Confucianism orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> However, Kang flatly contests the validity of this interpretation, arguing that “when Mencius said that human nature could be good, he was talking about its ultimate state. Did he ever say that it was originally so?”<sup>57</sup> Although Mencius plays an important role in the development of his own system of thought, Kang considers an unbalanced predilection for his ideas as a source of inherent error, as was Neo-Confucian’s concomitant condemnation of Xunzi: “Song Confucians venerated the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Mencius*, and attacked Xunzi. That was a great error.”<sup>58</sup> According to Kang, Neo-Confucianism had completely misunderstood Mencius: “Since Confucians of subsequent generations [i.e., Neo-Confucianism] did not excel in the reading of Mencius, all sorts of theories on human nature emerged.”<sup>59</sup> He goes even as far as saying that “The Cheng brothers and Zhu considered that human nature was fundamentally good, whereas human emotions were bad. None of them understood what human nature and emotions are.”<sup>60</sup>

The question of human desires (*yu* 欲) is also central to this standpoint. In contrast to Neo-Confucian views on desires, whereby this aspect of the materiality of human existence represents an obstacle to moral development, Kang sees in their very rejection an impediment to the expression of true human potential. He points out that “Master Zhou [Dunyi] said: ‘Is it possible to identify what

56 According to Paolo Santangelo, although Neo-Confucianism overwhelmingly embraced Mencius’s theory of the original goodness of human nature, “the thinkers of this school were led, probably by the Buddhist tradition, to modify the optimistic attitude of their predecessors, the Confucianists of the classical period. [...] Under certain aspects, the Neo-Confucian conception seems no less pessimistic, at least in the Song period, than views influenced by Xunzi and Buddhism” (Santangelo 1990, 232).

57 *Kangzi neiwaipian* 康子內外篇 (The inner and outer essays of Master Kang), in *KYWQJ*, 1:108: 夫孟子言其性可為善，正言其末，何嘗言本耶？

58 *Nanhai shicheng ji*, *KYWQJ*, 2:255: 宋儒尊大學、中庸、孟子，而攻荀子，則大謬。

59 *Kangzi neiwaipian*, *KYWQJ*, 1:111: 自後儒不善讀孟子，而論性之說紛紛矣。

60 *Ibid.*, *KYWQJ*, 1:101: 程、朱則以為性本善，其惡者情也，皆不知性情者也。

makes a sage a sage? There is one reason. What is it? Being free of desires.' Zhou thought that being without desires made one a sage. He didn't realize that he was still separating matter [and principle]."<sup>61</sup> According to Kang, desires are an inherent part of the human condition. Their eventual mortification should be understood in nearly literal terms: "Living beings necessarily have desires, in which nobody can avoid indulging. Only the dead have no desires."<sup>62</sup> Consistent with classical Confucian visions of moderating—rather than eliminating—desires, Kang identifies in the Buddhist insistence on their mortification the roots of moral standards which lose sight of a fundamental need of altruism. Zang Shi-jun points out that:

In his opinion, Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism advocated the restriction of desires, and this fundamentally ran counter to human nature [...]. [Kang's view] on the contrary highlighted the idea that it is only by following human desires that one can be close to the human way, and as such he positively affirmed a will to do away with suffering and to search for happiness.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, according to Kang:

If it were possible, like in Buddhism, to subjugate one's natural dispositions [lit. one's "heart-mind"], and consider desires to be poisonous snakes, ferocious tigers, giant flames or despicable brigands, and thus forcefully overcome them, then one would no longer have anything to do with human affairs either. But what if that were not possible? That being the case, one might as well simply allow the expression of [desires]. Therefore, regulating them is made possible by the fact that we are living beings, and this also makes it possible to find expression for them.<sup>64</sup>

61 *Jiaoxue tongyi* 教學通義 (On the general meaning of learning) [1885], *KYWQJ*, 1:83: 周子曰:「聖人可原呼? 曰: 一。一者何? 曰無欲。」周子以為無慾即聖, 不知尚隔氣質一層也。According to Chang Hao, the combination of Han and Neo-Confucian learning in the *General Meaning of Learning* is "indicative of Kang's influence by Guangdong Learning" (Chang 1987, 28).

62 *Kangzi neiwaipian*, *KYWQJ*, 1:103: 凡為血氣之倫必有欲, 有欲則莫不縱之, 若無欲則惟死耳。

63 Zang 1999, 160.

64 *Kangzi neiwaipian*, *KYWQJ*, 1:104: 若能如佛降伏其心, 視欲如毒蛇、猛虎、大火、怨賊, 能力挫之, 則吾亦不參預人事矣。其如不能何? 則姑縱之已耳。故夫制之者血氣也, 縱之者血氣也。

