

THE MODERN CHINESE “UTOPIAN IMPULSE” AND THE *DATONGSHU*

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1 Introduction

Utopian thought in both China and the West has been very popular, giving rise to considerable scholarship on utopianism. In ancient China the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 spoke of a “country of emptiness,” and later periods produced many similar texts. However, early and later utopias were dissimilar. Traditional utopian texts in China tended to emphasize purity, nonaction, and a return to ancient morality, while modern utopias emphasized progress leading to better futures. Two peaks of Chinese utopianism seem to have occurred in the late Tang and Five Dynasties period of the ninth and tenth centuries and in the late Qing of the nineteenth century.¹ Utopian thought has flourished since the late Qing and has had a major impact on China. Although few of the concrete utopian proposals were put into practice, the force of the utopian critique can be seen in its impact on political revolution, deeply influencing later generations.

I will begin with a few general observations on modern utopianism. First is the distinction between “passive utopianism” and “active utopianism” as characterized by the intellectual historian Chang Hao. According to Chang, the former holds that utopia cannot be practiced immediately but rather manifests itself gradually through following the processes of historical evolution, while the latter believes in transformative change that should be pursued through positive actions and put into practice immediately rather than passively waiting for history to gradually unfold.² Second, scholars have distinguished between “major” and “minor” utopias. I believe this distinction, proposed by Jay Winter, a historian of the First World War at Yale University, is a useful one. However, Winter provides little analysis of the distinction; rather, each chapter of his book focuses

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- 1 Xiao 1982 demonstrates that more texts with utopian tendencies are from the late Tang / Five Dynasties and the late Qing periods than other period.
 - 2 Zhang Hao 2018, 321.

on a specific case. For example, Winter points to Albert Kahn, who, under the influence of Bergson, advocated a kind of minor utopian ideal. One of his ideas was to promote the use of photographs to record important places around the world in the early 1920s; another was to run a maritime university. Kahn believed that with wealth people could expand their minds, and that people could learn more than a dozen languages at maritime universities and go to many countries to expand their knowledge. In this way Kahn wanted to change the world through small reforms, not transformative change.³ And third, in addition to the above two classification schemes, I believe that Chinese utopias can be divided into two other main types. First, before the 1898 Reform Movement, utopian thought was basically backward-looking and characterized by a kind of moral involution—a manifestation of moral values so extreme as to seem undesirable by most people at the time or since. Second, after 1898, utopianism in China became oriented toward the future and was characterized by a belief in progress.

Utopianism in the wake of the 1898 Reform Movement represented a major break with traditional thought in general and earlier Chinese utopias in particular. It reflected the impact of the theory of evolution, or a new future-orientation. One idea of the age was to “break down the Three Bonds”—the hierarchical relations of father-son, ruler-minister, and husband-wife—which inspired all later utopian thought. Modern Chinese utopianism never returned to moral involution or dreams of ancient morality but instead became destructive in its vision of a creating a new utopia by breaking the chains of society, country, and family. I thus divide utopian thinking since the late Qing into two categories: first, utopias that are backward-looking and rest on moral involution, and second, utopias that are forward-looking. The former display some characteristics of Winter’s “minor utopias,” focusing on specific reforms, but also include totalistic visions that are characteristic of major utopias. The latter, notably represented by the *Datongshu* 大同書 of Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), are major utopias by Winter’s definition but may be either active or passive in terms of Chang’s taxonomy. Nonetheless, both types of utopian thought—backward-

3 Winter 2006, chap. 1. I am grateful to Peter Zarrow for bringing this work to my attention.

looking and forward-looking—were responses to the social problem of massive disorder at the time. They shared a “utopian impulse” that, broadly defined, we might find in the vast majority of complex societies, if not all of them.⁴ Nonetheless, the prevalence of utopian writing waxes and wanes, depending on and reacting to social conditions. In Karl Mannheim’s words, “A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs.”⁵

Contrary to one important strand of contemporary scholarship, the utopian impulse need not be oriented toward the future.⁶ And neither need it necessarily be religious in orientation. Rather, a utopian state of mind is marked by secular “radical visions of change” that are often sketched out without full detail.⁷ In the Qing period, the utopian impulse often stemmed from intense moral desire—a yearning also found in Kang’s otherwise quite different full-fledged utopianism.

Before turning to Kang Youwei’s *Datongshu*, I first analyze a kind of utopian impulse that has been neglected by scholars but was popular during the Qing: that of the “hungry country” (*exiang* 餓鄉). This is an example of the basically backward-looking and moral involution of Qing-period utopias. The “hungry country” stems from the *Records of a Hungry Country* (*Exiangji* 餓鄉記), written by Lan Dingyuan 藍鼎元 (1680–1733) in the early Qing, which was a novelistic utopia that described a group of people who could withstand poverty and hunger but remain moral. My attention was drawn to this short text through the writings of Lei Haizong 雷海宗 from the 1930s. Lei’s most famous scholarly work argued that China lacked a military culture. He reasoned that since China combined soldiering and farming rather than developing a specialized military, it had not been able to develop a military culture. But one of Lei’s essays offered a comparison of the published version of Lan Dingyuan’s *Records of a Hungry Country* with a transcript of the work that had been handed down through his family, which was copied from Lan’s work and also contained re-

4 Manuel and Manuel 1979, 1–29; Dutton 2010, 223–258.

5 Mannheim 1936, 192.

6 As in, for example, Jameson 2005.

7 See Zarrow 2021, 5–13.

visions made by the Qing scholar Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠.⁸ Indeed, literati liked to copy useful passages or texts they were fond of into booklets, and good ones might be published as a collection or just kept for personal reference. This was not a matter of plagiarism but simply a special custom in how people used to handle texts. Therefore, the version of the *Records of the Hungry County* of Lei Haizong's family might have been simply copied by an unsuccessful middle or lower ranking scholar. We can thus infer that Lan Dingyuan's minor utopia spread fairly widely.

Lan Dingyuan's utopia is an allegory derived from the story of Boqi and Shuyi fleeing to Shouyang Mountain (c. eleventh century BCE). Lan said that Boqi and Shuyi fled the conquering Zhou dynasty and established a Peach Blossom Spring, a place to practice their own moral standards. As opposed to Albert Kahn, who would found utopia on wealth, Lan Dingyuan's utopia emphasized that the basis of morality was poverty, that poverty was the primary prerequisite for morality and virtue. Lan suggested that many historical figures—such as Deng Tong 鄧通, Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, and Wen Tianxiang 文天祥—all wished to find their way to the “hungry country.” Yet whether they could remain in the “hungry country” depended on their level of morality and virtue: the greater their tolerance for poverty, the greater their morality and the greater their qualifications to live in this utopia. The wealthy stood no chance.⁹ Was poverty the prerequisite of morality? Although Lan's utopia was written with a playful edge, it nonetheless represented contemporary attitudes.

