

THE PROFITABLE SIDE OF THINGS: KANG YOUWEI'S  
ON HOW MATTER CAN SAVE THE NATION

PABLO A. BLITSTEIN

We are surrounded by things.<sup>1</sup> We buy things, we move things, we wear them, we grasp them. Our whole world consists of things. But we do not often use the same things, nor do we relate to them in the same way. The way we talk about “things”—a name we give to everything inanimate and tangible, to every identifiable element of the physical world—comes out from the experiences we have had in the past, the projects we have conceived, the places where we have been, and the people we have met. Our relation to things is the result of our social trajectories and the history we have been a part of.<sup>2</sup> In the last few centuries, mechanized industry has produced a deep change in the relation between humankind and things. Things that were formerly locked in some aristocratic palaces—from toys to cloths, ceramics to food—suddenly became available in the homes of thousands of people; things that were only imagined in previous ages, or not even conceived, were now invented. This was a shared experience among many of those who lived in the so-called industrial societies, and also among those who could enjoy industrial products from afar. However, when people in different parts of the world sat down to think and write about this proliferation of things, they explained this novelty along different patterns. Some saw in this proliferation a radically new phenomenon and considered it a dividing line between past and present; others detected its novelty but considered the proliferation of things as the extension of previous and well-known forms

- 
- 1 I would like to thank the participants of the workshop “Key Texts in Modern Chinese Political Thought,” particularly Peter Zarrow and Thomas Fröhlich, for their very helpful comments on this article. I am also grateful to Jon Wilcox and Wang Chunhua for their suggestions.
  - 2 The meaning of “things” has been the object of discussions in philosophy, history, and the social sciences. For an overview based on the Heideggerian distinction between “things” and “objects,” see Brown 2001, 1–22. And more generally for the historical period at stake in this article, especially in North America, see Brown 2003, particularly the first chapter on “The Tyranny of Things” (21–50).

of production. Perspectives differed, so explanations varied from one place to another.

The questions that the next few pages can help illuminate are the following: in this shared history of reflections about the increased development of human productive powers, what conceptual resources did nineteenth- and twentieth-century people use to think about the proliferation of things? What relation to things did they advocate and how did they place this proliferation within the social and political order? The answer to such questions depends on who uttered what and where. Here we will focus on what can be called a symptomatic text: *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* (*Wuzhi jiuguo lun* 物質救國論). This text was written in classical Chinese and the first draft was finished in Canada in 1904; in 1908, it was published by the Guangzhi publishing house in Shanghai.<sup>3</sup> The author of this book, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), was a well-known advocate of fundamental political reform in China and struggled to turn the Qing dynasty into a constitutional monarchy. He held the *jinsbi* degree (the highest one), had been appointed in 1895 as clerk in the Ministry of Works in Beijing, and had been an outspoken supporter of the emperor Guangxu's institutional reforms of 1898.<sup>4</sup> Now in exile, he had traveled to different places in both Europe and North America and had built a huge organization of reform-minded overseas Chinese, the Protect the Emperor Society (Baohuang hui 保皇會; official English name: Chinese Empire Reform Association), with branches in cities in both the American continent and East and Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* resulted from this particular experience outside China. It was not just a proto-developmental text on the salvational powers of industry,

3 I follow the dates given by the editors on page 62 of Kang Youwei's "Wuzhi jiuguo lun" [hereafter "Wuzhi"], in volume 8 of *Kang Youwei quanji* [hereafter *KYQJ*]. Citations are to the 2006 edition published by Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe.

4 For a detailed analysis of Kang Youwei's appointments, projects and political roles between 1895 and 1898, and more generally of the general nature of the 1898 reforms, see Kwong 1984, 90–103 and 129–200. Despite the polemical nature of Kwong's work, it remains an excellent account and analysis of Kang's activities in those years.

5 Larson 2007, 4–26.

as its title might suggest and as it has indeed been read by later scholars.<sup>6</sup> It actually represented something new: it displayed a new attitude toward things. It certainly represented a new attitude in the Chinese-speaking world; it extended, opposed, and brought together different ways of talking about “things” in nineteenth-century China. But since it also brought into the picture other scholarly traditions, both European and American, and since it took as evidence experiences from different parts of the world, we could also say that this text “synchronized” many nineteenth-century discourses on things that up to then had developed independently.

We will focus on three aspects of this text. In the first part, we will analyze its key word, “matter,” and the science Kang Youwei wanted to build; we will show that “matter” represented a particular conception of things, and that its science required from its practitioners new ways of thinking, seeing, and perceiving. In the second part, we will show that the science of matter supposed a political theory of things: the question for Kang, who was a political activist and reformer in exile, was how to persuade the Qing dynasty to reorient and unify the knowledge of its subjects on the basis of this science. For this purpose, he suggested that the monarchy should follow the path of the Hohenzollern in Germany and adopt the “despotic” methods of its factories and political institutions. Finally, in the last part, we will concentrate on the predecessors of the science of matter. We will show that this science owed as much to political economy as it did to the tradition of “ruling the world” (or “statecraft,” *jingshi* 經世), and that Kang’s political theory of things was to a certain extent built on some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas from the scholar-official traditions.

## 1 Things, Matter, and the Ways of Seeing

*On How Matter Can Save the Nation* shares with many texts in the social and political thought of its time a basic unit of analysis: the “nation.” Although Kang’s essay focuses on the productive powers of labor, and therefore presupposes the multilocal and usually transnational coordination of resources and raw materials that made it possible, it takes “national” societies as the ultimate framework

---

6 Hsiao 1975, 522–529.

of the proliferation of things. This national perspective was not just grounded in nineteenth-century descriptions of the world in terms of nations. It was also consistent with the purpose of its author: to explain to the “Chinese nation” in general, and to the “Chinese state” in particular, why it is important to foster the proliferation of things.<sup>7</sup> The “nation” of the title (*guo* 國) was conceived both as a jurisdiction and the container of a political subject. The producers were not seen as transcontinental “clusters” of human relations defined by the production processes, but mainly as part of supra-individuals such as “France,” “England,” or “China.” This concept of nation corresponded to a particular idea of the world order. Like many reform-oriented Chinese texts of the 1890s and the 1900s, *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* had a social Darwinian conception of the “society of nations”: it assumed that the inflexible law of the “survival of the fittest” ruled the universal competition between nations and that, just like in natural selection, stronger nations would survive and weaker ones perish. To this idea, Kang added his own “philosophy of history.” Based on New Text Confucianism, he held that the history of humanity as a whole went through three stages—the Age of Disorder, the Age of Increasing Peace, and the Age of Great Peace—and he claimed that individual nations did not reach these stages at the same time: some were faster, others slower, and their survival as nations depended on their capacity to reach each of these stages. The theory only appeared marginally in this text, but it pervaded Kang’s writings at the time and was the basis of his well-known *Book of the Great Unity* (*Datong shu* 大同書).<sup>8</sup>

7 We will not get into the details of the conceptual history of “nation” in the Chinese-speaking world. Suffice it to say that there was in those days no single word for this concept, and that we should actually talk about a “nationalized” set of words to convey the different connotations that the “nation” had in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. For a conceptual history of “nation” in China, see e.g. Wang 2003, 195–220; Matten 2012, 63–106; Fang 2014, 3–60.