## 5 The Affirmation of Materiality and the Rejection of Cheng-Zhu Dualism

Kang's position represents a clear refutation of Cheng-Zhu dualism. In fact, Kang declares that the Neo-Confucian "principle" is but a human creation, and as such is flawed and unworthy to be used as a justification for moral standards. His rejection of its transcendence is also the affirmation of material immanence, in which his use of the notion *tian* 天 needs to be understood in an imminent way: the world in its very materiality, arguably best translated as "Nature," rather than the more metaphysical "heaven" or "heavenly." In this way, instead of "principle" being rooted in a transcendental *tian* as the basis of any imaginable ethical development, "Nature," along with desires—the most natural of human proclivities—is depicted as the realm in which true human potential can be expressed. According to Kang,

"Principle" is a manmade principle. The ears, the eyes, the various members of the body, vitality, and cognitive awareness are all things which are endowed by Nature. Infants have no knowledge but already have desires. This is without any human intervention whatsoever. Therefore, desires are endowed by Nature. The Cheng brothers claimed that it was possible to apprehend "heavenly principle." These are words of ignorance. Hence, desires are natural, and "principle" is manmade.<sup>65</sup>

Such criticism of Neo-Confucian dualism is a recurrent theme in Kang's philosophy, which is firmly rooted in an ontological vision based on the primacy of material energy (*qi*) over principle. According to Kang, "All things originated from *qi*. Only after the existence of *qi* did principles emerge. *Qi* is what engenders humans and things. Principle is how they are engendered. Humans are perpetually [lit. 'day by day'] in the midst of *qi*, without knowing it, just like fish are perpetually in water without knowing it."<sup>66</sup> In other words, material immi-

65 *Kangzi neiwaipian, KYWQJ*, 1:111: 故理者，人理也。若耳目百體，血氣心知，天所先與。嬰兒無知已有欲焉，無與人事也。故欲者，天也。程子謂天理是體認出，此不知道之言也，蓋天欲而人理也。See also Chang 1987, 32.

66 *Wanmu caotang koushuo, KYWQJ*, 2:133: 凡物皆始於氣，既有氣，然後有理。生人生物者，氣也。所以能生人生物者，理也。人日在氣中而不

nence is the ultimate reality of this world, and to claim that this could in any way be preceded by principle is purely erroneous: “Master Zhu thought that principle existed before material energy. This theory of his was wrong.”<sup>67</sup> Song Dehua argues that “With regard to the origins of the world, this most fundamental of philosophical issues, Kang Youwei very clearly advocated a materialist position and opposed an idealist one”;<sup>68</sup> and in this way Kang’s ontology had “cast off the shackles of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and re-established a materialist position.”<sup>69</sup> According to Chang Hao, Kang’s “monistic tendency to see the cosmos as solely made up of the material force of *qi*, stands closer to Western Han Confucianism [i.e., New Text Confucianism] than to the mainstream of Neo-Confucianism.”<sup>70</sup> This leads him to suggest that Kang had already been influenced by New Text teachings in the earliest stages of his development.<sup>71</sup> However, the earliest examples of Kang’s *qi*-monism are to be found in such texts as the *Inner and Outer Essays of Master Kang*, in which one finds no clearly developed New Text influences. Kang’s theories on *qi* emerged before his interest in New Text Confucianism, and are certainly primarily directed against Cheng-Zhu attitudes on this issue.

The rejection of the primacy of principle necessarily supposes a refutation of the idea that human nature (*xing* 性) is synonymous with this very principle. According to Kang, “Master Zhu’s idea that human nature is the same thing as principle is inappropriate. Song Confucians often wrongly interpreted Mencius’s theory of the goodness of human nature. That is why they said such things.”<sup>72</sup>

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知，猶魚之目在水中而不知也。

67 Ibid.: 朱子以為理在氣之前，其說非。

68 Song 2002, 21.

69 Ibid., 22.

70 Chang 1987, 33.

71 Ibid.

72 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, *KYWQJ*, 2:254 (朱子性即理也，未當。宋儒每附會孟子性善之說，故云然)。See also, among others, *Chang’an jiangyan lu* 長安講演錄 (Record of speeches in Chang’an) [1923], in *KYWQJ*, 11:276: “Master Zhu interpreted human nature as being principle. In that he was wrong” 朱子解性為理，非也; *ibid.*, 283: “Master Zhu considered human nature to be the same thing as principle. However, this is biased and incomplete. Humans have a nature,

The rejection of a transcendental primacy necessarily entails a concordant denial of transcendental foundations of morality. For Kang, human ethical development is necessarily rooted in matter, from which it cannot be separated: “The Cheng brothers, Master Zhang and Master Zhu divided human nature into two things: matter (*qizhi* 氣質) and moral principle (*yili* 義理) [...]. In fact, human nature consists entirely of matter. What is referred to as moral principle comes from matter. They cannot be forcefully separated.”<sup>73</sup>

It is precisely in such Neo-Confucian attempts to dichotomize moral development and materiality, whereby the former is attained through the subjugation of the latter, that Kang sees the origins of austere moral standards in which personal cultivation is prioritized over humanistic fulfillment and social justice, and in which ideas of what is “appropriate” or “right” (*yi* 義) are upheld to the detriment of classical Confucianism’s paramount objective, humanness (*ren*):

