

Historians of China have had difficulty placing Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) in the flux of modern Chinese history. Did he lead a political breakthrough in the 1890s, opening China’s path toward modern bureaucratic and constitutional government? Or was he a political failure and reactionary who ultimately set back the clock of progress? Does Kang represent the final flowering of Confucianism, a rejection of Confucianism, or the founding of a renewed Confucianism? During his lifetime and since, critics dismissed Kang as a sloppy thinker, a failed reformer, a plagiarizer and forger, and a fantasist, and a man whom time passed by long before his death.

While Kang evidently believed that he alone understood the truths first laid out by Confucius and even proposed to surpass Confucius, he founded no school of followers. Why, then, do we take Kang Youwei seriously? Notice that the question is not, “Why *should* we take Kang seriously?” At least from the pioneering and still-unequaled work of Kung-chuan Hsiao in the 1970s, the centrality of Kang to modern Chinese politics and thought has been clear.<sup>1</sup> But if only because each new generation must come to terms with a figure who, one way or another, embodied China’s transition to modernity, we need to revisit Kang from time to time.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, our perspectives on Kang and his historical significance necessarily reflect a new appreciation of China’s successful search for “wealth and power”—attributes Kang never regarded as the highest good but not attributes he despised.

The articles in this special issue suggest that there were many Kangs, as indeed Kung-chuan Hsiao noted fifty years ago, but they also lead us some way toward understanding the inner coherence of Kang’s thought across the realms of politics, philosophy, religion, culture, and scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Duan Lian 段炼 examines a collection of early essays penned by Kang in the 1880s, pointing to how Kang

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1 Hsiao 1975, translated into Chinese as Xiao 1997.

2 For aspects of this intellectual transition, see Wang et al. 2007.

3 Three of the articles here—those by Duan, Blitstein, and Wang—are revised papers first presented at a conference on “Key Texts in Modern Chinese Political

based a political program of top-down reforms on a reworking of Confucian notions of power and principle. Duan argues that Kang's thought displayed a high degree of coherence, whatever tensions remained in it. By deriving principle from power and trends, Kang was embarking on a secularizing project that was based on "universal principles" rather than "Heavenly principle" but principles that nonetheless represented—or actually created—the Dao. While Duan focuses on Kang's response to the epistemological crisis facing Confucianism in the late Qing, Pablo Blitstein focuses on Kang's development of a "science of matter"—labor and industry—that was based on both Qing dynasty statecraft traditions and on Kang's knowledge of Western theory and practice of political economy. But Blitstein shows that Kang was not merely interested in goods but also both in the knowledge necessary to produce them and in their usefulness for the nation and for society as a whole. This perhaps suggests, along with Duan, that Kang conceived institutional reform in China (based on universal principles) as part of a much larger movement toward the Great Unity (*datong* 大同). Blitstein emphasizes that while Kang looked to the state and particularly to the monarchy to foster the science of matter, it ultimately depended on knowledge. It is thus not overly reductive to note that for Kang, it was not power that produced knowledge but (true) knowledge that produced (legitimate) power. What Blitstein calls matterology was evident in Kang's ultimate vision of the future, the *Datongshu*, though this work was intensely spiritual as well. In his article, Wang Fansen 王汎森 points to the break that *Datongshu* represented with the earlier tradition of Chinese utopianism, which rested on the "moral involution" of intense ascetic commitment. Wang argues that by envisioning the future as one of the happiness of all humankind freed from the "boundaries" or chains of present-day society, Kang was engaged in a project of destruction as well as creation. Concluding that the influence of *Datongshu* can hardly be overestimated, Wang also points to the doubled nature of Kang's utopianism, which exhibited a realistic and cautious side as well as boundless faith in the capacity of human intelligence.

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Thought" held at the University of Connecticut in September 2019; while the other three articles—those by Defoort, Moores, and Lee—were contributed later.

Historians have naturally focused on Kang's political views, but the history of scholarship offers invaluable perspectives on Kang's life as well. Carine Defoort argues that Kang Youwei played a major role in the understanding of *zhengming* 正名 (correction of names) as a keystone of Confucian thought. Previous thinkers had of course discussed *zhengming*, but it was not a central concern. Defoort shows that for Kang, however, the case for Confucius as "reformer" and "uncrowned king" was based on Confucius's act of *zhengming*. If it was Hu Shi who essentially constructed the modern discourse of *zhengming*, it was Kang who had already implied the links between *zhengming* as ordering the world in Confucius's time and strengthening the nation in Kang's own time. As Defoort points out, Kang's New Text scholarship was inextricably related to his view of Confucius, but Seán Moores argues that Kang's moral philosophy was as deeply informed by his critique of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, a critique that predated and survived his use of New Text arguments. Moores highlights the consistency of Kang's critique, which he further argues reflected basic intellectual trends of the nineteenth century but which in Kang reinforced a devotion to bringing about *ren* 仁 (perfect humanness). At the same time, Moores, too, emphasizes Kang's "materialist ontology" in contrast to the primacy of "principle" in Neo-Confucianism, and thus highlights the foundation of both Kang's reformism and his utopianism.

In Moores's words, Kang attempted to bring traditional philosophy into the modern era. The rediscovery of Kang, as it were, in China in the twenty-first century might suggest he succeeded in some ways. To conclude this special issue, Ting-mien Lee 李庭綿 offers a brief overview of Kangism in China today. Lee argues that Mainland New Confucianism, much less cultural conservatism since the 1990s, cannot be reduced to the turn to Kang Youwei, yet nonetheless many Kangists today identify as heirs of those movements, in contradistinction to the older New Confucianism of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Lee points out that for today's Kangists, "returning to Kang" is a way of thinking about political questions in the broadest sense. How does China become a modern nation but maintain its traditions? To answer that question, there is at least much that is appealing for them in Kang's resolute opposition to revolution, his vision of "great unity," and even the notion of a Confucian religion.

In the very different circumstances of the twenty-first century, a set of classicists find themselves returning to basic issues first raised in the late Qing, including, as Lee shows, the role scholars should play in public life and the role China should play in the world.

## References

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