Next I turn to Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 and Guan Tong 管同, important thinkers of the early nineteenth century. They lived in a society in which people were losing their homes and the gap between rich and poor was increasing. Gong Zizhen, just as social ills were intensifying and the government was unable to maintain the educational system, responded with a call to return to tradition. He believed that because the Qing had abolished the head tax, people were no longer attached to the land, and the numbers of migrants were increasing. In his essay “Agriculture and Lineages” (*Nong zong* 農宗), Gong advocated combining farmland with lineage institutions and prohibiting people from freely

8 Lei 1937, 619–630.

9 Lan 1995, 203–204.

traveling.¹⁰ Gong Zizhen is usually considered an enlightened thinker, but in this kind of essay at least a part of his thinking rested on the method of moral involution to resolve the problems of social disorder that the mid- and late Qing was facing. Guan Tong, deeply influenced by the Tongcheng School, wrote a utopia also called "Records of a Hungry Country," also a Peach Blossom Spring upholding poverty and morality and lacking many goods or material desire—a moral utopia upholding the spirit of ritual propriety and shame and the highest standards of conduct. Guan Tong's utopia differed from Lan Dingyuan's in his greater emphasis on several aspects. First, poverty: "the soil is worthless [...] there is no trace of human lives." And second, the qualifications necessary for living in this utopia: "those who are not eremites practicing shame and ritual propriety cannot enter this country," which especially emphasizes the moral conduct of "firm endurance" and "preserving [morality] to the death."¹¹ Gong and Guan lived nearly at the same time and had similar reactions to the social disorder of the day. Although one wrote "Agriculture and Lineages" and the other wrote "Records of a Hungry Country," they both looked to ancient models, while in his utopian imagination Guan Tong particularly emphasized moral asceticism.

Ding Yipeng 丁以澎, a Yongqing country magistrate in the 1720s, provides another case of someone credited with writing a "Records of a Hungry Country," though he was in fact copying Lan Dingyuan's text. According to the local gazetteer, people could understand Ding's vision from his "Records of a Hungry Country," but this work was entirely Lan's and the gazetteer's editor did not realize this.¹²

It is worth noting that Guan Tong's "Records of a Hungry Country" did not merely circulate among elites but also influenced the father and son Gao Yulin and Gao Lütan of Tongguan, Shaanxi. In the famine of 1877 they were eating grass and roots when someone advised them to get government food relief, but Gao Yulin told his son, "the righteous do not accept handouts and the virtuous do not drink stolen water—how can we be worthy of the name of scholar if,

10 Gong 1999, 48–55.

11 Guan 1995, 14a–14b (444). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

12 Zhou 1779, 654.

while we are unable to help others, we take even a morsel?" He further cited Guan Tong, saying, "Formerly Guan Tong wrote 'Records of a Hungry Country' wishing to enter the hungry country, so let us grow old and die there."¹³ Soon enough, they starved to death. This shows that "Records of a Hungry Country" did not merely circulate in Shaanxi but had real effects, prompting a father and son to die for the sake of moral fervor.

Liang Shaoren's essay collection has an entry on Lan Dingyuan's "Records of a Hungry Country."¹⁴ The work circulated fairly widely in the late Qing and early Republican periods. The early Communist Party head Qu Qiubai would have been familiar with it. As a student at the Russian Language Institute, he was one of the few Chinese really proficient in Russian. He also wrote his own records of a hungry country to claim that the new "hungry country" was Russia since the Communist Revolution. After Qu reached Moscow, he wrote "Journey to a Hungry Country," following the style of "Records of a Hungry Country," but here "hungry" (餓) was a play on words meaning Russia (Eluosi 俄羅斯) and not actual hunger. Russia was indeed quite poor in the wake of the revolution, but it was full of hope and light—humanity's new utopia, the heaven of communism.¹⁵

2 Traditional Utopias in the Late Qing

Backward-looking utopias based on moral involution were also seen in the utopian impulse that emerged in the last two decades of the Qing dynasty to found a perfect society either inside or outside of China. Such ideas marked dissatisfaction with existing institutions, a dissatisfaction that did not look to gradual solutions. The institutions of the perfect society would not emerge from the natural evolution of customs but out of human reason; nevertheless, such utopian schemes were still marked by moral involution.

For example, two works representing the decades-long research of Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 on the *Zhouli* and the *Mozhi* are taken as a major contribution to Qing ev-

13 Song and Wu 1934, 13544.

14 Liang Shaoren 2012, 147 f.

15 Qu 1985, 3–112.

identical studies scholarship. The *Zhouli* has overwhelmed readers with its enormity and citations, while the *Mozi* text was long disordered and incomprehensible, presenting problems that Sun Yirang was able to resolve. Yet his works were political as well as philological. It was Zhang Taiyan who pointed to Sun's real intention in studying these two texts. "In governing, nothing is more complete than the Six Departments, so Sun annotated the *Zhouli*; in deeds, no one was more virtuous than Mo Di, so Sun edited the *Mozi*." Zhang added, "In his deeds, Sun was close to Mo Di; at home, he behaved with trust and kindness; abroad, he promoted education; he even sometimes quarreled with officials, but although criticized, he did not let it worry him."¹⁶ That was to say that Sun deliberately followed Mozi in dedicating himself to the service of humanity, constantly trying to benefit the people. Sun set up local welfare institutions and schools in his hometown, regretting nothing even when local officials opposed him and people vilified him. However, Sun clearly did not think that the ideals of the *Zhouli* or the *Mozi* could simply be carried out in a China stuck in the past. Thus from his youth onward Sun constantly tried to gather people to found a utopia based on the *Zhouli* and the *Mozi* somewhere abroad.