8 “Wuzhi,” 69. See also Duan Lian’s contribution in this issue. We may wonder why this theory only appears marginally in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation*, while it is the main framework of the *Book of the Great Unity*. It is true that the *Great Unity*, whose draft may have been completed by 1902 (though different scholars give different dates), had not yet been published at the time Kang wrote *Matter*:

*On How Matter Can Save the Nation* gave “matter” a key role in deciding the result of this universal struggle for national survival. But what did Kang mean by the term? The word we translate here as “matter” is *wuzhi*, a compound of *wu*, “things,” and *zhi*, “essence.” Its association with the English “matter,” and later with “materialism” (*wuzhi zhuyi* 物質主義), started to take place in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Kang does not thoroughly explain how he understands “matter”; in most of the text, the concept appears to be treated as self-evident. For example, after showing that China had fallen behind Europe only since the eighteenth century, and claiming that the reason for this gap was the superior nature of European military and industry, Kang says:

---

the first chapters were only published in 1913. Moreover, the *Great Unity* underwent many corrections and additions until the publication of the whole text in 1935. But by the time Kang wrote *Matter*, he had already used the underlying theory of the *Great Unity* in his writings and public interventions. Whatever the explanation, the relation between the two texts deserves more research. For the history of the *Great Unity*, see the note by the editors of *Datong shu*, in *KYQJ*, 7:2. Cf. Takeuchi Hiroyuki’s critical review of the different dates that have been given for the *Book of the Great Unity* in Takeuchi 2008, 161–169 (Takeuchi suggests the year 1910 as a possible date for the first draft). On the early evolution of Kang’s ideas on the *Great Unity*, see also Takeuchi 2008, 158–242, as well as *ibid.*, 183 ff., for the transmission of Kang’s theory since the 1890s.

- 9 Federico Masini has suggested that the word was a Japanese neologism (*busshitsu*), but its physical and chemical connotations, and even its association with natural and economic processes, may well have been spread by Western missionaries’ writings. For example, Alexander Williamson’s *Gewu tanyuan* 格物探原 has a chapter on “matter” (*wuzhi* 物質), which deals with chemical elements (*yuanzhi* 元質). Kang had been an avid reader of the missionary periodical *Wanguo gongbao*, where Williamson’s work was published, and in his youth he was definitely inspired by the contents of this journal. See Masini 1993, 206; Williamson 1876, 1:2b–3b; Kang 1987, 13.

Industry<sup>10</sup> and military are matter. That is, their [European] perfection of political and legal institutions, just like chemistry, optics, electricity, mechanics, astronomy, geography, mathematics, fauna and flora and living creatures [that constitute the object of] science, none of this is beyond the matter that contains force and power, form and energy.<sup>11</sup>

This is one of the text's most explicit paragraphs regarding Kang's concept of "matter." For Kang, then, matter is the name of the whole physical world, both its physical properties and its own transformation processes. Xiao Gongquan [= Hsiao Kung-chuan] has argued that Kang's matter is just "industry"<sup>12</sup>; and indeed the *Book of the Great Unity*—which Kang probably finished around 1902—has a whole chapter on the "boundaries created by production" which is devoted to labor and industry.<sup>13</sup> A paragraph like the following seems to go in that direction:

Gunboats, agriculture, and trade: all emerge from the refinement of labor techniques; and the refinement of labor techniques rests on applied science and specialized professional training.<sup>14</sup>

Kang indeed thought that labor techniques, and more generally industry<sup>15</sup>, were the key to matter production. But many other passages in the text show that

10 The Chinese term is *gongyi* 工藝. Depending on how Kang uses it, this term may be translated as "craftsmanship," "labor techniques," "labor skills," "manufacture," or "industry" (the latter not in the sense of "industrial sector," but in the sense of the labor skills necessary for the transformation of unfinished products into finished ones). I employ one or another of these translations according to the context.

11 "Wuzhi," 67: 夫工藝、兵炮者，物質也。即其政律之周備，及科學中之化、光、電、重、天文、地理、算數、動植、生物，亦不出於力數、形氣之物質。Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

12 Hsiao 1975, 522–529. See for example p. 525, especially his translation of a passage from *Wuzhi*, 82.

13 For an analysis of these ideas in the *Book of the Great Unity*, and on their later uses in Chinese Marxism (especially by Li Zehou), see Brusadelli 2017, 103–122.

14 "Wuzhi," 67: 夫炮艦、農商之本，皆由工藝之精奇，而工藝之精奇，皆由實用科學及專門業學為之。

15 See note 10 above on the term *gongyi*.

“matter” is not a conceptual equivalent to industry. For example, when he discusses how Germany developed in the previous decades, he mentions “matter” as distinct from industry and machines:

Since it [Germany] defeated France<sup>16</sup>, it has investigated the science of matter, techniques, machines, electricity, and chemistry in a specialized way, and each thing and profession had its own specialized science; it has done research on it no more than twenty years, and now it has overcome the strong England.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, according to Kang’s first definition, “matter” is not just the general name of any existing thing in the world; nor does it have the narrower meanings of “industry” or “raw materials” (the English word “matter” was indeed used in this second sense in political economy). “Matter” designates either the object of labor or the result of labor, and the concept assumes that things have worth as long as they can be turned through labor into socially useful objects. In this sense, Kang did not present “matter” as a commodity or as the object of “economic” transactions; he did not intend to present an economic theory on exchange value. His was a theory about the usefulness of things within the national and the world order. It was, in a way, a political theory of “use value.”<sup>18</sup>

16 In the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871).

17 “Wuzhi,” 81: 自勝法後，專講物質、工藝、機器、電化之學，事事業業，皆有專學，講求不過二十年，今遂勝於強英。 If we follow the punctuation of this edition, “matter” is juxtaposed to “techniques,” “machines,” “electricity,” and “chemistry.” Hence my translation. But in another understanding of the passage, we could interpret that what follows “matter” (“the science of techniques, machines, electricity and chemistry”) displays part of what “matter” encompasses as a concept: “it has investigated matter, [that is,] the science of techniques, machines, electricity, and chemistry, in a specialized way.” In this second case, “matter” also appears as something larger than just “industry,” and this is the meaning that indeed comes out from the rest of the text (as we will see below). For an interpretation of “matter” and the “science of matter” in this sense, see Dan 2011, 34–35.

18 I merely use this concept in a figurative way. The concept of “use value,” which comes from classical political economy and has been particularly successful in Marxism (it is indeed a key concept in Marx’s *Das Kapital*), refers to the properties of a commodity which can satisfy a need; in this sense, it is a precondition

Kang's general argument depends on such a definition of "matter": if China wants to survive, it needs to make matter proliferate. In most of his previous writings, Kang had already attempted to explain how China could catch up with the European nations and survive within the new world order. The new element here was that the key to national salvation does not lie only in institutional or economic reform but in the proliferation of matter: in order to have a strong army, strong institutions, strong trade, strong agriculture, and a strong industry, China has to develop the necessary "matter" that make possible all these activities and institutions. For this reason, the proliferation of matter is neither the spontaneous result of market forces nor the output of a huge state enterprise which commands production. The proliferation of matter is the product of a science. The "science of matter," as Kang calls it, is precisely the necessary knowledge that China should possess if it wants "wealth and strength," both big industry and a powerful army. When a nation possesses this science, it can manage to obtain all the industrial things and machines it needs not only to produce wealth but to defend itself from stronger nations. As he puts it in one of the subtitles of the text:

In order to manage an army, one must rely on the administration of wealth; the administration of wealth relies on enriching the people; and everything depends on the science of matter.<sup>19</sup>

This science is the foundation of wealth and strength precisely because its object is the "one hundred affairs"—that is, everything. No industry, no army,

---

for the existence of a commodity and for its exchange value (unless its use value is the exchange itself, like in the case of money). Regarding Kang's "matter," we are not dealing with a theory of exchange value, nor necessarily with commodities, for Kang did not conceive matter as something that should necessarily be produced for a market (although markets were certainly important for him). Kang's text is a political theory of the production and use of things from the point of view of their qualitative properties.