Master Zhu was born after the learning on unified governance had been lost. He expounded [his teachings] with great fanfare, speaking a lot about rightness but very little about humanness. He knew a lot about self-reflection and the reduction of one’s faults, but very little about how to relieve the hardships of the people. He was obstructed by teachings from the age of disorder,<sup>74</sup> and did not understand the meaning of universal peace and *datong* (大同). With elements from Daoism and Buddhism mingled into it, his way was one of great hardship.<sup>75</sup>

Kang’s *qi*-centered ontology is the foundation of his criticisms of Neo-Confucianism in general. His gradual espousal of New Text Confucianism in the 1890s led to other arguments being used to formulate this criticism. However, even when expressed differently, the denunciation of hardships brought about

but so do things”: 朱子以性為理，則偏而不完全。性人有之，物亦有之。

73 *Changxing xueji* 長興學記 (*Changxing* study notes) [1891], in *KYWQJ*, 1:341: 程子、張子、朱子分性為二，有氣質，有義理... 實則性全是氣質，所謂義理，自氣質出，不得強分也。

74 See footnote 6 above.

75 *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (A study of Confucius as a reformer) [1897], in *KYWQJ*, 3:3: 朱子生於大統絕學之後，搗鼓揚旗而發明之，多言義而寡言仁，知省身寡過而少救民患，蔽於據亂之說而不知太平大同之義，雜以佛老，其道艱苦。

by Neo-Confucian moral paradigms remains central to his philosophy. In this way, according to Kang, although Zhu Xi possessed “comprehensive knowledge,” was an “exceptional talent” in the history of China, and was an “incomparable” figure, he had nonetheless been

deceived by Liu Xin’s falsified old-text theories, saying that the *Zhouli*, which he believed to have been written by the Duke of Zhou, was flawless; that the idea of *Datong* came from the *Laozi*; and that it was in fact impossible to fathom the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [...]. He was excessively meticulous with regard to the three cardinal rules, bringing about great hardship for women. However, since at the time of Kangxi, [the following of his teachings] was specifically decreed, everyone has had to obey Master Zhu. As a result, for hundreds of years people have believed in his teachings, thinking that Confucius was like that, and not knowing that they were wrong.<sup>76</sup>

Kang’s accusations that Neo-Confucian teachings were incomplete and transmitted a misconstrued vision of Confucianism is discussed in more detail below. Beforehand, it is not superfluous to stress how the condition of women in Chinese society is emblematic of Kang’s criticism of Neo-Confucianism, and is an aspect which permeates every phase of his intellectual development. In his 1902 commentary of the *Analects*, Kang declares that: “According to the *Gongyang* commentary, Confucius was a king of cultural excellence—a king of civilization and progress. He was not in favor of decline. The Song Confucians did not understand the meaning of this, and thought that being a worthy person consisted in austerity.”<sup>77</sup> Further on in the same commentary, he reiterates this idea:

Although Confucius attached great importance to civilization by means of education, he considered that the most important thing was to assure the material well-being of the people. This is just like Guanzi’s idea that to govern a

76 *Chang’an jiangyan lu*, *KYWQJ*, 11:285: 蓋無所不通，千古異才，無有其比...惟蔽于劉歆偽古文之說，謂《周禮》盛水不漏，信為周公所作，謂大同為老子之說，謂《春秋》實不可解...其於三綱亦鞭辟事太過，令女道甚苦。然以康熙時特定功令，須服從朱子，故數百年人信其學，以為孔子如是，不知其非也。

77 *Lunyu zhu* 論語注 (Commentary of the *Analects* of Confucius) [1902], in *KYWQJ*, 6:395: 公羊稱孔子為文王，蓋孔子為文明進化之王，非尚質退化者也。宋儒不通此義，以敝車羸馬為賢。

country one has to first guarantee the people this well-being. This is different from the Song Confucians, who went on about high ideals, but then considered that dying of starvation was trivial while becoming impure was serious.<sup>78</sup>

The idea here of the triviality of starving to death is a direct reference to the notorious affirmation by Cheng Yi, who claimed that a destitute widow should not be allowed to remarry, since in this way she would become “unchaste” (*shijie* 失節者); and who declared “The thing is that people nowadays are afraid of starving to death. That’s why there is such talk. However, starving to death is very trivial. Becoming unchaste is very serious.”<sup>79</sup> Criticism of this position figures prominently in the *Book of Great Unity*, in which Kang clearly argues that it went against the original standards of Confucianism, and explains how it had led to situations of extreme suffering and injustice in the society of his day:

In ancient times, a woman was never criticized for remarrying after the death of her husband. Only afterwards was there the ideal of being with one man until the end. People started saying that “a virtuous woman does not serve two husbands.” But only women of great virtue can do that. Afterwards came the idea that “starving to death is trivial, becoming impure is serious.” As a result, everywhere there are widows who have not remarried. In China, the standards for women in my home province of Guangdong are particularly severe. In my home region, there are widows everywhere, in every little alley. They are poor and abandoned, old and helpless. Either they have children they are unable to look after, or are childless and oppressed. Alone and pitiable, in the cold of