In the 1880s another approach was adopted by Xu Qichou 許啟疇, Chen Qiu 陳虬, and Chen Jieshi 陳介石, who founded the Society to Pursue Aspirations (*Qiuzhishe* 求志社) in the northern district of Ruian, Zhejiang. Chen Qiu had originally proposed to call their utopia "Peace and Happiness Village," but some suggested this might violate a taboo since of course they already lived in peace and happiness under the rule of the sacred Qing dynasty. In the Society to Pursue Aspirations everyone dressed in commoners' clothing to express their equality, and so they were also called the Commoners' Society. Officials and scholars returning from the outside had to first change into commoners' clothing in a small hut outside the main gate to avoid ostentation. The society elected one head, one finance officer, two buyers, and two teachers, working in shifts and earning salaries supplemented by rice coupons depending on family size, while responsible for their other foods. "Those who cannot support their families and those who desire to explore the world are allowed to leave," and Society members will help manage their families. Thus the members "can plow

16 Zhang Taiyan 1982, 75.

and timber, can work and reside, can come and go.”¹⁷ When Chen took up an official post in Beijing, a superior asked whether he was the Chen Qiu who organized the Peace and Happiness Village in Zhejiang, demonstrating that Qing officials also knew of this organization.¹⁸ This utopian community was based on respect for order and moral standards. Even the construction and ordering of the housing was based on rules: the doors to every house opened on a common space where everyone could eat together, farm, assemble, and make ritual sacrifices, with the houses surrounding this space.

Chen Qiu’s “Essay on Equally Allocating Sons” (*Junzi pian* 均子篇) of 1883 laid out a unique family structure to be followed by members of the Peace and Happiness Village. If three brothers have seven sons, they will allocate them according to birth order regardless of who is the actual father: the eldest boy to the eldest brother, the second boy to the second brother, and the third boy to the third brother, and then renewing the cycle, leaving the eldest brother with three sons. They are officially adopted after they stop nursing in a year. Daughters are allocated in the same way. Chen said that this method had six great merits and should be followed by later generations. “If they violate my will, my spirit will be displeased.”¹⁹ This utopia was only carried out for ten-odd years before it disappeared, but these kinds of minor utopias that transcended tradition and were deeply imaginative are worth our consideration, regardless of the period they emerged in.

We may doubt whether people of the Peace and Happiness Village could really follow all the Society’s rules, but what is important is that it established an alternative concept outside of existing institutions that became popular in the late Qing and early Republic. Although the new worlds founded by the likes of Chen Qiu in China and the new societies to be fulfilled on distant islands imagined by Sun Yirang were ostensibly following ancient models, their details display a strong sense of rebellion. For example, marriages were determined by lottery, a completely new idea.

17 Chen, “Qiuzhishe ji” 求志社記, in Chen 2015, 286 f.

18 Ibid., 288.

19 See Chen, “Junzi pian” 均子篇, in Chen 2015, 256 f.

3 The Basic Principles of the *Datongshu*

As noted above, the first type of Chinese utopia looked backward, emphasized morality, and pictured frugal simplicity. After the 1898 Reform Movement, utopias were mostly of the second type, looking forward, emphasizing a doctrine of limitless possibilities, and abolishing the Three Bonds. The "Records of a Hungry Country" in the Qing or Qu Qiubai's "Journey to a Hungry Country" both still displayed a traditional moral imaginary. But this was diminishing in the period after 1898, as new utopias generally assumed the complete destruction of existing institutions to destroy traditional moral restraints, leading to the dominance of a doctrine of limitless possibilities.

Aside from the original Confucian moral imaginary, utopias in the wake of 1898 utilized new intellectual resources such as science and evolutionary theory, creating a limitless possibility of humanity in the future. Xia Chengtao 夏承燾 noted in his diaries that for those who were influenced by evolutionary theory, the general sentiment was to look to the future and not the past. One of his friends once remarked that, "I regret that I was not born a thousand years ago to explain what the ancients never knew." This sentiment soon changed to, "I regret that I am not going to be born a thousand years from now"—substituting the future for the past.²⁰ Thus the notion of the unlimited possibilities of the future was influenced by evolutionary theory. Utopian thought in the aftermath of the 1898 Reform Movement therefore became that of the "major utopias" geared toward the future, displaying a scientific imaginary, full of limitless possibilities. The most famous of these utopias was Kang Youwei's *Datongshu* 大同書.²¹ Rather than a "minor utopia" or a backward-looking utopia, the *Datongshu* was a major utopia and a forward-looking utopia, but it still remained a passive utopia, not an "active utopia" to be immediately put into practice. However, the active utopias that soon emerged were related to Kang's utopia.

20 Xia 1992, 609.

21 The title of Kang's work, *datong* (大同), is derived from the "Liyun" 禮運 chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記; discussed below) and means something like "great union" or "great unity" or, in a more modern political sense, "commonweal," or simply "utopia."

The sources of Kang's utopianism were extremely broad. He had begun writing in a utopian vein from an early age, as seen in his "Complete Book of Substantial Truths and Universal Laws" (實理公法全書). This work, like his later *Datongshu*, shows that he was deeply influenced by the Western science of the day. Kang greatly valued Western learning. He bought some two hundred translations published by the Jiangnan Arsenal, and the *Datongshu* was full of references to sciences like electricity, optics, and mechanics, in addition to displaying Kang's deep knowledge of Confucianism and Buddhism. In his conception of a utopian world, natural laws and social laws were interlinked. What Kang learned from modern Western science was that science can break down the boundaries dividing people, for example through the telephone and the telegraph. Additionally, through the microscope, Kang understood that "large and small have the same principle" insofar as they are relative, and that through electricity "fast and slow have the same principle." Through the telescope, Kang understood the possibility of linking the earth and the stars. Given that large and small and fast and slow all had the same principle, how could inequality be justified? Given that all elements of the natural world were interlinked, it followed that the boundaries dividing people had no place in the world.

Moreover, Kang had earlier discussed Timothy Richard's translation of Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888) with his disciples at his academy. In this translation the term *datong* 大同 was used for the concept of utopia. At the time, using terms like *datong* to talk about any concepts of utopia that were unfamiliar to Chinese seems to have been quite common. For example, the Jiangnan Arsenal's translation of Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* was entitled *Datong Studies* (*Datongxue* 大同學).²² Several features of the *Datongshu* resembled those of *Looking Backward*, and we can be sure that Kang's work was inspired by Bellamy's work.²³

However, in my view, another key intellectual resource for Kang was the Qing scholar Wei Yuan 魏源. In his reading of the "Liyun" (禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), Wei proposed that different stages marked develop-

22 Zhang Bing 2017, 95–102.

23 In his early discussions with his disciples, Kang said that *Looking Backward* was a reflection of *datong*. See Kang Youwei's lecture recorded in Li and Jiang 1987, 83.

ment from the Age of Lesser Peace (*xiaokang* 小康) to that of the *datong*. In the Age of Lesser Peace, the titles of the Son of Heaven and the Noble Lords were inherited and the distinction between ruler and minister was respected. However, in the Age of Datong, rulers were selected from among the virtuous and all property was held in common. Wei Yuan said that the Age of Datong represented the ideals of Confucius, and was the same as the Age of Great Peace in the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳.²⁴ Wei's view represented a particular interpretation of classical learning. In the late Qing period, two conflicting classical texts were discussed. In the "Liyun" chapter of the *Book of Rites*, the development of the world was from *datong* 大同 to *xiaokang* 小康—in effect, a devolution. However, in the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) followed by Wei Yuan, the development of the world had gradually progressed, from the Age of Chaos (*juluanshi* 據亂世) to the Age of Rising Peace (*shengpingshi* 升平世) and on to the Age of Peace (*taipingshi* 太平世). Kang Youwei combined these two contradictory texts, equating the Age of Peace with the Age of Datong.