19 "Wuzhi," 79: 治軍在理財, 理財在富民而百事皆本於物質學. The word *licai* 理財 or "administration of wealth," which was traditionally used to discuss public revenues and expenses, was one of the different translations of the nineteenth-century European concept of "economy." In a 1913 text, *Licai jinguo lun* 理財救國論, Kang Youwei used the word *licai* in the sense of "finance" and related it to financial markets. See e.g. Goodman 2016, 115 ff.

no wealth is possible if it is not grounded in the knowledge of things and their intrinsic properties. Among the different examples Kang gives to illustrate the fundamental role of this science of matter is the following one:

The roots of “enriching the people” lie in a deep mastery of agriculture, manufacture, trade, mining, and transportation [of goods] and in renewing them. But for the competition in these five professions, if one is not good in matter and its chemistry,<sup>20</sup> there is nothing to start with. That’s why today, whether it is for strengthening the army or for enriching the country, there is nothing that does not rely on the science of matter.<sup>21</sup>

To put it in the classical terms of political economy—Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) had translated Adam Smith in Chinese only a couple of years before Kang’s essay—neither production nor circulation could ever be mastered without the science of matter. The science of matter is an all-encompassing science which explores the qualities and foundations of things and makes them useful for the particular purpose of “wealth and strength.”

In the early twentieth century, there were attempts in both the United States and Europe to think of industrial things well beyond their purely economic value (in the sense of exchange value). These reflections took place mostly in the domain of the arts, but also reached science, industry, and engineering. The well-known Arts and Crafts movement, which focused on the quality and forms of objects, was based on a reflection on things as crafts and more generally on the negative effects of industry. Its adherents entertained an ambiguous relation to mass production that ranged from nostalgia for preindustrial techniques to a positive attitude toward mass production, but they tried to create the “right principles” for industrial production. Other groups of architects, industrialists, scientists, and artists were more decisively in favor of mass production, especially in Germany, and they conceived techniques and forms to make new sorts of buildings, furniture, and objects on a large scale, as in the cases of the *Deutscher*

20 The expression could be translated literally as “the chemistry of matter.” I use this paraphrase because the emphasis seems to be placed on the study of matter.

21 “Wuzhi,” 79: 富民之本，在精治農、工、商、礦、轉運之業而更新之。然是五業者之競爭，非精於物質之化學，則無從措手也。故今日者，無論為強兵，為富國，無在不藉物質之學。

Werkbund and later the Bauhaus movement.<sup>22</sup> Kang was probably not familiar with the writings of these people. His English was poor and his German nonexistent, and although he visited both countries, wrote a journal during his trips, and mentions Britain and Germany as the two great representatives of the “science of matter,” he does not seem to have been aware of these movements. However, arts, and especially visual arts, indeed played a role in Kang’s conception of the science of matter. When he mentions all the steps that China should follow to obtain this science, he says:

The science of painting is the root of all the sciences; the Chinese see it as useless, but do they know that the industrial and commercial goods and all the tools of civilization depend on painting for their invention? [...] If painting is not mastered, then products are clumsy and of bad quality, and it’s difficult to sell them and make them circulate [...]<sup>23</sup>

Now, what sort of painting did Kang have in mind? Painting has for him the mission of educating the eye in the sense of the proliferation of things; and in this regard, his models are the perspectival techniques of the Italian Renaissance, and more particularly Raphael. Raphael was considered by the American and European academic painting schools of the nineteenth century to be one of the highest representatives of technical perfection.<sup>24</sup> Kang certainly knew about this after visiting the “galleries of the eleven countries” and seeing “paintings from the whole world.” His veneration for Raphael and the Italian Renaissance did not mean that he rejected the Chinese painting traditions. In his opinion, the Imperial Painting Academy (Huayuan 畫院) of the Song dynasty (960–1279) had reached even higher levels of perfection than European painting. But ever since Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) and Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) promoted a new style in the sixteenth century, Europe and China had

22 Benevolo 2001, 182–208, 371–380.

23 “Wuzhi,” 93–94: 繪畫之學，為各學之本，中國人視為無用，豈知一切工商之品，文明之具，皆賴畫以發明之。[...] 若畫不精，則工品拙劣，難於銷流 [...].

24 Thus John Ruskin, the famous art critic and defender of the Pre-Raphaelites, criticized the veneration of Raphael in contemporary schools of art: “We begin, in all probability, by telling the youth of fifteen or sixteen [...] that Raphael is perfection, and that the more he copies Raphael the better [...]. And we wonder we have no painters!” Ruskin 1851, 19–20.

parted ways: while the hazy style of these influential painters had driven Chinese painting away from the knowledge of matter, all the European countries started sending their own painters to Italy in order to learn the techniques of the Renaissance:

Since the mid-Ming dynasty, Wen Zhengming and Dong Qichang emerged; they abandoned the models of the Imperial Painting Academy, mockingly considered its painters “craftsmen,” and replaced these models with subtle and remote things. As for Italy, it saw the emergence of Raphael; in the oil paintings he made, light and dark, and landscape and color, everything was made in a truthful way, and so all Europe because of him changed its old models and followed him. For this reason, they changed, and day after day they went upwards; we changed, and day after day we went downwards. Today, since we want to get into competition for industrial goods and turn this into the root of the administration of wealth [or the “economy”], we absolutely have to follow his painting model.<sup>25</sup>

Kang’s conclusion was that China should send students to learn Italian painting, especially in Rome and Florence; and since Italy was a poor country, the cost of living would be cheaper for them than for the students who were to be sent to Germany or the United States. These students would not only learn to make better crafts and enable China to produce goods of a superior quality. European painting would also allow them to see things in a different way, “truthfully,” and not according to the “subtle and remote” representations that since Dong Qichang had obscured the actual properties of matter.

In other words, the Chinese nation should not feel the impulse to see things in any anarchic way; the Chinese should have the freedom to invent new things, and especially to link invention to industry, but they should not separate their individual representations from the “science of matter”: on the contrary, their own individual and free representations should try to shed light on one particular aspect of matter. In short, everyone should see things as “matter”; if they

25 “Wuzhi,” 95: 惟自明之中葉，文、董出，撥棄畫院之法，謂為匠手，乃以清微淡遠易之。而意大利乃有拉非爾出焉，創造油畫，陰陽景色莫不逼真，於是全歐為之改變舊法而從之。故彼變而日上，我變而日下。今既欲競爭工藝物品以為之本，更不能不師其畫法。 Many of Kang’s arguments on painting (and calligraphy) are thoroughly studied in Wong 2016.

cannot, the whole nation will perish in the universal competition for “wealth and strength.”

## 2 A Political Theory of Things

The purpose of this “science of matter” was thus to create a unified perspective on things. This was to claim all-encompassing knowledge of things as “science of matter,” and put all the particular sciences to the service of proliferating socially useful things. I use the expression “socially useful” but could also say “nationally useful”: the ultimate purpose of the science of matter was to “strengthen” the nation. This did not mean that “matter” was only conceived as the object of a nation-based use. On the contrary, matter looked like the inescapable condition of any social development, and in this sense it did not belong to anyone: those who master its science will survive, those who neglect it will perish, and this was equally valid for both a world of nations and a world without nations. More or less at the same time, Kang announced in his *Book of the Great Unity* that national boundaries will disappear one day, and that the development of industry will play a role in this regard. Inspired by Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward* and socialist utopianism, he claimed that huge factories will one day replace states, abolish national borders, and contribute to the unification of the whole world.<sup>26</sup> However, since *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* was written as an intervention into this world of nations—the “Period of Ascending Peace” in Kang’s historical teleology—he mostly concentrated here on how matter can be used within the narrower purpose of “strengthening China.”