78 Ibid., *KYWQJ*, 6:482: 孔子雖重教化，而以富民為先。管子所謂，治國之道，必先富民。此與宋儒徒陳高義，但言餓死事小，失節事大者，亦異矣。

79 See Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi 1981, 301: 只是後世怕寒餓死，故有是說。然餓死事極小，失節事極大 See also Ropp 1976, 7: “originally, a widow was not considered unchaste as long as she discharged her responsibilities to her children and in-laws. But, widows were expected to die if necessary in order to avoid dishonorable violation of their chastity. In Song Neo-Confucianism, widow suicide was rationalized as part of *lijiao* (ethical propriety).” According to Bol 2008, 244: “widow chastity gained the force of law only in the Yuan dynasty.” For a presentation of the plight of women in Confucian society, see also Clark and Wang 2004.

winter they have neither clothes nor blankets to keep themselves warm. And even in times of abundance, they live in great hardship.<sup>80</sup>

Further on in the same text, Kang tells us that:

The Song Confucians adored elevated ideals, and their demands surpassed those of Confucius, resulting in millions of widows all over the country living in misery, cold and hungry, and with their deep bitterness filling the air. And this is considered as being excellent customs. Good government lies in making the people happy and satisfied, fulfilling their desires and providing for their needs. The *Book of Poetry* says that good government means “no forsaken women.” How could it mean the air full of bitterness, and cold and hungry [widows] everywhere?<sup>81</sup>

Such cases are, of course, only a few examples of social injustice. However, the most important thing, as far as Kang’s viewpoint is concerned, is that all of these cases are directly imputed to Neo-Confucianism. Years before he wrote the *Book of Great Unity*, Kang pointed out how he considered indifference toward the plight of others as being totally incompatible with any form of Confucianism: “If I myself were suffering, I would expect others to help me. Am I to remain indifferent to the sufferings of others? Would even an animal be capable of that?”<sup>82</sup> The lack of altruistic concern thus imputed to Neo-Confucianism therefore not only points to a regrettable social reality at the end of the imperial era in China, but also suggests a fundamental flaw in Neo-Confucian ideological premises.

80 See *Datong shu* 大同書 (The book of great unity), in *KYWQJ*, 7:72: 故古者婦人夫死而嫁，未聞議之，後則加以“從一而終”之義。始則稱“烈女不事二夫”，是惟烈女乃然；繼則加以“餓死事小、失節事大”之義，於是孀守之寡婦遍地矣。中國之中，吾粵女義尤嚴，吾鄉族觸目所見，皆寡妻也，里巷皆是。貧而無依，老而無告，有子而不能養，無子而為人所欺，藁砧獨守，燈織自憐，冬寒而衣被皆無，年豐而半菽不飽。

81 *Ibid.*, 73: 宋儒好為高義，求加於聖人之上，致使億萬京垓寡婦，窮巷慘淒，寒餓交迫，幽怨彌天，而以為美俗。夫善為治教者，在使民樂其樂而利其利，養其欲而給其求。詩之言治曰：「內無怨女」，豈有以幽怨彌天、寒餓遍地為至治哉！

82 *Changxing xueji*, *KYWQJ*, 1:345: 我有飢溺，望人拯之，人有飢溺，我坐視之，雖禽獸其忍之哉？

## 6 The Incompleteness of Neo-Confucian Visions

Another recurrent theme of Kang's criticism of Neo-Confucianism is his claim that it represented a skewed and incomplete version of Confucius's teachings. In the context of his increasingly New Text rhetoric of the 1890s, this accusation is of course based on the idea that Neo-Confucian thinkers had been handicapped by the omnipresence of falsified canonical texts. This will be looked at further below. However, according to which definition of a "complete" or "authentic" form of Confucianism does Kang disqualify Zhu Xi and others?

Indications of Kang's view are arguably to be found in the formative phases of his intellectual development, especially the period during which he studied under Zhu Ciqi, as mentioned above; namely, the ideal of combining moral development (*yili*) with the practical governing of human affairs (*jingshi* 經世)—alternatively referred to as "institutions" (*zhidu* 制度).<sup>83</sup> This is a constant leitmotif across Kang's works. However, it is characterized by a shift in interpretation which needs to be remembered if one is to grasp the import of his intentions, despite the countless theoretical contradictions and cases of arbitrariness that often plague his thought (as numerous scholars have pointed out). This shift is to be found in what Kang actually understands by these concepts. For instance, if the governing of human affairs is without doubt synonymous with Kang's ideas of institutional reform in the 1890s—the addressing of structural challenges to China's survival being seen as the responsibility of a genuine scholar—in the majority of Kang's writings the notion most frequently refers to the bringing about of social justice. At the same time, moral development is understood not as being a question of personal cultivation but rather the expression of empathic altruism which helps advance the ideals of human well-being and social justice. Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism is clearly perceived as being an obstacle to the fulfillment of these two factors. According to Kang,