In addition to the influences cited above, I believe that the *Datongshu* reflects the dilemmas and utopian impulses active since the late Qing. In works such as the *Datongshu*, Kang repeatedly emphasized the hellish nature of the living environment of Guangdong (especially Guangzhou) and its insurmountable difficulties. Perhaps this view led him to reject the notion that gradual reforms could solve these problems and led him to search for an entirely new option.

It is generally accepted that Kang began writing *Datongshu* when he was twenty-seven, but this book was not written in one go. It developed continuously, constantly absorbing new knowledge. The first drafts of *Datongshu* were circulated among Kang's disciples at his academy, who were quite stunned by it. Tan Sitong further developed Kang's ideas in his book *On Benevolence* (*Renxue* 仁學), which Liang Qichao promoted, but even though Liang and Kang's other disciples kept asking him to publish his work, Kang always refused. When Kang fled into exile after the defeat of the 1898 Reform Movement, he clearly continued to collect more materials to further construct his utopia. Scholars have long pointed out that the *Datongshu* contains many details from after Kang's 1898 exile (such as the section on Fourier), and they continue to debate the dating

24 Mori 1981, 129 f.

of the final version of the text.²⁵ However, most scholars accept that Liang Qichao's account is fairly reliable, dating the basic completion of the manuscript to 1901 and 1902 when Kang was somewhat settled in exile in Penang.²⁶

According to Qian Mu, even though Kang was already familiar with the theory of the *datong* in the *Book of Rites*, his utopianism emerged in two stages. First was his *Complete Book of Substantial Truths and Universal Laws*, which Qian took as reflecting Kang's belief in the distinction between the New Text and Old Text schools of Confucianism rather than the distinction between the Datong and the Lesser Peace.²⁷ This explains why Kang's book was first called "Universal Principles of Humanity" (*Renlei gongli* 人類公理) rather than "Datong." It was only in the second stage that the *datong* of the *Datongshu* emerged. Qian believes that Kang postdated the *datong* utopia that he later developed, claiming it as that of a twenty-seven-year-old.²⁸

Be that as it may, as Kang said in his colophon to the *Datongshu*, he was chiefly motivated to write it out of his "distress over the national calamity and sorrow over the people's suffering." In sections of the *Datongshu* that have been somewhat neglected, Kang describes the hellish suffering of the people of Guangdong in the late Qing, and if these were put together, that would be a significant accomplishment. Thus the premise of the *Datongshu* was to eliminate suffering

25 Li Zehou's 李澤厚 analysis is invaluable. See Li 1979, 92–181. For a brief discussion of the debate on this point between Li Zehou and Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞, see Zhu Weizheng 朱維錚, "Daoyan" 導言. This appears in Kang Youwei, *Kang Youwei datonglun erzhong* 康有為大同論二種, Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1998 [hereafter "DTL"], 33–34.

26 In 1913 Kang published the first two sections of the *Datongshu* in his journal *Buren* 不忍; in 1919 this was published as a pamphlet. Only in 1935, eight years after Kang's death, did Zhonghua shuju publish a complete version of *Datongshu*.

27 Qian Mu thus rejected Kang's own colophon "Datongshu chengti ci" 大同書成題詞 where Kang claimed to have written the book to "mourn the disaster of the nation and the suffering of the people" while he was fleeing from the French invasion in 1885. According to Qian, Kang first touched on the Datong only in 1895. See Qian 1966, 700.

28 Qian 1966, 699.

and seek happiness, proclaiming that all its measures were taken for the happiness of the people and that all its governance is for the benefit of the people.

The basic premise of Kang's thought lay in his belief that every person was one of "heaven's people" (*tianmin* 天民) at birth—that everyone is subject to "heaven" and that "eliminating suffering and seeking happiness" is in accord with the principle of "heaven's people."²⁹ In all matters, Kang believed that judgments should be based on "universal principle" (*gongli* 公理), which he thus termed the "universal principle of heaven." And according to the universal principle, all persons are "heaven's people," who are born free and equal and so should throw off their shackles.³⁰ The sole obstacle preventing a person from becoming one of "heaven's people" is "selfishness" (*si* 私). The *Datongshu* says, "In family relations, fathers only favor (*si*) their own sons, grandfathers only favor (*si*) their own grandsons. Given this selfishness, people only raise their own descendants but not the descendants of others, not even the descendants of fellow clan members."³¹ Families are thus the origin of all selfishness, and so the destruction of the family is the starting point that leads to the *datong*. In the *datong* all the boundaries that bind people are eliminated, and so everyone is completely free. Kang's utopia was one of "absolute equality," yet since his basic premise was not equality as such, Kang advocated that all humans share the same body and spirit. He thus advocated numerous ways of changing people's skin color and physical form.

"Nine boundaries" were to be abolished to achieve the Datong utopia, namely: abolish national boundaries to unite the world; abolish class boundaries to equalize peoples; abolish race boundaries to amalgamate the races; abolish sexual boundaries to preserve autonomy; abolish family boundaries to become heaven's people; abolish work boundaries to make all jobs public; abolish arbi-

29 DTL, 221, 250. Cf. Laurence G. Thompson (trans.), Ta T'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-wei, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958 [hereafter "TTS"], 184.

30 "Universal principle" is established by heaven, and so Kang spoke of the "universal principle of heaven." In referring to the "primacy of universal principle," Kang was valuing it above "ritual and righteousness" (*liyi* 禮義), and in "expounding universal principle," slavery is abolished. DTL, 213, 164; cf. TTS, 137.

31 DTL, 243–244; cf. TTS, 179 f.

trary administrative boundaries to govern equally; abolish species boundaries to love all living forms; and abolish the boundaries of suffering to attain the utmost happiness. After the nine boundaries are abolished, human society shifts from the private and selfish (*si* 私) to the public and open (*gong* 公). In this public and open world, human life—birth, aging, sickness, and death—will be managed by various institutions that people collectively and spontaneously organize themselves.

