

# “POWER CREATES PRINCIPLES, AND PRINCIPLES CREATE THE DAO”: THE ESOTERIC AND EXOTERIC ESSAYS OF MASTER KANG

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## 1 Introduction

Faced with the internal and external crises of imperial China in the late Qing, Chinese intellectuals, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, attempted to remold their view of the world to understand the enormous changes to global structures that they were witnessing. One approach rested on the conceptual patterns of “principle-power interactions” (*lishi hudong* 理勢互動) and “essence-function dichotomy” (*tiyong erfen* 體用二分). Scholars-officials such as Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841), Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), and Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) tried to build on the statecraft tradition to strengthen the Chinese comprehension of the outside world and deepen China’s relationship with it.<sup>1</sup> In their view, “principle” offered a holistic and eternal interpretation of the significance of the life of humankind, which was based on the worldview of a transcendent Heaven (*tian* 天). “Power,” then, referred to objective trends and an inevitable disposition which gave rise to new conditions due to shifts in the economy, military affairs, business, or diplomacy. Thus the “principle-power interaction” usually indicated the balances and tensions between moral value and realistic strategy during periods of transition in Chinese history, challenging and modifying the traditional worldview of Confucianism.<sup>2</sup>

However, a second approach, seen in scholars such as Liao Ping 廖平 (1852–1932), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–

- 1 As key concepts in the Chinese tradition, *li* 理 (principle) and *shi* 勢 (power, or circumstance and trends) formed a crucial intellectual framework for historical analysis among the intelligentsia in premodern China. For example, in Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 historical conception, the “principle-power interaction” deals with the philosophical issues of the “variable” and the “invariable” in history, “especially to demonstrate the connection between the necessities of reality and value.” Zhao 2017, 55.
- 2 See Yang Guoqiang 2015.

1929), whose research interests lay in the New Text school, began to weave together domestic political reform and tactics for foreign affairs within the framework of the Confucian classics. As one of the great intellectuals and political reformers of the “age of transition” in modern China, Kang Youwei proposed rethinking the concepts of “universal law” (*gongfa* 公法), “substantial principle” (*sbili* 實理), the “three ages” (*sandai* 三世), “institutional reform” (*gaizhi* 改制), and “Great Unity” (*datong* 大同). Thus did Kang start to “invent a new ideal” (*faming yizhong xin lixiang* 發明一種新理想), in the words of Liang Qichao, on the symbiotic connections between the policies for “seeking wealth and power” (*xunqiu fuqiang* 尋求富強) and the imagination of the “world of great unity” (*datong shiji* 大同世界) in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup>

*Esoteric and Exoteric Essays of Master Kang* (*Kangzi neiwai pian* 康子內外篇), compiled in 1886, consists of fifteen main chapters and totals 18,000 characters. Nine of the chapters, including chapters on “Reward and punishment” (*Hepi pian* 闔辟篇), “Uncompleted mission” (*Weiji pian* 未濟篇), “Neo-Confucianism” (*Lixue pian* 理學篇), “Love and hatred” (*Aiwu pian* 愛惡篇), “Human nature” (*Xingxue pian* 性學篇), “Compassion” (*Buren pian* 不忍篇), “Knowledge and discourse” (*Zhiyan pian* 知言篇), “Damp and heat” (*Shire pian* 濕熱篇), and “Awareness and recognition” (*Jueshi pian* 覺識篇), were published in *Qingyi bao* 清議報 (China Discussion) journal in 1899 after the defeat of the Hundred Days’ Reform while the rest were only published after Kang’s death in 1927.<sup>4</sup> The microfilm of the entire fifteen chapters of *Essays*, published in *An External Compilation of Unpublished Works from Thatched Hut among Ten Thousand Trees* (*Wanmu caotang yigao waibian* 萬木草堂遺稿外編) in 1978, was preserved in the library of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. According to Kung-chuan Hsiao, these four reels of microfilm of

3 Liang 1998, 82. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

4 The chapter titles of *Essays* are virtually untranslatable in English because Kang uses arcane references to the Confucian classics to express his complex ideas. For example, the literal meaning of “Hepi” 闔辟 is “closing and opening” (*yiguan yihe* 一開一合), which comes from the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), while Kang uses this term here as a metaphor for absolute power and political strategies that the emperor may use at will.

Kang's writings, both published and in manuscript form, were made by Mary C. Wright from the collections of Kang's daughter Kang Tongbi in the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