The idea of what is right, which is manmade, changes with the times, just like the five phases succeed each other and are relative to each other. This came from Confucius, and was explained by the Song worthies. It is just that their idea of morality (*yili*) is only one aspect (*yiduan* 一端) of [what it really is],

83 Kuang Bolin points out that for Kang, "practical governing of human affairs' meant 'institutional reform.'" Kuang 1980, 12.

and even so they claimed it came from Confucius.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, as already mentioned above, “Song Confucianism is one type of learning, but it does not represent the entirety of Confucius’s [teachings].”<sup>85</sup> As Kang Tongjia points out, for Kang the way of Confucius was not like the teachings of Zhu Xi, who merely “abided by the *Analects*, and gave priority to self-cultivation and the reduction of faults (*xiushen guaguo* 修身寡過).”<sup>86</sup>

In the context of his gradual turn toward a New Text paradigm, Kang identifies Neo-Confucianism’s relative disregard for the Confucian classics (*jing* 經) in favor of the so-called Four Books (*sishu* 四書) as the primary cause of the loss of a clear social dimension to scholastic concerns.<sup>87</sup> According to Kang, “Confucius is the most respectable teacher in the world. Morality and institutions all came from Confucius. Studying is therefore just a question of studying Confucius [...]. Everyone who wishes to study Confucius should study the classics.”<sup>88</sup> However, Kang claims that the advent of Neo-Confucianism in substance eclipsed the importance of the classics: “From the Han onward, govern-

84 *Changxing xueji*, KYWQJ, 1:345: 人立之義，與時推移，如五行之運迭，相重輕者也，原于孔子，析于宋賢。然宋賢之義理，特義理之一端也，今但推本于孔子。

85 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, KYWQJ, 2:173: 宋儒自是一種學問，非孔子全體也。

86 Kang Tongjia 1973, 20.

87 Daniel K. Gardner affirms that Neo-Confucianism’s interest in the Four Books “can perhaps be found in the Confucian reaction to the influence of Buddhism on Chinese thought at the time.” In fact, whereas the practical moral teaching of the Classics was based upon examples from history, “the Four Books were concerned primarily with the nature of man, the springs or inner source of his morality, and his relation to the universe. As these kinds of concerns became increasingly vital to the Confucian thinkers of the Song, it was natural that these four texts should grow in appeal and importance” (Gardner 1984, 67 f. The “Four Books” refer to the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸); whereas the “Six Classics” refer to the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), the *Book of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記) (non-extant), the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋).

88 See *Gui xue dawen* 桂學答問 (Questions and answers on learning in Guilin]

ment was based upon the Six Classics. Ever since the Song and the Yuan, it has been based on the Four Books.”<sup>89</sup> And also: “Master Zhu’s lifelong effort was dedicated to the Four Books, especially the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. However he didn’t touch the Six Classics.”<sup>90</sup> Kang’s attitude in this regard is summed up in his view of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which he claims combines the social and moral vocations of Confucianism: “Confucius’s ideas on both institutions and morality are to be found in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.”<sup>91</sup> Neglect of such a text, according to Kang’s reasoning, thus reflects a tendency to amputate Confucianism of its social and political dimension:

Confucius’s teachings on dealing with worldly affairs are to be found in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, whose ideas about reforms are made known by the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* commentaries. During the four hundred years of the Han dynasty, both political affairs and scholarship followed this model; not like talk about the classics nowadays, which is only for the superficial use of scholars and has nothing to do with the practical affairs of government.<sup>92</sup>

Kang’s attempts to counter this inevitably lead to the danger of overcompensation; and thus his thought has often been considered nonphilosophical in Confucian terms precisely because of a perceived lack of moral philosophy. Commenting on Kang’s insistence on the centrality of the classics, Qian Mu 錢穆

[1894], in *KYWQJ*, 2:18 (天下之所宗師者，孔子也。義理制度皆出于孔子，故學者為孔子而已...凡為孔子之學者，皆當學經學也...). See also *Changxing xueji*, *KYWQJ*, 1:348: “Confucius said: ‘My objectives are in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Their implementation is in the *Classic of Filial Piety*.’ *The Classic of Filial Piety* is about morality. *The Spring and Autumn Annals* is about how to deal with worldly affairs.” 孔子曰：「吾志在春秋，行在孝經。」...孝經義理也，春秋經世也。

89 *Nanhai shichengji*, *KYWQJ*, 2:254: 漢以後，六經之治；宋、元以來，四書之治。

90 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, *KYWQJ*, 2:136: 朱子一生精力全在四書，大學、中庸為最，而六經無與焉。

91 *Wanmu caotang koushuo*, *KYWQJ*, 2:135: 孔子制度在春秋，義理亦在春秋。

92 *Changxing xueji*, *KYWQJ*, 1:348: 孔子經世之學，在于春秋。春秋改制之義，著于公、穀。凡兩漢四百年，政事學術皆法焉，非如近時言經學者，僅為士人口耳簡畢之用，朝廷之施行，概乎不相關也。