If we had to sum up Kang’s general purpose behind this text, we could say the following: China should become a nation of matter producers. This purpose faced two major challenges: the first one was how to reach the minds of every Chinese; the second was how to introduce a unified perspective on matter in a heterogeneous population. Each of the two challenges supposed a different response, but they were both related to a more general problem for late nineteenth-century Chinese nationalism: that is, how could Qing imperial sub-

---

26 On the relation between Kang’s ideas and Bellamy’s novel, see Takeuchi 2008, 194–208.

jects consider themselves “Chinese” if their rulers were Manchu? How could they see each other as part of a single “national” polity if they were Han Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs, if they had developed their own institutions, if even the Han Chinese subjects spoke very different languages? In other words, how could they claim that they were a single nation and that they had a single national history? Nationalist reformers like Kang were aware of this problem, and he had already dealt with it in his writings. Indeed, the question of national unity is a thread that runs through his writings of that period.<sup>27</sup> Kang’s idea could be summarized in the following way: China *was* a nation, but it should also *become* a nation. It should develop a shared language, shared customs, a shared religion, and many other shared elements which in theory displayed the hidden unity of this otherwise heterogeneous population—and which in reality would actually *produce* the sort of social and political unity which justifies its status as a “nation” before itself and before the world. Whether in the form of religion, custom, or language, this idea represented the nationalist intention of suppressing the complexity of social difference in the name of a single unifying element that would both create and justify the “national.”

How could the Qing monarchy produce this “national simplification”? The key instrument, as Kang had constantly claimed since the 1890s, was the educational system. During the 1898 reforms, he had advocated the reform of the civil service examination system. A couple of years later, as other reformers in the Qing court were already suggesting, he proposed to abolish this system and replace it with the most important instrument of nation-making of the late nineteenth century: universal and compulsory education. Compulsory education would mark a fundamental reform that was supported by a variety of arguments. Some arguments put forward the “egalitarian” foundations of universal schooling: as members of the same nation, everyone should receive the same ed-

27 See e.g. “Qing junmin hezhi, Man Han bufen zhe” 請君民合治，滿漢不分摺，in *KYQJ*, 4: 425. I will not discuss here the reservations of Kong Xiangji and other scholars regarding the date of this and other memorials from the *Wuxu zougao* (published in 1911). Whatever the date of this text, I consider that it is representative of Kang Youwei’s ideas about the question of national unity in the period after 1898.

ucation; education should not be left just to those who could afford it. But for nation-builders, compulsory education was also a major instrument with which to construct the nation: once everyone received the same education, once everyone had access to the same language, the same historical references, the same civil codes, and so on, then everyone would see each other as a member of a single national polity.<sup>28</sup> Compulsory education was not just intended to create a nation of equals, but the nation itself. Kang's more general calls for educational reform, and more specifically for universal and compulsory schooling, were part of such nation-building endeavors that permeated nationalist thought in China and beyond.

*On How Matter Can Save the Nation* was part of this nationalist endeavor to unify the diverse social perspectives through compulsory education. Kang's earlier proposals had already focused on schools, on the compulsory system, and on the content of examinations; he had also focused on the unification and extension of "Chinese" customs like clothes, hairstyles, and the like. But his essay on matter added a new element to these endeavors: now the key element to unify the nation was the science of matter. In his 1904 *Travel Notes in Germany*, Kang also suggested something in this direction; he found in Germany a model of mandatory education, a perfect association between university and industry, and more generally widespread knowledge of the necessary skills for industrial development:

In other countries, when they carry out industry, they use workers, all of whom stupidly follow [old models] and have no renewed models. [But] how wise the Germans are! In a factory of chemical products, the foreman must be someone who has a degree in chemistry [...].<sup>29</sup>

A couple of months later, Kang developed this idea in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation*. He used the German model to build a more general argument about the science of matter: unlike other elements of national education, this science was the key to transforming a "backward" empire into an "advanced" nation.

28 Zarrow 2015, 17; more generally, 11–26.

29 "Deguo youji" 德國遊記, in *KYQJ*, 7:456: 他國人之為工藝, 皆以工人為之, 故愚而循守, 無日新之法。智哉德人! 其化學製造產之工長, 必以化學之卒業士領之...

Germany had learned to see things as matter, had developed faster than others, and in a couple of decades had reached and even overtaken England. China should now follow the same path as Germany and let its population develop its own productive forces<sup>30</sup>. How should China do this? It should adopt seven measures, all of them inspired by Germany: it should open schools of applied sciences; add courses on machinery and carpentry in primary schools, so that students will later “create new machines”; open museums; open galleries of models and drawings; create factories; create schools for specialized and professional training; and finally, organize competitions.<sup>31</sup> All of these measures should turn China into a nation of “matterologists” who will freely and willingly contribute to make China “wealthy and strong.”

As is clear from all of this, the science of matter is neither a purely scholastic knowledge nor an observational science. It is a knowledge conceived for practice. And as practical knowledge, together with the specialized training required by each particular thing, it should not become the privilege of a limited number of experts but the general knowledge of the whole nation. Kang was guided by an egalitarian ideal; he was indeed concerned with an equal distribution of skills among the whole population, and although this distribution should be defined by the division of labor and the position each person should occupy in the new society, he aimed at giving everyone an equally important part in the general production of matter. However, like many nationalist reformers, Kang combined his egalitarianism with a veneration for “strong states”: it supposed the concentration of power onto the hands of a sovereign institution and a preference for “despotic” (*zhuanzhi* 專制) means to achieve reform. This “despotic” temptation derived from the ultimate goal of choosing and imposing those “shared” elements that should produce national cohesion. As one of those shared elements, and more generally as the key to survival, the knowledge of matter should establish the unified perspective that contributed both to national cohesion and to national salvation.

This was the other meaning of the “German model.” It was not only a model for the form that should take the proliferation of things, or even for the exten-

---

30 See also Dan Shilian’s analysis in Dan 2011, 33–40.

31 “Wuzhi,” 94–95.

sion of the science of matter to the whole population: it was also a model of a strong monarchical power which guided the process of industrialization and struggled to suppress any obstacle to the production of matter. It was the model of Bismarck, the antisocialist laws, and the strong constitutional powers of the Hohenzollern. This explains why *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* contains a long section about the concepts of “freedom” and “revolution.” In those years, Kang was debating with those who advocated revolution in China. The revolutionaries were struggling for influence both in China, where they published and organized underground, and abroad, where they competed with reformers for the same supporters among overseas Chinese and students. In Japan, Southeast Asia, Canada, and the United States, the revolutionaries argued that China needed a revolution and that the Chinese should fight for their freedom. The revolutionaries raised funds and recruited members to their organizations; their rhetoric partially drew on the model of the French revolution and they increasingly gained supporters—at the turn of the century, they had even briefly tempted Liang Qichao, Kang’s chief disciple who would slightly later become a leader of the antirevolutionary reformers. Kang’s critique of freedom and revolution, as well as his positive description of the German model, should be placed within this context.