Kang's utopia begins with the destruction of the family, which is the origin of all evils. According to Kang, although modern Western countries promoted individual autonomy, they were still far from achieving the Age of Great Peace. This was simply because they still had families, the source of all selfishness.³² We only have to look at several of the *Datongshu*'s section headings to understand why the family is the core of all evil. For example: "The injury from having families is a great obstacle to achieving the Age of Great Peace." Kang lists fourteen great evils of having families, which are the most obstructive and divisive injury to achieving the Age of Great Peace.³³ He repeatedly emphasizes that the most important and also the most difficult means to abolish the nine boundaries is to abolish the family. Even to abolish nations has to be accomplished by abolishing the family, while to abolish the family one had to follow the principle of natural rights—in Kang's words, "the equality and autonomy of both men and women; marriages no longer defined as between 'man' and 'wife.'" If this can be practiced for sixty years, then the consciousness of the family among humanity will disappear and the private selfishness inherent in the relations of husband and wife, and father and son, will no longer exist. At this time, there is no one to bequeath property to, and family money and treasures will be freely passed on to others.³⁴ Moreover, since there are no families, Buddhist monks do not even have to "renounce" their families.³⁵

32 Kang said, "Individual autonomy is well developed in the West today, but this is still not the moral character required for the Age of Great Peace. Why is this? Because of the existence of families." DTL, 247; cf. TTS, 180.

33 DTL, 248 f.; cf. TTS, 181 f.

34 DTL, 314; cf. TTS, 226.

35 Kang said, "There is a Way to get there. Gaining it will be gradual; [we must proceed] in orderly sequence to perfect it. [This Way] can bring about that men will

4 Getting to the Datong

Kang Youwei did not clearly describe the means to reach utopia; he neither spoke of classes nor of class struggle, but he presented many arguments that deftly depicted his vision of the future. First, Kang highlighted basic trends of historical evolution—for example, the innumerable kingdoms of ancient China were reduced to 200-odd kingdoms of the Spring and Autumn period, which were reduced to the seven great powers of the Warring States period, and finally resulted in the Qin unification. His point was that the entire world would gradually evolve into just a few states (most often he pointed to German unification for proof). Second, Kang highlighted the basic trends of development occurring in the contemporary West.

Third, the theory of evolution, which was Kang's strongest argument, assumed that with the right direction and methods, people would be riding the train of evolution and gradually reach utopia. And fourth, even more important was Kang's theory of the "Three Ages." Virtually the entire *Datongshu* is imbued with this theory, a temporal framework derived from New Text Confucianism: through diligent effort human society could move from the Age of Chaos through the Age of Ascending Peace and finally reach the Age of Great Peace (or the Datong).³⁶

For Kang, this framework provided the direction, energy, and pattern that would automatically and powerfully guide humanity to the Datong. All is inevitable and all is moving forward. "Survival of the fittest" sets an inescapable trajectory. Thus over time everything tends toward the Datong, where even Black people will all become White.³⁷ Kang believed that according to the Three Ages theory of Confucianism, China was then in the Age of Chaos while the West was in the Age of Ascending Peace. Both the West and China, then, had to continue onward to the Age of Great Peace.

have the happiness of having abolished the family without suffering renouncing the family." DTL, 250; following TTS, 184.

36 DTL, e.g., 122 f.; cf. TTS, 86 f.

37 In Kang's words, "The doctrines of Evolution are increasingly clear" and "there is no escape from Evolution." DTL, 166, 171; cf. TTS, 138, 142.

According to the *Datongshu*, reaching the Datong is like a train powering straight ahead that should reach its destination without fail. It is striking that whereas anarchists believed that an anarchist realm could be attained only by violent revolution through general strikes, assassinations, and so forth, the *Datongshu* is insensitive to class and says little about violent revolution. Kang seems to have believed that no such revolutionary methods were necessary to reach the Datong. Many matters are discussed in the *Datongshu*; below, I focus chiefly on the view of political affairs seen in Kang's utopia.

Kang believed that the first stage to attain the Datong was for every country to establish public assemblies (*gongyihui* 公議會), evidently along the lines of Europe's parliaments of the day. In his "Chart of the Three Ages," Kang lists public assemblies as still in the Age of Chaos, but in the next stage humanity gradually amalgamates its thousands of small governments into a single world government or public government (*gong zhengfu* 公政府).³⁸ The political structure that Kang imagined was based on using degrees of latitude and longitude to divide the entire globe into administrative divisions. Countries would no longer exist, and thus the endless wars roused by national loyalties would disappear. People would no longer regard themselves as belonging to a particular country but only as members of a such-and-such "degree."³⁹ Ultimately, public governments will be formed among all the planets, an extremely expansive political vision that was inspired by modern power and communications. Kang believed that in the future there would be no obstacles to the links and consultations between countries and planets.

Administration of the public government is systematically divided into twenty ministries and four Yuan. There will essentially be no "officials" in the public government, and no real hierarchy. Kang repeatedly emphasized that in the Datong the entire world would be self-governing; the officials are of the people—with no distinctions of rank—and these "officials" are chosen by the people through election and consensus. There is no real president in the public government but a leader chosen by officials who are at every level themselves chosen by election, their terms of office and powers limited. Kang said, "In the Datong

38 DTL, 320; cf. TTS, 233.

39 DTL, 132–133; cf. TTS, 99 f.

there are no commoners; all the people in the world collectively manage the world's affairs." In effect, the entire world resembles a cooperative.⁴⁰

The top priority in Kang's vision of the Datong was public communication and transportation (*gongtong* 公通), which would function like today's Ministry of Transportation.

In the Datong era, railways, electricity, steamboats, and postal services will be unified and belong to the public. At this time, airships will be common and also belong to the public. These five services are all essential to global transport and communication, and will be managed by specialized departments of the public government.⁴¹

Railways, electricity, steamboats, postal services, and airships—"all five create a network connecting the entire globe" and are key to unifying the entire Datong world. In terms of society, twelve institutes will provide public nurture (*gongyang* 公養), public education (公教), and public succor (*gongxu* 公恤) from birth to death: human roots, infant care, childhood nurseries, preschool care, elementary schools, middle schools, colleges, hospitals, homes for the elderly, poorhouses, nursing homes, and funeral homes.⁴² From birth to death every individual will be taken care of by these twelve institutions, which will be run by publicly selected managers serving limited terms. Kang was so thorough that he even considered how to deal with death. Burial wastes too much land while cremation is too hard on the survivors; therefore, in the future a "dispersion machine" (*huarenji* 化人機) will easily dissolve the corpses.⁴³

In the Datong, the public government will assign everyone jobs. Based on the principles of agricultural and industrial production, everyone will spend a period of their lives working in the twelve institutes just like military conscription. Everyone is raised by the public government for twenty years and then works for twenty years. Then, "at 40, they may retire from work and concentrate on