(1895–1990) complains that “Put like that, Confucianism would mean study of the classics.”<sup>93</sup> Qian continues by pointing out that “Now that Kang dedicated himself entirely to *Gongyang* Confucianism, he inevitably ended up abandoning the *Analects* and, as a result, Song and Ming [Neo-Confucianism].”<sup>94</sup>

From a New Text perspective, the incompleteness of Neo-Confucian thought is worsened by the effects of Liu Xin’s supposed falsification of Confucian classics: “Most of the classics revered by the Song [Neo-Confucians] are forgeries and not the [true] classics of Confucius.”<sup>95</sup> And even if Kang does not attack the Four Books as such, he considers that an emphasis on moral cultivation without a concomitant elaboration of its social and political dimensions leads necessarily to an incomplete and misconstrued iteration of Confucian teachings. In the context of Kang’s reformist agenda of the late 1890s, the alleged falsification of Confucian classics, as has been well documented by scholars of the Qing dynasty, serves as an ideological justification for ushering in new institutions seen as capable of responding to the unprecedented challenges looming over China’s fate in calamitous times. A reinvented Confucius is conjured up as an example of historical precedent in this respect; a Confucius who is depicted not only as a reformer in ancient times but also as a philosopher whose vision of humanistic development is an invitation to progress toward a better future. Kang’s utopian age of “Great Unity” (*datong* 大同) is often described as a fundamental break with “traditional” Confucian thought. However, it could be argued that, along with the explosiveness that New Text rhetoric afforded him, Kang’s ideas in this regard are in fact a continuation of the concerns about social justice already omnipresent in his earlier works. In this way, his criticism of Neo-Confucianism finds new forms of articulation that survive even when the New Text / Old Text controversy is no longer the core concern.

In particular, this criticism is developed around the following accusations: that Neo-Confucianism corresponds only to a period of incomplete humanistic development—the so-called age of disorder (*luanshi* 亂世)—synonymous

93 Qian [1952] 1998, 123.

94 *Ibid.*, 133.

95 *Xinxue weijingkao* 新學偽經考 (A study of the forged classics of Xin Learning) [1891], in *KYWQJ*, 1:356: 宋人所尊述之經，乃多偽經，非孔子之經也。

with social injustice; that it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of who Confucius was and what he represented; and that, consequently, it has created an erroneous vision of Confucianism as a humanistic philosophy, thereby hindering its role in the modern world.

In a text written in 1923, in the context of interactions with Korean scholars, Kang points out that:

As Master Zhu did not take his teachings from the Six Classics, he was only able to expound the Four Books. However, even then, what he expounded were but doctrines from the age of disorder. He was only able to grasp one aspect of the teachings of Confucius, and was merely partial and fragmentary. What is passed down as Confucianism in Korea is in fact Liu Xin's illegitimate falsified classics and Master Zhu's fragmentary teachings. They are not the authentic original Confucianism.<sup>96</sup>

Neo-Confucianism is thus presented as being structurally part of an incomplete and unjust phase of human development. As he points out elsewhere, "Although Master Zhu was a worthy man, he only ever understood the way of the age of disorder. It cannot be extended to the present age. That is why, even if we may respect him, we cannot venerate him."<sup>97</sup>

Central to this are also perceptions of Confucius himself, whose importance is ever more emphasized in Kang's work with the passing of time.<sup>98</sup> New Text Confucianism of course plays a key role in this process. Significant scholarly attention has already been paid to Kang's visions of Confucius as a "reformer," a "king without a crown," or the "founder of a Confucian religion," and it is not

96 *Peishan shutang ji* 培山書堂記 (Notes on the *Baesan Seodang*) [1923], in *KYWQJ*, 11:260: 夫朱子無得於六經，只能發明四書。然所發明者，猶是據亂之說，僅能得孔子一端，偏安割據而已。朝鮮所傳為孔教者，實劉歆偽纂之經，朱子割據之教，非孔子本教之真也。

97 *Yu riren mojun bitan* 與日人某君筆談 (Written conversation with a Japanese gentleman), in *KYWQJ*, 11:118: 朱子雖賢，而所得僅據亂之道，不能範圍今之世，故雖可敬而不能尊奉矣。

98 Hsiao points out that "the only authority that he unconditionally acknowledged was that of Confucius—not Confucius as traditionally recognized but Confucius as he himself understood him" (Hsiao 1975, 57).

the intention of this article to dwell upon these aspects in particular. However, it is worth remembering that at the heart of such striking positions lies the belief that Confucius's philosophy represents a fundamental shift in ideological paradigms at the end of the Zhou era (eleventh–third century BCE). Already in the earliest phases of his intellectual development, Kang emphasizes this aspect in his criticism of Neo-Confucianism, declaring that one of the shortcomings of Zhu Xi's thought lay in his incapacity to understand such a shift. According to Kang, Zhu Xi “did not understand the difference between Zhou Learning and that of Confucius, mistakenly thinking that the *Great Learning* was the *Great Learning* of Zhouzhi.”<sup>99</sup>