In this critique, Kang claimed that the revolutionaries did not really understand the meaning of “freedom” in the West; they were in his opinion misled by the Japanese translation of this word. *Ziyou* 自由 (Jp. *jiyū*) or “from oneself,” the established translation among revolutionaries, had turned “freedom” into an abstract concept and had lost its more contextual meaning of “liberties” or “freedom of.” According to Kang, the European concept of “freedom” had feudal origins and derived from the particular “liberties” or “privileges” which were given to feudal lords. Later on, the French and American revolutionaries started using this concept in the sense of “freedom of speech,” “freedom of thought,” “freedom to carry weapons” and so on, and this was the way in which it was used nowadays.<sup>32</sup> When the Japanese translated the word, they created a

32 This was indeed the history of the concepts of “freedom” and “liberty.” In the early nineteenth century, even after their more abstract uses during the American and French revolutions, the words could still recall their ancient meaning of “privilege” (related to the ancient use of the Latin *libertates* in the sense of “prerogatives”).

source of misunderstanding:

The English *feilibeng*, “freedom” only has the sense of “release from” (*shifang*) and contains a juridical meaning. As for the two-character *ziyou* as translated by the Japanese, which has the meaning of loosening hands and feet, walking carelessly, with no restrictions and no control, of following one’s own feelings and doing whatever suits you, without fear from either Heaven or Earth, how could humanity ever follow such an idea?<sup>33</sup>

The “freedom” of the Europeans was actually a “limited freedom” (*youxian ziyou* 有限自由):

In the constitutions of each country, what is called “freedom of speech,” “religious freedom,” “press freedom,” and “freedom of movement,” refers to freedom in one single aspect, and not to a general freedom.<sup>34</sup>

In Kang’s opinion, the “school of Confucius” had already preached this limited freedom when it claimed that one should not do to others what one does not want others to do to oneself. Confucians had never preached the “unlimited,” abstract freedom of the Chinese revolutionaries, because such a freedom was not even suitable for the time of the “Great Unity.”<sup>35</sup> Such a “freedom” was merely a dangerous dream.

This “limited freedom” of the Europeans, and especially of the Germans, was the only one compatible with the science of matter. To produce matter, one had to accept a certain degree of “despotism” (*zhuanzhi* 專制), especially in the pro-

---

Over the course of the nineteenth century, freedom was increasingly associated with the concept of a political ideal or a human condition. For a thorough history of the concept of “freedom,” see Conze 1975, 425–544. For a conceptual history of “freedom” and “liberty” in China, see Xiong 2001, 69–94, esp. 69–73. And for “revolution,” see Leese 2012, 25–61.

33 “Wuzhi,” 68: 英文非里泵 Freedom 者，僅為釋放之義，尚含有法律之意。若日本所譯為“自由”二字，則放手放腳、掉臂遊行、無拘無管、任情肆意、不怕天不怕地之謂，則人道豈有此義理乎？

34 “Wuzhi,” 69: 即今各國憲法，所號為言論自由、宗教自由、遷徙自由、出版自由者，亦所謂一事之自由，而非普通之自由矣。

35 “Wuzhi,” 69.

duction process.<sup>36</sup> This did not mean that people ceased to possess autonomy. On the contrary, “obedience” and “autonomy” were complementary:

Man comes to life within society (*qun*), so everything requires obedience, and everything requires autonomy [...]. It's like gathering bricks to build a house: if they are all scattered they can't be used as bricks; but if the brick is not square and flat according to its model, and it's circular, protruding, sharp, or swollen, then it will be discarded and will not have any use. Besides, when we see how Americans and Europeans do things, we realize that they venerate despotic rule (*zhuanzhi*) more than any other, and whenever they do something, they always have a foreman to take charge of it, and everyone below him obeys.<sup>37</sup>

The conclusion of this discussion again led Kang to the “German model”:

I traveled around Germany, and its serious and orderly atmosphere makes it very different from France. O! This is what made Germany strong, and the lessons that were left by Bismarck are deep. Today China is fragmented and has no order, and so it should implement the German form of rule; if one wants to use freedom to save her, it's like having diabetes and drinking poisonous alcohol: she will certainly end up dead.<sup>38</sup>

36 “Wuzhi,” 70. The term *zhuanzhi* was often used to translate “despotism.” In 1905 Liang Qichao published a text on *kaiming zhuanzhi* 開明專制 or “enlightened despotism,” and Kang used the same term in his 1902 open letter condemning revolutionary methods. See Kang, “Da nanbei Meizhou zhu huashang lun Zhongguo zhi ke xing lixian bu neng xing geming shu” 答南北美洲諸華商論中國只可行立憲不能行革命書, in *KYQJ*, 6:320. Liang's “Kaiming zhuanzhi lun” can be found in Liang 1988, 17, 13–83. But *zhuanzhi* also had older connotations: in the Qing dynasty's discourse, like in previous times, it referred to a powerful monarch who concentrated powers in his own hands.

37 “Wuzhi,” 70: 人生群中，事事須服從，亦事事須自立...譬如合群磚以成屋，苟散沙則不能為磚，然磚而不方平如式，圓凸尖腫，則亦必棄去而不能為用也。且觀歐美人之行事，最尚專制，任立一事，皆必推立一長以主之，而下皆服從焉。

38 “Wuzhi,” 71: 吾遊德國，整齊嚴肅之氣象，迥與法國殊。嗚呼！此德之所以強也，俾士麥之遺教遠矣。方今中國之散漫無紀，正宜行德國之治，而欲以自由救之，所謂病渴而飲酖，其不至死不得矣。

In other words, Germany was the model because it developed suitable political institutions for the science of matter: unity between university and industry, qualified foremen, thorough organization of production, and, most important of all, the necessary dose of “despotism” at all levels, from factory management to government.<sup>39</sup> This was certainly not the first time Kang had advocated “despotism.” In the 1890s he had already said that the Guangxu emperor should follow his seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors and concentrate power in his own hands; he had also praised Peter the Great as the despot who had seen the world, controlled the boyars, and changed “old customs”; and he had not failed to mention that Meiji had deprived the Shogun of his powers and started a radical reform. But the despotism Kang promoted in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* was different. Whereas “despotism” meant mostly political reform for the earlier Kang, now it meant the development of the science of matter. His discourse on Peter the Great is a clear example of this new attitude. In 1898, Kang had praised Peter for his political reform and welcoming attitude toward Western industry<sup>40</sup>; in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation*, he praised him again for understanding “matter” and for personally engaging with the transformation of things<sup>41</sup>. Peter the Great now symbolized the nation of “matterologists” that Kang aspired to build.

### 3 The Science of Matter and its Predecessors

The science of matter did not come out of the blue. When Kang Youwei wrote this essay, he was inspired by different readings and experiences from both his years in China and his experiences in exile. He saw in England and Germany galleries, museums, and schools that inspired him; he saw factories, met politicians and professors, and studied the history of each place he visited. In Canada

39 In Yves Cohen’s words, the twentieth century was a “century of chieftains,” because it was characterized both by the emergence of highly hierarchical structures relying on a “chief” and by widespread reflections across the world on what “chiefs” were supposed to be and do. See the introduction of Cohen 2013, 9–25. Kang Youwei definitely contributed to these kinds of reflections.

40 “*E Bide bianzheng ji* 俄彼得變政記,” in *KYQJ*, 4:33–41.

41 “Wuzhi,” 64–65.

and the United States, he also met important people, especially businessmen, and he could experience for himself the complexity of the financial world and the specific challenges of big industry. Through his daughter Tongbi and other intermediaries, he had access to English books he could not have obtained otherwise. From China he had carried with him his intimate knowledge of literati traditions and his experience as a scholar-official. When he discussed “national politics” in general, and in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation*, all these experiences and readings were particularly prominent. Among them, one deserves particular attention: political economy.