40 DTL, 318, 320–323; cf. TTS, 231–236.

41 DTL, 326; cf. TTS, 237.

42 DTL, 250–251; cf. TTS, 184–186.

43 DTL, 292; cf. TTS, 206 f.

studying the Way.” The purpose studying the Way is to become spirits and immortals. In Kang’s words, “The world of spirits and immortals is the fulfillment of Datong.”⁴⁴

Although the Datong claimed to break down all hierarchies, it also created new ones. In the bureaucracy of the public government, agencies at every level are divided into eight ranks, which Kang derived from the institutions of the Zhou dynasty as recorded in the *Zhouli* 周禮 and the *Shijing* 詩經. Moreover, people outside the bureaucratic hierarchy also possessed different ranks, according to the awards and punishments meted out by the public government. For example, inventors are given honorary badges as “intelligent persons,” while lazy people receive punishments.⁴⁵ In Kang’s Datong, the public government gives various special medals such as “the benevolent (*ren* 仁人) stars” to differentiate among ranks. For example, the public government assigns positions from high to low in every profession, depending on a person’s skills, diligence, and service. The tone of the *Datongshu* toward lazy people is quite harsh, and they are to be treated severely. The treatment of each retiree is also determined by how much they contributed to society. Still, it is worth noting that no matter how worthless someone is, they are taken care of by the public government.

In today’s terms, Kang’s Datong society is a “planned society”—the opposite of what Hayek called “spontaneous order.” Furthermore, the Budgeting Ministry of the public government is extremely important. The *Datongshu* meticulously emphasizes whether everything is properly accounted for, including both production and distribution. The Budgeting Ministry calculates how to properly allocate everything in the production and consumption systems, so that waste, inequality, and inefficiency are avoided. The *Datongshu* assumes a limitless level of human rationality, assuming that people can plan everything. However, from today’s point of view, those who have lived through the problems of actual “planned economies” or those who understand Hayek’s notion of “spontaneous order” may not think that the all-encompassing “budgeting” of the *Datongshu* is workable.

44 DTL, 368; cf. TTS, 274.

45 DTL, 322, 337, 349; cf. TTS, 234, 243, 253–254.

Of all the positions in the Datong, the highest is labor (*gong* 工), and the most important work is that of inventing new machines.⁴⁶ However, Kang strictly distinguishes between "private labor" and "public labor," "private trading" and "public trading," and "private farming" and "public farming." The former is to be eliminated and only the latter followed in the Datong. In the case of farming, for example, each self-governing degree/district establishes agricultural bureaus down to the level of the farm, where all facilities are shared in common. However, unlike in anarchist theory, farmers are still paid wages and are eligible for promotion.

Kang believed in the limitless possibilities of modern technology—since ancient times there have been no problems that new technologies could not solve. For example, the invention of new "foodstuffs" will solve the nutritional deficiencies resulting from the problem of insufficient food supplies. Kang's Datong can even be called a scientific and egalitarian utopia. Although the conflict between high and low, master and slave, has proved irresolvable since ancient times, Kang said, "There will be no slaves in the Datong, for machines will carry out all their functions."⁴⁷ Not only will all humans be equal, but animals and plants will all be equal too: "governance will reach all the earth's animals." There will thus be no abuse or killing of animals.⁴⁸ How do we solve the problem of eating meat? Kang said, "When the Datong has arrived, there will many new technologies producing spectacular substitutes for meats with the same nutritional values and yet tasting better."⁴⁹ In the future, food will take new forms, such as potions, and thus food supply assured.

As noted above, the Datong as imagined by Kang depends on every kind of "network" for links and communication. Of these, the link between the telephone and the political order were especially close.⁵⁰ Because the Age of Great Peace relies totally on disinterested public discussions, which "reach majority decisions through telephoning,"⁵¹ the Age of Great Peace is a materially rich

46 DTL, 309 f.; cf. TTS, 221 f.

47 DTL, 363; cf. TTS, 272.

48 DTL, 356, 355; cf. TTS, 266.

49 DTL, 356; cf. TTS, 266.

50 DTL, 331; cf. TTS 238 f.

51 DTL, 343.

and highly developed society. In Kang's words, "no old forest and no deep mine are left undeveloped" to "make use of all the earth's resources."⁵² Kang's Age of Great Peace eliminates competition, except for the competition in benevolence and intelligence. As noted above, both "the intelligent" and "the benevolent" to be rewarded with various medals. In the *Datongshu* the mention of the "medal of benevolence" largely stems from politics, because good politics depends on recognizing the participation of the benevolent with reward.⁵³ In the Age of Great Peace, wealth does not come through business but "the wealthy only gain fortune after they invent new machines, accomplishments of the intelligent" who can "claim patents" and "set prices."⁵⁴

Kang consistently emphasizes the importance of intellect and thus schools to develop human intelligence—the key factor in whether the Datong could be reached.⁵⁵ He often remarked that, "In the Age of Great Peace, methods of developing human intelligence will be especially valued." Furthermore, in the Datong there are to be many ways of encouraging the development of human intelligence, sometimes by awarding medals and sometimes by giving titles, from the "knowledgeable," to the "very knowledgeable," to the "most knowledgeable," up to the "wise," and finally the "sage."⁵⁶ The standard that distinguishes the sage from the wise is mainly based on intelligence and invention, not morality.

The Datong opposes commerce, and denounces the ills of private labor and trading. There is no room for economic competition. Buying goods is like online shopping today, but people buy goods from the public government, which has only called a Ministry of Transport, no Ministry of Commerce. The Age of Great Peace has no merchants but only workers, and precisely because buying goods is like today's online system, there is no need for merchants. In Kang's words, "In the Age of Great Peace there is no private economic activity but all persons are workers."⁵⁷

52 DTL, 327.

53 DTL, 340; cf. TTS, 245.

54 DTL, 333.

55 Chapter 11 specifically deals with this issue—DTL, 337; cf. TTS, 242–244.

56 DTL, 336 f.; cf. TTS, 243 f.

57 DTL, 312, 313; cf. TTS, 223–225.

The Datong is a utopia in which physicians are the most esteemed. Kang repeatedly emphasizes that physicians hold the most important role in the twelve Yuan. Because life is comprised of birth, old age, illness, and death, we all need physicians, and the number of physicians deployed in every Yuan will exceed anything we can imagine.⁵⁸