## 7 Neo-Confucian Misrepresentations of Confucius and Their Consequences

For Kang, Confucius was not just one worthy figure among others, as conventional Neo-Confucian “lineages” suggested. He was the inventor of a new philosophy, and not simply the transmitter of previous teachings. Failure to see this deformed understanding of Confucius and his legacy:

Master Zhu did not have a clear understanding of [Confucianism in its] entirety, and only expounded the *Analects*, thinking that the way of Confucius was [entirely] to be found therein. This was highly fragmentary and partial. Master Zhu's Confucius is not [the real] Confucius. Some people do not know that Confucius was in fact the founder of Confucianism, and mistakenly think that he was just one philosopher among others.<sup>100</sup>

This is of course a fundamentally New Text perspective, since the refutation of Confucius being “one philosopher among others” is aimed at drawing clear distinctions between a hereby reinforced Confucius on the one hand and Old Text—and Neo-Confucian—paragons such as Yao and Shun on the other. As

99 *Jiaoxue tongyi, KYWQJ*, 1:32: 不知周學、孔學之殊，誤以大學當周制之大學。

100 *Yidali youji, KYWQJ*, 7:375: 朱子不深明本末，乃僅發明《論語》，以為孔子之道在是，則割地偏安多矣。此乃朱子之孔子，非孔子也。或乃不知孔子實為儒教之祖，誤以為哲學之一家。

such, for Kang it is simply erroneous to consider other figures to be on a par with Confucius:

Later generations [i.e., Neo-Confucians] were dubious of differences between Confucius, Yao, and Shun. Wang Yangming had the theory that “Yao and Shun were worth ten thousand *yi* of gold, and Confucius, nine thousand.” In that he was greatly mistaken. Master Zhu claimed that Confucius was more able and virtuous than Yao and Shun, but that his achievements were similar. However, they didn’t understand Confucius’s institutional reforms, that he established an ideal of government that could last for generations, and that there was no limit to his virtuous achievements.<sup>101</sup>

Kang understands the Neo-Confucian “downplaying” of Confucius’s historical role to be a means of diluting the social message inherent in original Confucianism and most efficiently conveyed by New Text teachings. According to Kang, the result of Neo-Confucianism’s following of “falsified” classics is a tendency to think that (New Text) social ideals such as *datong* are totally alien to Confucian thinking, and a fundamental incapacity to respond to the social needs of China in the modern era:

Master Zhu was misled by Liu Xin’s age of disorder, claiming that the *Liyun*’s theory of *datong* was Daoism [lit., Laozi’s learning]. He abandoned Confucius’s theory of universal peace and *datong*, and [his teachings] are incapable of encompassing present-day ideas such as democracy and socialism. As a result, the way of Confucius has been restricted.<sup>102</sup>

The idea that Neo-Confucianism—and not Confucianism as such—is an obstacle to the development of “democracy” and “socialism” in China is a recurrent theme from Kang’s later years. It is accompanied by the idea that the image

101 *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (A study of Confucius as a reformer), in *KYWQJ*, 3:116: 孔子、堯、舜，後世疑其差等。王陽明有「堯、舜萬鎰，孔子九千鎰」說，固為大謬。朱子謂孔子賢於堯、舜，在事功似矣。然不知孔子改制，治定百世，乃為功德無量。

102 *Da Pujun datixue shu* 答樸君大提學書 (A letter in reply to Mr. Park on learning), in *KYWQJ*, 11:346: 然朱子惑于劉歆據亂之世，據《禮運》大同之說為老子之學，是朱子捨棄孔子太平大同之說，而無以範圍方今民主社會之義，則孔子之道窮矣。

of Confucianism had been tarnished by Neo-Confucianism, thereby leading to its rejection by younger generations. In this way, he seems to suggest that May Fourth era calls for the overthrowing of “Confucius’s boutique” were ultimately caused by a Neo-Confucian betrayal of Confucius’s true social philosophy. He says that Zhu

suspected that the *Liyun’s datong* was Daoism, claimed that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* could not be interpreted, and did not understand the theories of *Gongyang*, *Guliang*, *Dong Zhongshu*, and *He Xiu*. As a result, the ideas of universal peace and *datong* have been discontinued and made inaccessible. If people merely keep to doctrines from the age of disorder, then there will be no way of encompassing the ideas of democracy and socialism that exist in Europe and America. This has led to Confucianism being doubted and attacked by [the followers of] new learning. Isn’t this a waste? Master Zhu had no grasp of the Six Classics, and only expounded the Four Books. However, what he expounded were doctrines from the age of disorder. He only understood one aspect of Confucius’s teachings, and was partial and fragmentary.<sup>103</sup>

In fact, according to Kang, the prevalent image of Confucius in the modern era is a misconceived one, since Confucius has fundamentally been associated with Zhu Xi and Neo-Confucianism: “The ‘Confucius’ people are attacking in the present day is merely Master Zhu, and not Confucius himself.”<sup>104</sup> And: “What people refer to as ‘Confucius’ nowadays is merely Master Zhu [...]. The ‘Confucius’ they talk about is just Master Zhu, and not Confucius himself. Confucius is accommodating and unimpeded. He adapts to the changes of the times. There is nothing that he cannot encompass, and there is nothing in his teachings with which one can find fault.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, according to Kang, Confucianism