Kang was definitely familiar with some texts of Scottish and English political economy. Since 1902, his disciple Liang Qichao had begun serializing in the *Xinmin congbao* periodical his *Short History of Political Economy* (*Shengji xue xueshuo yange xiaoshi* 生計學學說沿革小史), covering the period from ancient Greece to Adam Smith (1723–1790); Henry Fawcett (1833–1884)’s *Manual of Political Economy* (1863) had been available in Chinese since 1883; and in 1902 Yan Fu had published his translation of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>42</sup> There are many traces of political economy in *On How Matter Can Save the Nation*. In the appendix, especially in the paragraphs devoted to taxation and parliaments in China, Kang claims that local assemblies should take part in discussions on taxation and budgets; if not, “even if Liu Yan came back to life and Adam Smith was in charge, people would definitely complain.”<sup>43</sup> Here Adam Smith is not portrayed as the representative of a science. He just stands out as an insightful scholar who, like Liu Yan 劉晏 (c. 715–780) of the Tang dynasty (618–907), would be able to handle complex questions of the state budget. In this sense, economic reflections were only part of the science of matter, not the whole of it. Yan Fu’s translation and Liang Qichao’s presentation of Adam Smith may have inspired Kang but, as he suggests in many passages of his essay, the “science of matter” was beyond the scope of political economy. It was neither trade, nor industry, nor agriculture, nor even the interconnection of these activities, but a knowledge about the root of all these activities—a knowledge on the “matterological” aspects of things.

42 On the introduction of political economy in China, see Trescott 2007.

43 “Wuzhi,” 100.

Political economy may have also inspired another aspect of the science of matter: its “axiological neutrality” toward things. That is to say, just like the economic processes as conceived in political economy, the processes of matter production were neither good nor bad, and no moral judgment should be made about them (although Kang definitely considered matter itself “good”). In his introduction to his translation of the *Wealth of Nations*, Yan Fu had already advocated respect for political economy and dismissed accusations that “profit” was immoral.<sup>44</sup> In the same way, Kang insisted that the science of matter and ethics were two different things and should remain unrelated.<sup>45</sup> But this separation of morality and matter may have also been inspired by other traditions. Actually, the idea had been present in China since the first half of the nineteenth century. Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), a major source of inspiration for Kang, had claimed for example that “since antiquity, there have been wealthy and powerful countries which did not follow the royal Way”—that is, the ethical and ritual rules that should guide the behavior of the monarch and his ministers—“but there has been no royal Way without wealth and strength.”<sup>46</sup> Kang made a similar legalist-inspired claim. He said that if the main characteristic of civilization is its “ethics,” then China is probably superior to Europe and America, and India even superior to all other countries; but if the defining trait of civilization is its “matter,” then Europe and America are superior to the rest.<sup>47</sup> The irony of all this is that the anthropological assumptions of nineteenth-century political economy were, as Albert Hirschman has shown, grounded in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century controversies in moral philosophy.<sup>48</sup> When Chinese scholars had access to political economy in the nineteenth century, they neglected

44 Schwartz 1964, 124, and more generally chap. 5.

45 Indeed, Kang claimed that while China had excelled in ethics, it lacked the science of matter, while others had the science of matter but were bad at ethics. The problem was that a country without ethics could easily survive if it had the science of matter, but a country without the science of matter was doomed to perish even if it was the most virtuous on earth. Such was the case of India. “Wuzhi,” 66–68.

46 Wei 1994, 41.

47 “Wuzhi,” 66–68.

48 Hirschman 2013, 9–66.

these “moral” origins of the science and took from its seeming “axiological neutrality” the elements that looked compatible with their own purposes.

Whether in this regard political economy played a more important role in Kang’s discourse than Wei Yuan’s legalist ideas, it is difficult to say. What seemed to be closer to political economy, at least in its English and Scottish traditions, was the idea that matter, like economy, was a relatively autonomous force which commanded the rest of human activity. For many British political economists, this autonomous force was the economic processes; for Kang, it was the use and production of matter. The objects were different, but the pattern of thought was similar.

In any case, whatever its relation with political economy, *On How Matter Can Save the Nation* also gave a prominent role to another field of knowledge: the “ruling the world” (*jingshi* 經世) tradition, also called “statecraft,” which had become a central issue in nineteenth-century China. The statecraft agenda had been shaped both by the Ming-Qing transition in the seventeenth century and by the nineteenth-century internal and external affairs of the Qing empire; it was a field of knowledge that covered issues from administration to taxation, from ritual to public works: that is, it covered the whole range of activities that a Chinese scholar-official was supposed to handle when he became imperial servant. Within this tradition, Kang discussed two generations of “ruling the world” representatives. First, the generation of ministers and scholar-officials who were active since the Tongzhi Restoration, the so-called self-strengtheners; and second, the earlier generation that included Wei Yuan, who produced part of their works before the Opium Wars and later inspired the self-strengtheners. Regarding the Tongzhi generation, Kang praised their positive attitude toward industry but criticized them for being too partial and selective. In the general introduction to his essay, Kang said:

During the Tongzhi and beginning of the Guangxu eras, Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), and Shen Baozhen 沈葆楨 (1820–1879), when ignorance was starting to recede, understood conditions too superficially; they thought that what makes America and Europe powerful are gunboats and troops and that we should employ troops and gunboats to repel them. They did not know that the fact that they have troops and

gunboats has a root [...]. The reason why China is sick is none other than that she fails to investigate the science of matter.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, their problem was that they exclusively focused on certain industries and military organization, and neglected what made industry or armies possible; they knew that industry was a key issue, but they were unaware of its actual foundations. For this reason, they only made a partial and unsystematic use of the science of matter. This did not mean that their assumptions were wrong. A key inspiration for them too, Wei Yuan had famously suggested that China should “imitate the best techniques [of the Europeans and Americans] in order to control them.”<sup>50</sup> For Kang, Wei had at least started down the right path:

In those times, [Wei Yuan] certainly did not know that the Europeans had their own flourishing civilization, ethics, law, politics, literature, and philosophy, and he used Chinese civilization to discuss these things; but [he knew] that the way to save the nation was precisely what China did not have, that is, basically, matter. If from the times of Daoguang (1820–1850) and Xianfeng (1850–1861) up to the time of Tongzhi (1861–1875) and the first years of Guangxu (1875–1908) people had rewarded the creation of new techniques<sup>51</sup> and new ideas, then today they would already have developed for a couple of decades, and if we take into account the strength of our country and the intelligence of our people, we could already be equal to Europe and compete with it. How could there be anyone who came to humiliate us? So Wei Yuan’s theory is still today a superior theory. Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Guo Songtao 郭嵩焘 (1818–1891) all followed Wei Yuan’s approach, and they all held important positions; it’s just a pity that they could not discuss it deeply and apply it vigorously!<sup>52</sup>

49 “Wuzhi,” 63: 當同光之初，曾文正，李文忠，沈文肅諸公，草昧初開，得之太淺，則以為歐美之強者，在軍兵炮艦，吾當治軍兵炮艦以拒之，而未知彼軍兵炮艦之有其本也。[...] 中國之病弱非有他也，在不知講物質之學而已。

50 “Wuzhi,” 71. For Wei Yuan’s phrase, see the original preface of his *Haiguo tuzhi*, vol. 4, 1.

51 The word is *qiyi* 器藝, which can mean either “techniques” and “labor skills” (like *gongyi*) or “machines and techniques.”