Through an analysis of *Essays*, this article explores key aspects of Kang's intellectual life before he brought it to a climax in the political reform movement from 1895 to 1898. First, stimulated by the intellectual trend and social basis of "power creates principles" (*youshi shengli* 由勢生理) in the late Qing, Kang formulated a new academic position. Second, based on this academic position, Kang gave political support to the principle that the "sage-king rules the world" (*shengwang jingshi* 聖王經世). And third, Kang combined his political stance and academic views with a revival of the ancient ideal of "Great Unity." Previous research has taken Kang's early works into account but generally focused on the distinct tensions in Kang's thought rather than his ability to weave a coherent synthesis. Kung-chuan Hsiao sheds much light on the differences between *Essays* and another of Kang's contemporaneous books: *A Complete Book of Substantial Truths and Universal Principles* (*Shili gongfa quanshu* 實理公法全書). Hsiao concludes that both books express a strong "materialistic direction" toward human motives and emotions, but that the former text shows greater respect for traditional morality and social values.<sup>6</sup> Wang Rongzu's study of Kang highlights "epistemological bias" in *Essays*. Wang pointed out that, deeply influenced by Western learning, Kang's epistemological bias profoundly shaped his perception on monoculturalism before he had turned thirty, which in turn shaped Kang's early belief that the development of history and culture shared the same rules of nature, which he called the "universal principles of humankind" (人類公理).<sup>7</sup> Finally, Gan Chunsong's research emphasizes that in *Essays*, Kang began comparing Confucianism to other religions in the world. At the same time, Kang distinguished differences in their perspectives of the secular life and the spirit world, laying the foundation for his future concepts of the "Religion of Humanity" (人道教) and "Religion of the Spirits" (神道教).<sup>8</sup>

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5 See Hsiao 1975, v.

6 Ibid., 47, 133.

7 Wang Rongzu 2006, 20 f.

8 Gan 2015, esp. 31.

The thought, politics, and influence of Kang Youwei has thus received considerable attention, but previous research has neglected the critical problematic of Kang's efforts to balance "power" and "principle" and to ground this concept in his academic imagination and political activities before the 1898 reform movement.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of *Essays*, and including some other texts Kang produced in this period, this article also explores the intellectual consequences and influences of Kang's "universal principles and substantial laws" (實理公法) in the late Qing, and how his thought reflected a "secularizing orientation" in modern China.

## 2 The Crises of Confucianism and Kang Youwei's *On Pedagogy*

By the mid-nineteenth century, the internal and external structures of imperial China had changed tremendously. Following military defeats at the hands of Western powers, the Qing court signed the unequal treaties, which included territorial concessions and huge indemnities. The tribute system, an essential element of the Chinese elite worldview, was collapsing. China was gradually pulled into an international system of state competition.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Taiping Rebellion and other mid-century uprisings intensified conflicts between local administrations and the central government and ultimately heightened long-standing tensions between the Manchu rulers and their Han subjects. The structural crises of the Qing tremendously challenged the cultural and political order on which Qing legitimacy was based.<sup>11</sup> The "self-strengthening movement" (*zhiqiang yundong* 自強運動) of the 1860s, which focused on the promotion of military industries in China, failed to prepare China for increasing imperialist pressures, seen for example in the Sino-French War (1883–1885) and Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Thus a certain optimism seen in the Tongzhi

9 Other representative studies of Kang include Tang Zhijun 1984, 1989; Chang 1987; Zarrow 2002; Tang Wenming 2012; Bao 2017. Studies of modern Chinese intellectual history include major discussions of Kang: Qian 1997, 1996; Xiao 1998; Onogawa 1982; Zhu 1995, 1996; Wang Hui 2006; Li 2008.

10 Hamashita 1999, 11 f.

11 Schwartz 2010, 295.

and early Guangxu reigns was replaced by self-doubt and a probing self-revaluation.<sup>12</sup>

The atmosphere of the period from the 1860s to the 1890s was complicated and fluctuating—which provided the conditions under which Kang could think of “inventing a new ideal.” Kang’s first book—*General Discussion on Pedagogy* (*Jiaoxue tongyi* 教學通義)—was, according to Liang Qichao, inspired by the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮).<sup>13</sup> Kang started by depicting imperial China as a weak nation due to its “lack of talented ministries at imperial court, lack of talented scholars in the academies, lack of talented generals in the army, lack of talented soldiers in the troop, lack of talented peasants in the fields, lack of talented craftsmen in the towns, and lack of talented businessmen in the cities.”<sup>14</sup> Kang explicitly pointed out that the structural crises faced by Confucian China arose not only out of the military and economic gap between China and the Western world but, perhaps more crucially, from the deficiency in cultivating the “Dao of rituals.”<sup>15</sup> Thus in Kang’s conceptualization “pedagogy” (*jiaoxue* 教學) did not precisely mean what the term refers to today (“teaching and learning,” or *jiaoyu* 教育 and *xuexi* 學習). Rather, it was inseparable from the rituals (or ethics) and social (or political) practices of Confucianism. Therefore, in his first chapter Kang wrote: “Where there are rituals and practices, there is the Dao of humankind (*rendao* 人道). The former belongs to virtues, while the latter to techniques. And that is all that sages should teach and people should learn.”<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, in this period, from about 1878 to 1880, Kang’s views were not always consistent. Perhaps attempting to synthesize the Old Text and New Text schools of Confucian scholarship, he was not unaware of the discrepancies between them. Briefly speaking, the “old texts” referred to versions of classics that were written in pre-Qin script, while the “new text” classics were in the new orthography of the Han dynasty. New Text scholars portrayed Confucius as a prophet and “uncrowned king.” Thus they believed the classics were sacred and

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12 Chang 1987, 6.

13 Liang 1998, 77.

14 “Jiaoxue tongyi” 教學通義 (General discussion on pedagogy), in Kang 2007a, 19.