103 *Peishan shutang ji, KYWQJ*, 11:260: 疑《禮運》大同為老子說，謂《春秋》不可解，不知公、穀、董、何之口說，於是太平大同之義斷絕閉塞矣。徒存據亂之說，則不能範圍歐美民主社會之義，遂至孔子教為新學所疑攻，豈不耗哉！夫朱子無得於六經，只能發明四書。然所發明者，猶是據亂之說，僅能得孔子一端，偏安割據而已；see also *Yu riren mojun bitan, KYWQJ*, 11:118.

104 *Kongzi shengdanri yanjiangci, KYWQJ*, 11:269: 諸子今之攻孔子者，乃攻朱子而已，非攻孔子也；see also *Chang’an jiangyan lu, KYWQJ*, 11:278.

105 *Kaifeng yanjiangci* 開封演講辭 (A speech in Kaifeng), in *KYWQJ*, 11:238: 若

could in fact disappear altogether if Zhu Xi's iteration of it were to continue to be followed: "If Confucius's way of *datong* is not elucidated, and one just refers to the partiality of Master Zhu's teachings, then I fear that Confucianism will perish. And if Confucianism perishes, to what will Master Zhu's teachings be able to attach themselves?"<sup>106</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

This article has shown how numerous aspects of Kang Youwei's criticism of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism are consistent across the various stages of his intellectual development. We have seen that although this criticism overlaps with—and is indeed reinforced by—his adoption of a New Text paradigm in the 1890s, this paradigm was certainly not the origin of his rejection of Neo-Confucianism. It could be reasonably argued that the most representative aspects of Kang's thought overall are a fundamental *qi*-based materialistic ontology and a constant desire for the advent of humanness (*ren*), attained through the practical implementation of Confucian statecraft (*jingshi*). These are aspects that Kang inherited from previous generations of Qing scholars.

In his writings, Kang is notoriously reluctant to give credit to recent or contemporary influences. This tendency not only negatively impacts the way his ideas are received; it also hinders the work of scholars seeking to situate his thought within the history of Chinese philosophy in general. Ironically, in the same way that Kang's New Text approach of the 1890s encouraged the reading between the lines of Confucian classics so as to discern the "true" teachings of Confucius, the modern reader of Kang's works also needs to identify what lies behind certain standpoints which at first sight seem relatively straightforward.

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今之所謂孔子者，乃朱子耳... 今之議孔子者，議朱子耳，非孔子也。孔子圓通無礙，隨時變通，無所不有，無可議者也；see also *Kongzi shengdanri yanjiangci*, KYWQJ, 11:269: "The *Analects* contain Confucius's New Text doctrines. However, what is referred to as the *Analects* today is just the Neo-Confucian and Master Zhu's [vision of it]" 《論語》有孔子今文有以說，而今之所據說《論語》者、宋朱子而已。

106 *Da Pujun datixue shu*, KYWQJ, 11:346: 若不發明孔子大同之道，而徒稱號偏安之朱子，則孔子之教恐亡也。孔教亡而朱子何所附焉？

Kang's criticism of Neo-Confucianism, fully consistent with Qing intellectual developments, needs to be understood in this way.

Another of the oft-cited flaws of Kang's philosophy is his frequent and flagrant disregard of philological rigor. This of course rules out any genuine affiliation between his thought and Qing evidential research. However, the importance of philology in late imperial scholarship should not make one overlook the materialistic dimension of earlier critiques of Cheng-Zhu thought in the Qing era. These critiques, without the philological rigor normally associated with them in the works of such figures as Dai Zhen, seem to have had the largest impact on Kang's thought during his formative years. A systematic analysis of this influence will need to be developed elsewhere.

However, these shortcomings might reasonably be "excused" when placed within the context of Kang's thought as a lifelong philosophical and sociopolitical project, a project characterized by a constant desire to see the full development of *ren* in China and worldwide and which encompassed all of the other dimensions of his philosophical and political endeavors, from institutional reform to the visualization of a utopian future in which the boundaries between humans have disappeared. The ultimate constancy of this objective—overshadowed by the apparent irregularity of frequently changing positions over the course of his life—needs to be held as a reference point when attempting to gauge the meaning of fluctuating and evolving ideas in Kang's works. And while at first glance Kang's attitudes toward Neo-Confucianism might appear to be of marginal importance, especially when compared with more widely known aspects of his thought, they in fact enable an invaluable perspective from which to better understand some of its most consistent aspects. This article has sought to highlight how these aspects, especially when considered in the wider context of intellectual developments in the late imperial period in China, enable one to perceive Kang more clearly, not as an iconoclastic betrayer of "traditional" philosophy, but rather as someone who attempted to bring it into the modern era, albeit at times in unconventional ways.

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