52 “Wuzhi,” 71–72: 當時固未知歐人之別有文明、道德、法律、政治、文

In this sense, Kang considered that Wei had set the right principles; he just did not know enough about the West, and his followers only made limited use of his suggestions. If China really wanted to use barbarian techniques to control the barbarians, then she should learn the science of matter, the actual root of “wealth and strength.”

The science of matter actually owed two debts to the tradition of “ruling the world.”<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, its positive and active attitude toward things; on the other, its all-encompassing dimension, which tended rather to integrate than to separate the spheres of knowledge and activity. In his huge collection of “ruling the world” texts, the *Anthology of Qing Texts on Ruling the World*, Wei Yuan had included a piece by a seventeenth/eighteenth-century scholar-official named Ren Qiyun 任啟運 (1670–1744). In the ceremonial lectures of the “classics mat,” which were addressed to the emperor, Ren conducted an exegesis of a passage of the *Book of Changes* which said, “By what means does the sage bring people together? By wealth (*cai* 財).”<sup>54</sup> In this exegesis, Ren observed:

Dong Zhongshu said: “The benevolent one rectifies his righteousness and doesn’t think of profit.” And Mencius: “What need is there to talk about profit? Benevolence and righteousness are enough.” However, when King Wen arranged the *Changes*, he said in the first place, “Primordial, penetrating, profitable, correct.” In his “Ornamented Words,” Confucius said: “Profit is the harmonization of righteousness”;<sup>55</sup> and also: “To bring profit to things is good for harmonizing righteousness.” He does not only talk about profit, but also brings together profit and righteousness. Why? Because Heaven produces the hundred things to nourish the people; therefore [the *Changes* say]

學、哲理之盛，而就中國本有之文明論之，則保國之道，中國所缺乏者，乃最在物質。假令當道咸，乃遲至同治，光緒初時，人獎勵新器藝，新思想，則今日之製作已數十年，以我國力之厚、人民之慧，已可與歐人並驅爭先矣。豈復有來侮者乎？然則魏默深之論，至今猶為至論也。曾文正，李文忠，郭筠仙皆頗從默深之說，又皆居要地，惜乎其未能深講而力行之也。

53 Huang 1986, 83–96.

54 “Xici xia” 繫辭下, in *Zhouyi zhengyi*, “Xici (xia),” 8.86b. All the quotations of the classics come from *Shisan jing zhushu* 1997.

55 The word *he* 和 is used here as a verb. The phrase comes from *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 1.15a.

that “the hexagram *qian* (乾) can use beautiful profit to be profitable to all under Heaven.”<sup>56</sup>

And from this observation, Ren drew the following conclusion:

The great profit between Heaven and Earth is the great righteousness between Heaven and Earth, and it is also the great benevolence between Heaven and Earth. If one brings no profit to things then there is no harmonization of righteousness, and if there is no harmonization of righteousness then there is no benevolence; for this reason, the administration of wealth is what the sage considers to bring profit to things; it’s what the sage considers to exert righteousness, in order to accomplish benevolence. The all-under-Heaven of the later generations is still the all-under-Heaven of the ancient sages. The production of things by Heaven has not stopped, but in ancient times there often was a surplus, and later on there often was scarcity; this has no other cause than the fact that there is no discussion about the administration of wealth.<sup>57</sup>

Here the topic is far from Kang Youwei’s “matter.” But the way Ren Qiyun handles the question of “things” (*wu* 物) could have inspired both Kang’s reflections and the Chinese reformers’ sympathetic attitude toward political economy. Ren indeed explained that the sages had used “things” to exert benevolence; if benevolence can be exerted through things, this is because the sage brings “profit” to them and people can enjoy them. We will not get into the details of what “profit” may have precisely meant to Ren. We will just mention that, probably following both an authoritative commentary and a passage in the “Attached Words” of the *Changes*, he understood it as “letting things have their due place,” that is,

56 Ren 2004, 436: 董仲舒曰：仁者正其誼，不謀其利。孟子言：何必曰利，亦有仁義而已矣。而文王係易，首言元亨、利貞。孔子文言，言利者，義之和，又言利物足以和義。非特言利，且合利與義，何哉？蓋天生百物，皆以養民，故乾始能以美利利天下。

57 Ibid.: 天地之大利，即天地之大義，而即天地之大仁也。非利物而無以和義，非和義而無以為仁，故理財者，聖人之所為利物，聖人之所為義以成仁也。夫後世之天下，猶古聖之天下。天地之生物未嘗息也，然而古常有餘，後常不足，此無異故，惟理財之不講也。

satisfying the people's needs.<sup>58</sup> Ren also makes it clear that “profit” is related to “wealth” (*cai*), which according to the *Changes* is what the sage uses to “bring people together.” In any case, just like Kang, Ren had proposed a political theory of things. He had suggested that the emperor—who was supposed to follow the example of the sages—should employ things to exert his benevolence on his subjects. Later on, in the early twentieth century, Kang turned this positive attitude toward the profitable side of “things” into a more general discussion on the profitable side of “matter.”<sup>59</sup>

The traditions of “ruling the world” may have also inspired the open nature of the science of matter. Unlike political economy, which supposed a clear distinction between the different sciences, the science of matter kept the all-encompassing impulse of the “ruling the world” field. Political economy tended to see things from their “economic” point of view and, without excluding the other uses of things, claimed valid principles only for its own “sphere” of application: economy applied to the sphere of production and exchange like art to the sphere of artistic works or ethics to the sphere of morality. Even if political economy saw its object, “economy,” as the major social force, it relied on a clear separation in the conceptual jurisdiction of each science or art. The science of matter, on the contrary, intended to find general principles that applied to all human activities: matter was the “root” of everything of worth, no matter from which dimen-

58 See the commentary of Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) in *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 1.15a and the “Attached Words” passage in *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 8.86c. Kong’s was an authoritative commentary of the ancient classic. The expression “have their due place” referring to “things” appears in Kong’s commentary to the hexagram *qian* (“each gets what is appropriate to it” 各得其宜), where he discusses *liwu* 利物, and, with a similar wording (“each gets its due place” 各得其所), in the main text of the “Attached Words.” In this second case, it refers to the satisfaction of the people’s needs through market transactions.

59 However, Ren did not only see the positive side of things. In the same piece, he also said that things could “seduce” and lead people astray, and that the virtuous should avoid them. For Kang, the only negative things are those that cannot become “matter.” For the different ideas about profit, increasingly positive in some regards but cautious and sometimes negative in others, see Rowe 2018, 177–195; 2001, 287 and chap. 8.

sion of life, and for this reason the science of matter depended on the particular knowledge of the required conditions to turn “raw” things into useful “matter.” The “ruling the world” field was of course very different from this; it subordinated to the scriptural traditions of the scholar-officials—especially the classics and the ancient masters—the whole realm of imperial action. However, in so doing, the field of “ruling the world” did not assume that life was divided into different spheres with their own exclusive rules, but came back to general principles that could explain particular problems and could orient human life in all its dimensions. The science of matter remained attached to this all-encompassing way of seeing things.