15 Ibid.

16 “Yuanjiao diyi” 原教第一 (First chapter on education), in *ibid.*, 20.

carried hidden clues to the future that they tried to decode. But the scholars of the Old Text school treated the “new texts” as apocryphal and believed that the classics were the records of history and only edited by Confucius, and so subject to rational analysis. On the one hand, Kang devoted himself to studying some classics central to the Old Text tradition, such as the *Decorum and Ritual* (*Zhouli*, *Yili* 儀禮), *Lexicography* (*Erya* 爾雅), and *Explaining Graphs and Characters* (*Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字). Thus it was logical for Kang to praise the Duke of Zhou (Zhou gong 周公) and regard the rites of Zhou as the core of his *On Pedagogy*. But at the same time, Kang was beginning to subscribe to the tenets of the Gongyang 公羊 New Text school and to unbind the ties he previously had with the Old Text school.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, *On Pedagogy*'s discussions of the Six Classics (*liujing* 六經), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), and Zhu Xi revealed some ambiguity in regard to the Old Text school and its founder, Liu Xin 劉歆. Kang revised his work after reading Liao Ping 廖平, a distinguished contemporary scholar who favored the New Text school.<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, Kang's endeavor blurred the scholarly boundaries between the New and Old Text interpretations, which led to some of his chapters contradicting one another. Nonetheless, Kang's early work proposed an ideal political pattern that was legitimized by his reinterpretation of Confucianism. Institutional reform was thus put on the agenda in the 1880s.

Following his notion of “returning to ancient times to create new laws and institutions,”<sup>19</sup> Kang proposed that Chinese adopt the Duke of Zhou's “pedagogy and rites” to deal with the foreign pressures and domestic discord that they were

17 Kang 2011, 11–13.

18 In Zhu Weizheng's opinion, Kang revised *Jiaoxue tongyi* after he had finished reading Liao Ping's works. Until then, Kang was having trouble synthesizing Old and New Text school interpretations, so he abandoned his revisions and started to write a new book, *A New Study of the Forged Classics* (*Xinxue weijinkao* 新學偽經考). Zhu's conclusion, however, needs more evidence to be verified. The chapters of *Jiaoxue tongyi* were obviously finished and revised in different periods and do not show that Kang plagiarized Liao, as some scholars have charged. See Zhu Weizheng, “Kang Youwei zai shijiu shiji” 康有為在十九世紀 (Kang Youwei in the nineteenth century), in Zhu 1996, 194.

19 “Jiaoxue tongyi,” in Kang 2007a, 19: 反古復始，創法立制.

currently facing. At the same time, he believed that political institutions must evolve in accord with the trends of the times (*yinshi er bian* 因時而變). In *On Pedagogy* Kang says, “The rise of a new emperor lies in new institutions which renew the people’s worldview.”<sup>20</sup> Although Kang had made his aims clear in his first book, exactly what political steps did his reinterpretations of Confucianism demand? It was another work, the *Esoteric and Exoteric Essays of Master Kang*, completed around the same time but which was both more detailed and more philosophical, where Kang addressed this question. *Essays* puts a high value on the emperor’s absolute power and moral authority. In other words, any kind of institutional reform in China must be based on the absolute monarchy and retain the universal kingship.

### 3 Themes and Variations of Neo-Confucianism: The Scholarly Position of *Essays*

Although *Essays* is divided into a seemingly traditional “internal section” (*neipian* 內篇) and “external section” (*waipian* 外篇), Kang was actually breaking with earlier hermeneutical practice, which focused on the “Dao/essence” (*dao/ti* 道/體) and the “qi/function” (*qi/yong* 器/用), respectively. Kang might be read as reinforcing the point that *dao* and *qi*, and *ti* and *yong*, are inherently intertwined. The boundaries of chapters discussing “universal principles of nature and people” (*tiandi, renwu zhi li* 天地、人物之理) and “matters of political order and arts and music” (*zhengjiao, yiyue zhi shi* 政教、藝樂之事) are blurry, but in fact the chapters of *Essays* were arranged and published randomly as we read today.

In terms of the scholarly position of *Essays*, some scholars have regarded it as a typical work of Neo-Confucianism, while others have concluded it was written to oppose Neo-Confucianism.<sup>21</sup> I believe, however, that one finds both these tendencies in the book and the task is to see how they can be accommodated together. There is no doubt that much of Kang’s arguments were in line with the Neo-Confucianism he had imbibed from his Confucian family tradition and the teaching of his mentor Zhu Ciqi 朱次琦. Thus Kang writes:

20 Ibid., 24: 一王之興，莫不有新制，以易民觀聽。

21 Hsiao 1975, 54; Wu 1996, 106.

For the root of everything under Heaven is the principle of reason [...]. The aim of learning is to explore the origin of natural principles and to help people to reshape themselves under the principle of humankind.<sup>22</sup>

And:

The virtues of benevolence and righteousness are both accumulated with occurrences in human life, which relate to experiential training rather than human nature. It may be true if they were really based on human nature, they would not be different from love and hatred. The goodness [of benevolence and righteousness] is not the Heavenly Principle, but the result of the suitability of ways of the world. Thus, due to their complete difference from “hatred,” benevolence and righteousness represent goodness and are shaped by human behavior, not human nature.<sup>23</sup>