Kang's sympathy toward women is seen throughout the *Datongshu*, which even features a section that could be called a history of what women built, namely civilization itself.⁵⁹ In the "Zuo" 作 chapter of the ancient text *Shiben* 世本, except for the goddess Nüwa, all inventions and discoveries were made by males. Kang, however, clearly opposed such traditional views by making women the creative agents of history in the *Datongshu*.⁶⁰ Kang created the Datong to eliminate suffering and find happiness, but he never clearly explains what he means by "happiness." In the Datong, people have money but pay no taxes, they have wages but wages are public knowledge. Money is only used for travel. The Age of Great Peace is full of "happiness," a world without insanity. The greatest happiness does not lie in sex or food but studying and engaging in philosophy, and the highest realm of existence is to become an immortal, at which time the study of immortality becomes universal.⁶¹

As mentioned above, a strange aspect of the Datong is that Kang imagined it as a world where everyone has become White. Kang had traveled extensively in Europe and the Americas, and wherever he went he closely studied the West's social and political conditions, particularly its charitable institutions. Although he put the West in the category of Rising Peace rather than Great Peace in his threefold historical scheme, in Kang's vision the Great Peace was being approximated in trends seen in the Rising Peace found in the West. Kang's utopia was essentially one of White domination, and thus he aimed to turn all humanity into Whites or near-Whites as the necessary step to attaining the Datong.

58 This is why Kang sometimes called the Datong the "Medical World." See DTL, 283; cf. TTS, 203.

59 DTL, 202–204.

60 Kang believed that the *Shiben* was a forgery. See Kang 1987, 6.

61 DTL, 368; cf. TTS, 275 f.

Datongshu devotes an important section to a discussion of how to “become White.” The first job is to modify people’s bodies. Kang believed it was possible to change both body and behavior. Although sexual differences cannot be eliminated, the difference in appearance between men and women can be minimized. Thus Kang advocated that men and women wear the exact same clothing.⁶² “If we set aside the method of intercourse between men and women, there is no way by which to change [the human race] [...]. If we want to unite humankind in equality and the Datong, we must begin by making everyone’s bodies alike.”⁶³ All the other races of the world—Black, Brown, and Yellow—will become White after hundreds or perhaps thousands of years. Kang postulated three ways to transform the races: marriage (between the colored races and Whites); food (if Yellows always ate steak, they would eventually become Whites with their ruddy complexions); and environment (if Yellows and Blacks migrated to cold regions, their skin color would eventually lighten). The most striking of these ideas is that of racial assimilation to achieve “whitening” by intermarriage among different races, which would be encouraged by giving medals of honor to lighter-skinned people who married darker-skinned people. Kang’s notion of racial assimilation was promoted by disciples such as Tang Caichang 唐才常. Particularly intriguing is that later in France the anarchist revolutionary Li Shizeng 李石曾 enthusiastically promoted racial assimilation everywhere he went. He facilitated French-Chinese marriages with a certain amount of success.⁶⁴ However, Kang was pessimistic about the prospects of Blacks becoming Whites, saying that even with the best methods it would take over a thousand years for Blacks to turn into Whites.

Kang’s vision of the Datong is thus evolutionary, scientific, prosperous, materialistic, meritocratic, and takes the White race as its benchmark. It is a utopia with no respect for the traditional morality, and it rejects the ideal of righteousness regardless of class. There is still government, still a ranking system, still money, and people would still receive different treatment depending on their contribution to society. But these are not the governments or ranks in the tradi-

62 DTL, 220; cf. TTS, 161–163.

63 DTL, 172; cf. TTS, 144.

64 Li Huang 1978, 57, 60, 61.

tional sense. In Kang's utopia, from birth to death everyone is the responsibility of the public government and live their whole lives through the twelve Yuan. However, as noted above, although Kang described the stages of reaching the Datong in detail—such as abolishing the nine boundaries—he never offered a clear and practical way to explain why people would make these changes.

5 Tensions in Kang's Utopianism

Many thinkers in modern China displayed a utopian impulse, but they generally kept one foot in the utopian camp and one foot in the realistic camp. Kang Youwei, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, Dai Jitao 戴季陶, and even the early Mao Zedong 毛澤東 all exhibited this kind of thinking. However, the doubling of utopianism and realism in their intellectual systems took different forms. In some cases, realism and utopianism echoed each other to some degree in ways that were interdependent and interconnected. Yet in most cases a contradiction between realism and utopianism arose—a utopia that was quite esoteric and a realism that ended up actually hindering this utopia. Kang Youwei is a representative of this latter course.

The *Datongshu* displays this doubling of utopianism and realism.⁶⁵ Superficially, this appears to be a contradiction, but seen from larger perspective Kang's utopianism and his realism are not necessarily in conflict. For example, in discussing the family Kang said, "The family is a necessity in the Age of Chaos and the Age of Rising Peace, but it is a very harmful obstruction to the Age of Great Peace," while he condemned monks (*chujia* 出家), asking, "Why should the generations of today's civilization rush into this kind of ruined and empty realm?"⁶⁶ On the one hand, Kang believed in evolution, though he opposed the Darwinian principle of competition. On the other hand, he still saw that certain forms of competition were necessary to attain the Datong. On the one hand, Kang hated how national imperialism led to annexing territories, but on

65 E.g., DTL, 230–231; cf. TTS, 172–173.

66 DTL, 249 f.; cf. TTS, 183 f.

the other he understood that the annexation of small countries to create large ones was necessary to attain the Datong.⁶⁷

Another contradiction in Kang's doubling of realism and utopianism lies in his simultaneous effort to obstruct the road to the ultimate stage of the Datong. In Qian Mu's words, "All the boundaries that the *Datongshu* wished to destroy were built back in with deep trenches and high walls."⁶⁸ This tendency was even clearer in Kang's later years. He consistently argued against any too-rapid attempt to practice Datong ideals by referring to "national conditions" and the "theory of stages." He said:

What has been discussed above is only a plan for future progress. If at present, when the education of women is incomplete and their personal characters are immature, we were recklessly to introduce regulations for the independence of women so that they would be free to betray their husbands and indulge in their lusts, this would be the road to disaster. "Linens for summer; furs for winter": to everything its appointed time. We must not recklessly introduce regulations before the proper time. The author does not want to corrupt the moral customs; he does not wish to be guilty of that.⁶⁹

In regard to the conflicts between *Datongshu* and Kang's later *Buren* 不忍 (*Intolerable*) journal, where he published just the first two sections of *Datongshu*, Qian

67 DTL, 351; cf. TTS, 257 f.

68 Qian 1966, 687. Kang Youwei had thought about going to Brazil to create a "New China" in ways that sounded utopian, but never did so (see Kang 1992, 34). However, some have suggested that this was just a plan to export Chinese workers (see Mao 2018, 341–379). Kang did plan to take a large number of Chinese (laborers) to Mexico and build a "New China" there. In his discussion of this scheme, Pablo Blitstein points out that Kang visited Mexico for six months in 1905–1906, where the media treated him as a "businessman." He met with the Mexican president and praised him repeatedly. Kang admired how the Mexican president combined democratic republicanism with a degree of autocracy, which Kang seems to have believed was suitable for China. Kang seems to have seen the possibility of building a material utopia in Mexico. In his interview with the Mexican Herald, Kang also mentioned that the differences among the various races of the world were quite small. See Blitstein 2016, 209–260.