#### 4 Conclusion

Kang’s political theory of things puts into words a major ambition of contemporary nation-states: unify the political perspective of their populations under the idea that they belong to a single “nation” and take control of the activities that orient people’s lives. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such an ambition took many forms, for there was no single way of “seeing like a state,”<sup>60</sup> and Kang adopted it in his own way. He intended to unify the nation’s “vision of the world” on the grounds of a particular type of knowledge, the “science of matter,” and this required the intervention of a sovereign power (in his mind, a national monarchy). He thought that only a “state,” and especially a “despotic” one, could establish the necessary devices—mandatory education, museums, galleries, and so forth—to orient the knowledge of the whole population. For this reason, he rejected the seemingly anarchic ways in which the different groups of the empire devoted themselves to their activities, not to mention those who rebelled in the name of what he considered an abstract conception of freedom. He thought that the science of matter, which turned the unpredictable “things” of the world into the useful “matter” that would save the nation, should correct the deviant views of the people and lead them on to the path of “wealth and strength.” This was for Kang the main pillar of national cohesion. In this regard, his “science of matter” should help simplify the multiple relations of people to things, replace multiple

---

60 Scott 1998.

forms of knowledge by a single one, and erase the intrinsic arbitrariness in the way individuals and groups related to their social and natural environment.

Kang partly perpetuated a major assumption of the scholar-official traditions: political order depended on a particular kind of knowledge. This knowledge could not be the spontaneous product of unpredictable human relations, but an imposition “from above” that would be accepted, or at least respected, by most of the people. This did not mean that Kang rejected “autonomy” and “freedom,” as he explained. He even encouraged autonomy of thought, which was in his opinion a necessary condition for the development of new techniques, and he supported all the “limited freedom” that stood on different constitutions of the world. Kang simply thought that the state should produce multiple institutional devices to shape the knowledge of people within the narrower framework of the science of matter; it should get rid of useless ideas and things, and unify the perspective of the whole nation. In this sense, his political theory of things was neither an economic discourse about commodities (or value), nor simple propaganda for the “despotic” discipline of states and corporations. It was both of them. And beyond them, it was a normative theory on how power should relate to knowledge, and on how knowledge should relate to things.

## References

- Benevolo, Leonardo (2001). *Historia da arquitetura moderna*. Sao Paulo: Perspectiva.
- Brown, Bill (2001). “Thing Theory.” In: *Critical Inquiry* 28.1, pp. 1–22.
- (2003). *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Brusadelli, Federico (2017). “A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei’s Communism, Mao Zedong’s Classicism, and the ‘Accommodating Look’ of the Marxist Li Zehou.” In: *Asian Studies* 5.1, pp. 103–122.
- Cohen, Yves (2013). *Le siècle des chefs: Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l’autorité*. Amsterdam: Éditions Amsterdam.
- Conze, Werner (1975). “Freiheit.” In: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Ed. by Otto Brun-

- ner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck. Vol. 2. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, pp. 425–542.
- Dan Shilian 單世聯 (2011). “‘Wenming’ yu ‘wuming’ zhi bianzheng – Kang Youwei ‘Wuzhi jiuguo lun’ de yiyi” “文明”與“武明”之辨證—康有為“物質救國論”的意義. In: *Xueshu yanjiu* 10, pp. 33–40.
- Fang Weigui 方維規 (2014). “Jindai sixiang shi shang de ‘minzu’ ji xiangguan hexin gainian tongkao—jian shi ‘Zhongguo’ yu minzu zhuyi lunzheng” 近代思想史上的“民族”及相關核心概念通考—兼釋“中國”與民族主義論衡. In: *Yazhou gainian shi yanjiu* 2, pp. 3–60.
- Goodman, Bryna (2016). “Dubious Figures: Speculation, Calculation, and Credibility in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Stock Exchanges.” In: *The Cultural History of Money and Credit: A Global Perspective*. Ed. by Chia Yin Hsu, Thomas M. Luckett, and Erika Vause. London: Lexington Books, pp. 111–132.
- Hirschman, Albert (2013). *The Passions and the Interests*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hsiao, Kung-Chuan (1975). *A Modern China and a New World*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Huang Kewu 黃克武 (1986). “Jingshi wenbian yu Zhongguo jindai jingshi sixiang yanjiu” 經世文編與中國近代經世思想研究. In: *Jindai Zhongguo shi yanjiu tongxun* 2, pp. 83–96.
- Kang Youwei 康有為 (1987). “Kang Nanhai zibian nianpu.” 康南海自編年譜. In: *Kang Nanhai xiansheng yizhu huikan* 康南海先生遺著匯刊. Ed. by Jiang Guilin 蔣貴麟. Taipei: Hongye shuju, pp. 1–77.
- (2006). *Kang Youwei quanji* 康有為全集. Ed. by Jiang Yihua 姜義華 and Zhang Ronghua 張榮華. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe.
- Kwong, Luke (1984). *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days: Personalities, Politics, and Ideas of 1898*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Larson, Jane Leung (2007). “Articulating China’s First Mass Movement: Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, the Baohuanghui and the 1905 Anti-American Boycott.” In: *Twentieth Century China* 33, pp. 4–26.
- Leese, Daniel (2012). “‘Revolution’: Conceptualizing Political and Social Change in the Late Qing Dynasty.” In: *Oriens Extremus* 51, pp. 25–61.

- Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1988). *Yinbingshi heji* 飲冰室合集. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Masini, Federico (1993). “The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and its Evolution Toward a National Language: The Period From 1840 to 1898.” In: *Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series* 6, pp. i–295.
- Matten, Marc (2012). “China is the China of the Chinese: The Concept of Nation and its Impact on Political Thinking in Modern China.” In: *Oriens Extremus* 51, pp. 63–106.
- Ren Qiyun 任啟運 (2004). “Jingyan jiangyi wupian.” 經筵講義五篇. In: *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編. Ed. by Wei Yuan 魏源 and Wei Yuan quanji bianji weiyuan hui 魏源全集編輯委員會. Vol. 10. Wei Yuan quanji 魏源全集. Changsha: Yuelu shushe, pp. 430–442.
- Rowe, William (2001). *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (2018). *Speaking of Profit: Bao Shichen and Reform in Nineteenth-Century China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ruskin, John (1851). *Pre-Raphaelitism*. New York: John Wiley.
- Schwartz, Benjamin (1964). *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yan Fu and the West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Scott, James (1998). *Seeing like a State*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shisan jing zhushu* (1997). 十三經注疏 (ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- Takeuchi Hiroyuki 竹內弘行 (2008). *Kō Yui to kindai daidō shisō no kenkyū* 康有為と近代大同思想の研究. Tokyo: Kyūko shoyin.
- Trescott, Paul (2007). *Jingji Xue: The History of the Introduction of Western Economic Ideas into China, 1850 – 1950*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Wang Fansen 王汎森 (2003). “Wan Qing de zhengzhi gainian yu ‘Xin shixue’.” 晚清的政治概念與“新史學”. In: *Zhongguo jindai sixiang yu xueshu de xipu* 中國近代思想與學術的系譜. Taipei: Lianjing, pp. 195–220.
- Wei Yuan 魏源 (1994). *Mogu* 默觚. Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe.
- (2004). “Haiguo tuzhi.” 海國圖志. In: *Wei Yuan quanji* 魏源全集. Vol. 4-7. Changsha: Yuelu shushe.

- Williamson, Alexander (1876). *Gewu tanyuan* 格物探原. Shanghai: Presbyterian Mission Press.
- Wong, Aida Yuen (2016). *The Other Kang Youwei: Calligrapher, Art Activist, and Aesthetic Reformer in Modern China*. Leiden: Brill.
- Xiong, Yuezhi (2001). “‘Liberty’, ‘Democracy’, ‘President’: The Translation and Usage of Some Political Terms in Late Qing China.” In: *New Terms for New Ideas: Western Knowledge and Lexical Change in Late Imperial China*. Ed. by Michael Lackner et al. Leiden: Brill, pp. 69–94.
- Zarrow, Peter (2015). *Educating China: Knowledge, Society and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.