In his chapter on “Compassion,” Kang argues that “because of its blood and vigor, humankind has the awareness and cognition to cultivate the mind of compassion.”<sup>24</sup> The attitude of compassion reflects the value of benevolence and the concerns of the people, which scholars of the Song dynasty had discovered in Mencius. Its aim was to “protect the people” (*baomin* 保民), including to “save the people” (*jiumin* 救民), “nourish the people” (*yangmin* 養民), and “teach the people” (*jiaomin* 教民). To do this, one needs to constitute an elite political system of monarchy combined with a gentry class strictly devoted to self-cultivation.<sup>25</sup> Kang also says that he is himself worried and distressed by the state of China: the imperfections of its rulership, the inefficient development of the land, and the lack of personal cultivation of the people. These feelings stem from his compassion for the people and his strong intention to propel institutional reform.<sup>26</sup>

22 Kang Youwei 康有為 (2007b). *Kangzi neiwai pian* 康子內外篇. Beijing: Renmin daxue, hereafter *KNP*, 100: 夫萬物之故，皆又所以然之理 [...] 學也者，窮物理之所以然，裁成輔相，人理之當然而已。

23 *KNP*, 101: 今之所謂仁義者，積人事為之，差近于習，而非所謂性也。若夫性，則仁義愛惡無別也。善者，非天理也，人事之宜也。故以仁義為善，而別於愛惡之有惡者，非性也，習也。

24 *KNP*, 104: 有血氣，於是有覺知，而有不忍人之心。

25 See Yang Zhende 2018, 153.

26 *KNP*, 104.

Yet aside from these Neo-Confucian metaphysical and moral themes, another style of rhetoric is found in *Essays*. Kang was trying to synthesize the textual scholarship of Han Learning (*Hanxue* 漢學) and the moral approach of Song Learning (*Songxue* 宋學), as well as the New Text and Old Text schools, and Western knowledge. First, Kang he points out:

The significance of the ways of the world is determined by the strong or the weak powers [...]. Thus power creates principles, and principles create the Dao, the Dao creates Righteousness, and Righteousness creates Rites. That means power is the ancestor of the ways of the world, while rites are its great-grandsons.<sup>27</sup>

From Kang's perspective, the great crises of the Qing empire meant that in terms of the growing polarity between power and principle in the intellectual life of scholar-officials, there was a need to replace the "power-principle interaction" with the strategically adaptive notion that "power creates principles." Thus Kang in some ways gave primacy to "power," or at least he was headed in that direction, away from Neo-Confucian moralism. Specifically, to understand the ways of the world through power had become the inner logic of Kang's imagination of new principles in this period.

Second, as the crises of the late nineteenth century further unfolded, Kang's knowledge and belief in "Heavenly Principles" changed gradually. He wrote:

With the interdependence of aspects of square-circle, yin-yang, existence-extinction, concreteness-abstraction, and decline-growth, like the relation of Confucius and Sakyamuni, it is not easy to describe the principle of reason within its relative standards of the internal and external framework. With the interdependence of aspects of constancy-expediency, benevolence-righteousness, public-private, self-others, rites-wisdom, like the relation of China and western countries, it is not easy to describe the principles of reason within its relative standards of law.<sup>28</sup>

27 *KNP*, 人事之義，強弱而已矣。[...] 故曰：勢生理，理生道，道生義，義生禮。勢者，人事之祖，而禮最其曾、玄也。

28 *KNP*, 100: 然當然之理未易言也。內外有定而無定，方圓、陰陽、有無、虛實、消長，相倚者也，猶聖人之與佛也。義理有定而無定，經權、仁義、公私、人我、禮智，相倚者也，猶中國之與泰西也。

Kang noticed that the process of extension and transition of the “power-principle interaction” suggested that the “principles of reason” would inevitably break away from at least certain major Confucian concepts. Therefore, the question of how to realize the integration of traditional concepts with new principles by remolding the worldview and the spectrum of knowledge among the intelligentsia came to the fore in Kang’s thinking.

Generally speaking, in *Essays* Kang tried to emphasize and combine two aspects of Confucianism. Internally, he strongly emphasized those aspects of the “wisdom/intelligence” (*zhi* 智) that are more objective than “virtue ethics” (*de-xing* 德性). Kang found the fundamental difference between human and animals simply in intelligence, not the transcendent concepts of benevolence, righteousness, or rites. Kang was not attacking Confucian ethics but trying to raise the status of the “intelligence tradition” in the worldview of Confucianism. Thus he clearly expresses that “it is incorrect that benevolence dominates all the virtues of morality.”<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, “only the intelligent can realize benevolence with kindness, achieve righteousness with judgment, regulate propriety with ritual, and keep trust with honesty.”<sup>30</sup> From this point on, in Kang’s value system, intelligence remained an extremely important foundation for benevolence, righteousness, rituals, and trust.

Moreover, Kang’s concept of “intelligence” amounted to a new tool of human ethics in this age of rising globalization. With knowledge, people might be able to rationally regulate the appetites and emotions inherent to human nature—lust, sex, hunger, happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy—with knowledge and learning. Kang frequently mentioned his fascination with the microscope and electricity, which he encountered in the 1880s. They fostered his realization of new principles, such as that the laws of volume and velocity change with the subjects. Kang’s deep readings in Buddhism shaped his understanding of Western learning.<sup>31</sup> And he repeatedly cited scientific principles to demonstrate the objective nature of the principles he was advocating, especially in contrast to the

29 *KNP*, 108: 或謂仁統四端、兼萬善，非也。

30 *KNP*, 108: 惟其智者，故能慈愛以為仁，斷制以為義，節文以為禮，誠實以為信。

31 Kang 2011, 15.

Chinese moral tradition. Ultimately, Kang believed, only through intelligence could people progressively broaden their moral concerns beyond the family to the ethnic group, to the state, and to the nation to accomplish the goal of “all under heaven are one family.”<sup>32</sup>

If the above ways of thinking remained largely internal to the Confucian tradition, Kang also adopted an external perspective to rethink the political order and morality of Confucianism. He embraced Western knowledge of natural sciences, geography, and religion. Of course, due to his limited access to Western sources, much of Kang’s understanding was not so accurate and he used some terms arbitrarily. Nonetheless, he already possessed a new problematic that went beyond Confucian paradigms.

For example, from the perspective of geography, Kang emphasized that the global terrain was determined by nature, not by the sages. Surrounded and separated by the continuous mountain ranges on its borders, Kang pointed out, for thousands of the years ancient China never had sages like Buddha or Jesus, who transcended the boundaries of their countries to pursue their missionary projects. In Kang’s eyes, different terrains determined the political systems and patterns of faith of different regions. Furthermore, he believed that the geographical terrain of ancient China had fostered great unity instead of division. In contrast, India and Western Europe, due to their terrains, were generally divided into separate countries even though they united occasionally. Thus, in these countries people adopted Buddhism or Christianity as their national religion because they promoted equality and decentralization. Kang compared these cultural phenomena with China and proclaimed that the Chinese beliefs in sages, kings, and even Confucius could not be disseminated outside of China, while Buddhism, Christianity, and Western knowledge spread across the world. Kang also noted that although countries such as Mexico, Peru, and India had advantageous terrains and flourishing cultures across all ages, they were tragically defeated by foreign powers, and in some cases of culture, even extinguished. Thus Kang proclaimed: “The extinction of the religion is more dangerous than the extinction of the nation, and the extinction of the race is more dangerous than the extinction of the religion. Can the Chinese politics, rituals, and scripts

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32 *KNP*, 106: 天下一家.

which we inherited from our sages last forever?”<sup>33</sup> Clearly, this rhetoric reflected Kang’s skeptical attitude toward the worldview of “Heavenly Principles” and indicated that his attention had turned to the competition of civilizations in a globalized context.

Thus Kang tried to reexamine the conceptions and paradigms of Confucianism through the lens of comparative civilizations, particularly comparing Buddhism and Confucianism, in several chapters of *Essays*. He derived his concept of equality from Buddhism and emphasized its modern meaning to harshly criticize the rigid hierarchies of emperor and ministers, men and women, and elites and commoners in traditional China. Furthermore, Kang said that Confucianism had been twisted by scholars and officials in the Qin and Han dynasties using the “empty talk” of self-cultivation to legitimate hierarchy as “righteousness.” In fact, such hierarchies neither had a material basis or social foundation nor did they engage with universal human nature at all. Based on the concept of equality, Kang states, “Three matters must be changed in China within a hundred years: the inequality between the emperor and his ministers, the inequality between men and women, and the inequality between high and low. Alas for the learning of equality from Buddhism!”<sup>34</sup> It is this program that led Kang to begin to challenge the worldview of the Heavenly Principle (*tianli* 天理), which scholars had inherited from the Song dynasty, shaping their way of thinking for almost nine hundred years. “Principles are all created by the people; thus they should serve the people [...] Principles are the people’s principles.”<sup>35</sup> Thenceforth Kang tried to reinterpret the concepts of *qi* 氣, “desire” (*renyu* 人欲), and “yin-yang” (陰陽), as well as “principle” (*li*).

33 *KNP*, 112: 滅國為小，滅教為大；滅教為小，滅民類尤為大。然則中國累聖之政教、文字，其又可恃以萬世耶？

34 *KNP*, 108: 百年之後必變三者：君不專臣不卑，男女輕重同，良賤齊一。嗚呼！佛氏平等之學也。

35 *KNP*, 111: 理者，人之所立。[...] 故理者，人理也。

#### 4 Absolute Monarchy and “Sage-King Rules the World”: The Political Stance of *Essays*

The issues raised by Neo-Confucianism in *Essays* are also found in Kang’s other major writings of the period, such as *Substantial Truths and Universal Principles*. Nevertheless, *Essays* is not a work of pure philosophy but contains Kang’s most in-depth thinking to that point on institutional reform. In Kang’s words, by “wondering about the appropriateness of historical development, communicating through its course of change, and considering the gains and losses of the past, then the country can be governed effectively.”<sup>36</sup> *Essays* raises the question of how Kang shaped his new principles to understand the core of the political order in traditional China—the universal kingship.

First, Kang focuses on the principle that the “sage-king rules the world” as seen in the actual events and trends of Chinese history. In the first chapter of *Essays*, on how to use power, he explains that a good and excellent emperor must understand the techniques of “opening and closing” (闔辟) or, in a word, autocratic power (*duren zhi quan* 獨任之權), in order to govern his realm at will and authoritatively (*shujuan kaihe, fu tianxia yu guzhang zhi shang* 舒捲開合，撫天下於股掌之上).<sup>37</sup> In Kang’s view, the emperor’s role as ultimate and absolute authority is determined by the uniqueness of Chinese history and its culture.

Among all the nations in today’s world, only China can carry out that [autocratic power]. It is not because of its huge territory, large population, or abundant natural resources, but due to its absolutist monarchy. The authority of this power did not come from the political situation or material interests, but formed from the benevolence of the emperors Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and other sagely monarchs of the Three Dynasties, the righteousness of the great dynasties of the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming, as well as inspiration and encouragement of thousands of the sages and worthies over thousands of years. Thus the governance under the absolute monarchy the people followed traditional customs and the ministers professed their loyalty without dissent. Through the

36 *KNP*, 98: 酌古今之宜，會通其沿革，損益其得失，而後能治也。

37 For the terminology used in this chapter on “Reward and punishment” (*Hepi pian*), see footnote 4 above.

techniques of “opening and closing,” the absolute monarchy never feared lack of talents, the loss of customs, and weakness in military strength. Thereby led by the sage-king with absolute power, all the people will follow and the nation will easily become strengthened. This is appropriate at this time!<sup>38</sup>

Kang’s argument should not be dismissed as a “philosophy of power” (*quanli zhexue* 權力哲學) or a “politician’s logic” (*zhengke luoji* 政客邏輯), highlighting only his seeming praise for “absolute monarchy” and admiration of the emperor’s power.<sup>39</sup> We need to keep in mind the context of the late Qing China crises in order to understand Kang’s praise for absolute monarchy. From Kang’s perspective, Chinese culture had shaped the absolute monarchy centered on universal kingship over the course of centuries of development of the “Dao of rituals.” Kang can thus be read in two ways. In the first reading, he understood absolute monarchy to be a precondition for the realization of a wealthy and powerful China, and at the same time a prosperous and strong China also acted as the solid foundation of absolute monarchy. Undoubtedly, this interaction expressed the legitimacy of the historical rationality of the Chinese political tradition. In his correspondence with the imperial minister Pan Wenqin 潘文勤, Kang cited the greatness of the rites of Yao, Shun, and Yu as the primary model of political order for posterity. He wrote that absolute monarchy had launched a process of national integration and unification of China that had been formidable and unique. If China indeed realizes institutional reform, it would terrify the European powers.<sup>40</sup> Some scholars have thus concluded that Kang cherished the

38 *KNP*, 97: 故居今日地球各國之中，惟中國之勢獨能之，非以其地大業，非以其民眾也，非以其物產之豐也，以其君權獨尊也。其權之尊，又非勢劫之利誘之，積於二帝、三王之仁，漢、唐、宋、明之義，先聖群賢百千萬人，百千萬年講求崇獎激勵而成之，故民懷舊俗而無外思，臣慕忠義而無異論，故惟所使也。故挾獨尊之權，誠知闔辟之術，則人才之乏不足患，風俗之失不足患，兵力之弱不足患，一二人謀之，天下率從之，以中國治強，猶反掌也，惟此時之勢為然。

39 In this sense, I cannot agree with Zhu Weizheng’s understanding of Kang’s intention in the “Hepi” chapter, which Zhu takes as evidence that Kang, in his thirties, was so devoted to political power that he believed “the end justifies the means.” Zhu 1996, 184 f.

40 “Yu Pan Wenqin shu” 與潘文勤書 (Letter to minister Pan Wenqin), in Kang

memory of “imperial Confucianism” (*dizhi Ruxue* 帝制儒學) not only for the moral authority of Chinese emperors but also to indicate his own “unalterable loyalty” (*buyi zhi zhongzhen* 不移之忠貞) to the throne.<sup>41</sup>

However, in a second reading of Kang, the context of the late Qing crises comes for the fore. Facing China’s internal and external challenges, Kang saw that it would not be easy to maintain the traditional emperorship. To provide security and stability, the monarchy actually needs to keep pace with the times.

Only when people become wealthy, will customs be uplifted; only when domestic governance is well developed, will foreign affairs be manageable. This is what the European powers fear. As for China, if it can stabilize the nation in three years and start fundamental reforms in ten years, it will be stand in the world in twenty years and realize the Dao of the true king in thirty years. This is the time for China to avenge the shame of its ancestors, recover its civilization, reserve the sacred ethics from imminent destruction, and sustain the universal kingship from gradual disintegration.<sup>42</sup>

If we contrast these views with Kang’s previous discussion on the limitations that geography places on any project to expand Confucianism, we may see more of Kang’s goals in writing *Essays*. Kang hoped to restore the ancient rituals and revive an emperorship that was flailing in the face of domestic turmoil and challenges from the West. Thus in Kang’s eyes the process of institutional reform

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2007a, 169.

41 Howard 1962, 294–316; Chang 1987, 34. Yet, as Wang Rongzu has pointed out, Kang was not advocating that the absolute monarchy be maintained forever. Rather, his aim was to express the historical fact that the emperorship had existed in China for more than two thousand years and must be changed through institutional reform. See Wang Rongzu 2006, 26–27. In my view, Chang Hao and Richard Howard preferred to emphasize Kang’s recognition of the stability of the emperorship, while Wang paid more attention to Kang’s reform proposals to restrict the power of the emperor.

42 *KNP*, 99: 民富也，而後風俗可厚；內治修矣，而後外交可恃，此歐洲大國之所畏也。三年而規模成，十年而本末舉，二十年而為政於地球，三十年而道化成矣。於以雪祖宗之憤恥，恢華夏之聲教，存聖倫於將泯，維王教於漸墜。

needed to proceed with a steady but gradual pace with clear standards and direction. Ultimately, this process was not strictly limited to China, but as the moral reputation and cultural influence of Confucianism, especially the Dao of rituals, was enhanced, it could influence the world. Moreover, although Kang advocates in *Essays* that emperors need to know how to manipulate power for their own political purposes, this amounted to neither justifying nor advocating autocracy. In legitimizing the absolute power of the emperor, Kang's main intention was to break through the shackles of habits and traditions to reform institutions as smoothly as possible. Then and later, Kang's scholarly position was criticized for its apparent debts to Legalist thinkers such as Guanzi 管仲 (725–645 BCE), Shang Yang 商鞅 (390–338 BCE), and Han Feizi 韓非子 (281–231 BCE), who rejected Confucianism.<sup>43</sup>

Kang himself never disagreed or refuted such criticisms. In 1878 when he was only twenty-one and studying with his mentor Zhu Ciqi, he had expressed the thought that the emperor should adopt the political philosophy of Guanzi and Han Feizi to guide their rulership. Zhu Yixin 朱一新 (1846–1894), a prominent scholar of the Old Text school, criticized Kang for his obsessive concern with the wealth and power of Western countries and his attribution of their successful Legalist theories. Zhu also complained that Kang's unusual pragmatic understanding of “trends” (*shi* 勢) and “methods” (*shu* 術) was based on his interpretations of Confucianism.<sup>44</sup> Thus we may understand that Kang's political stance in *Essays* rests on an emotional and academic development track of long standing.

In general, Kang had no intention to develop a complete and systematic theory of universal kingship. Yet due to his firm belief in absolute monarchy, he said that the “Dao of the hegemon” (*badao* 霸道) and the “Dao of the true king” (*wangdao* 王道) can be intertwined as long as the emperor sincerely acted out of “compassion” (*buren* 不忍) for the people's livelihood.

The difference between the hegemon and the true king lies in the emperor's intention. If the emperor intends to lead people in search of wealth and power,

43 KNP, 97.

44 Zhu Yixin, “Zhu Shiyu fu Kang Changru di si shu” 朱侍御覆康長孺第四書 (Censor Zhu's fourth letter to Kang Youwei), in Kang 2007a, 327.

this is the Dao of the true king. But if his intention is only to acquire wealth and power for himself, this is the Dao of the hegemon.<sup>45</sup>

This interpretation was close to that of another New Text school scholar, Wei Yuan, who had said:

There has never been wealth and power without the Dao of the true king, and there has never been the Dao of the true king without wealth and power. The difference between Dao of the true king and Dao of the hegemon lies in the emperor's intentions, not appearances or methods, because the intentions rest on either the public good or on selfishness, even while appearances or methods may be the same.<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of the Legalist aspects of *Essays*, in some chapters Kang also cites Buddhism and Western ideas to criticize the relationship between the emperor and ordinary people. He directly attributed this to the overconcentration of power in the hands of the emperor, which resulted in the ordinary people's dissatisfaction.

The origin of the chaos under Heaven was the emperor's abuse of power, which led the people to resist, the ministers to revolt, and commoners to rebel against selfish emperors and fight for their own wealth and power.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, the conflict between the emperor's power and the popular will is the root cause of the crises of the political order leading to dynastic change. Kang thus further attempted to maintain the stability of the monarchy with new ethics such as "universal love" or "thou-I" relation (*jian'ai* 兼愛).<sup>48</sup> "Universal

45 *KNP*, 98: 王霸之辨，辨於其心而已，其心肫肫於為民而導之以富強者，王道也；其心規規為私而導之以富強者，霸術也。

46 Wei Yuan, "Zhi pian yi" 治篇一 (First chapter on governance), in Wei 1976, 36: 自古有不王道之富強，無不富強之王道。王伯之分，在其心不在其跡也。心有公私，跡無胡越。

47 *KNP*, 98: 故夫百姓侵其上，臣僚奪其君，匹夫可以揭竿而謀富貴，夫亦君上縱欲有以啟其亂萌也。

48 Peter Zarrow has pointed out that Kang tried to resolve the contradiction between monarchy and egalitarianism with the "stringent moral demands he placed on the monarchy as a personal institution." See Zarrow 2002, 29.

love is suitable for either emperor or the ordinary people. Its appearance is suitable for the ordinary people and its name and soul, emperor.”<sup>49</sup>

Infused with the principle of “sage-king rules the world,” *Essays* extended the statecraft spirit advocated by Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan in the mid-Qing. It also indicated Kang’s position in terms of Chinese scholarship that “power creates principles, and principles create the Dao.” Reinterpretations of this scholarship led in two directions: first, legitimation of the relation between Confucianism and statecraft thinking or a more realpolitik approach under the direction of the sage-king; second, that the core function of absolute monarchy is to realize state capacity by drafting the blueprint of institutional reform around the emperor.

## 5 Conclusion

At the age of thirty, Kang Youwei noted in his diary that “the source of struggle is the existence of nations.”<sup>50</sup> Kang focused much of his attention on the relationship between universal kingship and institutional reform, based in turn on absolute monarchy. As noted in the introduction, some chapters of *Esoteric and Exoteric Essays* were only published in the *Qingyi bao* in Japan and only after the failure of the 1898 reform movement. This work was thus less influential than his earlier two works, the 1891 *Forged Classics* and the 1897 *Confucius as a Reformer* (*Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考). These latter works dramatically challenged conventional Confucian views, a challenge made all the sharper by being made in the name of Confucianism. Nevertheless, though written earlier, *Essays* displays Kang’s deeper reflections on scholarship, philosophy, and politics, and these reflections foreshadowed his political reformism of the 1890s and his notion of a future *datong*.

*Essays* displays Kang’s shift from Confucian virtue ethics to a higher valuation of the political system and institutional reform. He was attempting to transform imperial China within the framework of the absolute monarchy of the

49 KNP, 108: 兼愛者，宜於為君者也；為我者，宜於為民者也；為我之形質者，宜於為民者也；為我之名與魂者，宜乎為君師也。

50 Kang 2011, 29: 列國並峙，是以有爭。

Confucian tradition into a society capable of surviving in the modern world. Kang's political thinking can also be seen in terms of a certain continuity with the "principle-power interaction" of the statecraft school from the mid-Qing. But Kang's focus gradually shifted from transcendental Confucian virtue ethics to secular and objective wisdom tradition. In *Essays* he attempted to remold the Heavenly Principle in order to resolve the epistemological crisis of Confucianism and to find a new philosophical basis to legitimate institutional reform. That said, *Essays* also interrupted the main trends of Qing Confucianism. Kang took the Confucian theory of political legitimacy based on the Heavenly Principle in a more secularizing direction that justified institutional reform. Thus his assertion in *Essays*—"power creates principle, and principle creates the Dao"—not only promoted the rise of the New Text school in late Qing scholarship, but expanded the sphere and dynamics of the realm of politics itself.

At about the same time that he was writing *Essays*, Kang had started think about the institutions and procedures of the Great Unity, or what would become the *datong* in his *Universal Principles of Humankind* (*Renlei gongli* 人類公理) and *Book of Universal Principles* (*Gongli shu* 公理書). These works were based on Kang's preliminary understanding of Euclid geometry and a notion of "universal principle" (*gongli*). Looking back to his early writings in *My History* (*Woshi* 我史), Kang says that he was abiding by benevolence, trying to comment on the sages according to the criteria of the Three Unities (*santong* 三統) and speculate about the future with the standard of the Three Ages (*sanshi* 三世), and finally then to unify the whole world as a Great Unity with the fusion of all countries, races, and religions.<sup>51</sup>

Kang highly appraised his thought on the Great Unity and his invention of universal principles in this series of works. He even says he could die happily after he comprehended the significance and path toward the Great Unity.<sup>52</sup> Scholars today continue to debate the relationships among Kang's key works—*Universal Principles of Humankind*, *Book of Universal Principles*, *Substantial Truths and Universal Principles*, and the *Book of Great Unity* (*Datong shu* 大

51 Ibid., 16: 以三統論諸聖，以三世推將來，而務以仁為主，故奉天合地，以合國、合種、合教一統地球。

52 Ibid., 17: 吾既聞道，既定大同，可以死矣。

同書), which is discussed further by Wang Fansen in this issue. Nevertheless, regardless of the differences among these works, it is clear that Kang's focus had begun to shift from the "rites of emperor Zhou" to all the world and all human beings, as witnessed in the references to "universal principles" and "universal laws" in the titles of these works, as well as subsequent books such as *A Summary Catalogue of Universal Laws for All Men* (*Wanshen gongfa shuji mulu tiyao* 萬身公法書籍目錄提要) and *A Comprehensive Understanding on Universal Laws* (*Gongfa huitong* 公法會通).

It is important to remember that, as Kang noted in his diary, he imagined that when all under heaven had become one family and all Chinese one person, this would be a peaceful world. To realize this new ideal of the Great Unity, Kang even envisioned the elimination of all countries and of the kingship itself, in order to eliminate conflict and suffering.<sup>53</sup> His disciples also pointed out that Kang was the first person to develop the concept of "universal principles," ultimately discrediting the concept of the Heavenly Principle.<sup>54</sup> Using the methodologies of measurement (*shice* 實測), induction (*guina* 歸納), deduction (*yanyi* 演繹), and ratiocination (*tuili* 推理), which he derived from geology and other branches of Western learning, Kang began to create a new worldview—based on universal principles and public laws—in order to reinterpret the morality and politics of China and forge the basis of a new morality and politics fit for the entire world.

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53 Kang 2011, 29: 斯真以天下為一家，中國為一人，兵軍永息，太平可睹矣。

54 Lu Naixiang and Lu Dunkui 2009, 77.

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