69 DTL, 224; following TTS, 166 f. (modified).

Mu cited Kang's words: "In writing the *Datongshu* I considered all future possibilities, but I did not dare to recklessly detail the conditions of revolutionary republican society, not because I did not know, but because 'summer clothes and winter clothes cannot be used out of season.'" ⁷⁰ In the colophon to the *Datongshu* in *Buren*, Liang Qichao added a note: "Twenty years ago when Master Kang basically explained some of this work to his disciples, I begged him to publish it, but he said this could not be done in this age of the competition among states." In other words, while the *Datongshu* advocated abolishing national boundaries, in the late Qing, when China was caught up in the competition among states, Kang opposed publication. ⁷¹ Thus for Kang the concepts of utopianism and progress through stages were inextricably linked.

Kang on the one hand promoted his utopia and on the other did his best to obstruct putting it into practice. On the one hand, he did not want to publish *Datongshu*, but on the other he openly talked about it for particular reasons. When the 1911 revolution established a republic, he published the first two sections of *Datongshu* for the first time in *Buren* in 1913. At this time, Kang thoroughly opposed republicanism, as he could not tolerate the destruction of Confucian morality at the hands of Sun Yat-sen's revolution. Kang's decision to publish the first two sections of *Datongshu* in a conservative journal at this time could have been designed to convey two messages. First, that Sun Yat-sen was insufficiently thoroughgoing—Kang used the partial publication of *Datongshu* to demonstrate that his own idealism was the more advanced. And second, Kang wanted to show that the current stage of development was not suitable for putting the Datong into practice.

70 Qian 1966, 688.

71 Liang said: "[Kang Youwei] himself invented a new ideal that he himself regarded as perfect, but he did not want it to be put into practice and tried his hardest to obstruct it. Nothing surpasses the strangeness of human nature" (Liang 1989, 60). Responses to the publication of the first two sections of *Datongshu* in *Buren* are worth exploring. Most reflected a Buddhist perspective, though some critics found Kang's "finding happiness in abolishing suffering" (*quku youle* 去苦有樂) wanting in comparison to that of the Buddhist version.

6 Sources of Utopianism

Kang early on circulated the first drafts of the *Datongshu* among his disciples. He also lectured on the concepts of his *Mengzi wei* 孟子微 (1902), especially those of benevolence and ether (*yitai* 以太). Their impact cannot be overestimated, shaping as they did Tan Sitong's *On Benevolence*, which in turn deeply influenced radical figures like Mao Zedong. The two books the youthful Mao Zedong most annotated were *On Benevolence* and the translation by Cai Yuanpei of *A System of Ethics* (*Lunlixue yuanli* 倫理學原理).

In his *Mengzi wei*, Kang said that Mencius's concept of "benevolence" was "ether": "The heart that cannot bear people's suffering is benevolence, electricity, and ether, which all persons possess." This was a very bold interpretation. Kang evidently transmitted it orally to his early disciples, and it gave Tan Sitong a very broad utopian imaginary. The function and nature of ether are huge; ether can interconnect all things in the universe. When people die, they break down into ether that scatters everywhere but can later come back together. Because ether can interconnect all things in the universe, we can know each other's thoughts (it is also because of ether that, "All people share the same heart, and all hearts share the same principle"). Ether could be used to explain everything, even many ancient Chinese moral ideas. Ether can break down all boundaries and barriers, such as family, state, and society, and the like. Due to ether, there can be no misunderstandings between people, as in a standard ether concept, namely telepathy. Thus will humanity form a moral community in the future.

A similar utopian politics was envisioned around a notion like ether in the French Enlightenment. The American historian Robert Darnton, in his *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, cites Enlightenment figures' belief that some kind of fluid pervaded the universe rather like the later notion of ether: it could connect states, celestial bodies, and people, so that through this liquid people could become mutually supportive comrades. It was believed that this mystical fluid represented great liberation and great destruction, and it was closely linked to the formation of all kinds of utopian ideas. The Enlightenment worshiped reason, but reason had its limits and could not be regarded as unlimited, as supposed by those who regarded mesmerism as a sign of the omnipotence of reason. As the French Academy received new reports of strange discoveries

almost every day, reason was used indiscriminately to make up explanations for them. Darnton thus regards this as marking the end of the Enlightenment.⁷²

In the late Qing, ether was seen as having the capacity to break down all barriers on the one hand and to connect all people and things on the other, which was the basis for establishing a great utopia. In the first decade of the twentieth century, many advocates of both revolution and constitutional reform believed they could rely on ether to break down all barriers and connect all people. During the period of the 1898 Reform Movement, the utopianism of Kang Youwei's thought and Tan Sitong's *On Benevolence* was based on the concept of ether, which was very influential, especially in Tan's case. Over the following decade leading up to the 1911 revolution, all kinds of writings reflected Tan's *On Benevolence*, particularly the term "smashing the nets" (*chongjue wangluo* 沖決網羅). Limits on human freedom became widely used by revolutionaries. This was matched by the goal of creating a utopia free of all the restrictions of Confucian morality.⁷³

Zhang Taiyan's 1908 utopia, which advocated the "five negations" (*Wuwulun* 五無論)—"no-government, no-settlements, no-humanity, no-life, no-world"—abolished all boundaries, eliminating government, settlements, and even humanity, and finally abolished the boundary between humans and all animals and plants in nature, leaving no distinction between humanity and all living creatures. Zhang's essay was deeply influenced by both anarchism and Buddhism.⁷⁴ It reflected the late Qing's utopian trends centering on individualism, anarchism, and Buddhism; Zhang treated only the individual (*geti* 個體) as real, while all the human associations of community, state, and government were false. We may say that Zhang was promoting individualism.

The influence of anarchism, largely originating from Japan, was enormously influential in the late Qing. Anarchism in Japan was particularly strong around 1908, when Kōtoku Shūsui 幸徳秋水 and his students promoted anarchist doctrines that became both popular and condemned as treason since they re-

72 Darnton 1968.

73 Although the term "ether" continued to appear in journals and newspapers, it was used purely as a scientific term, lacking any sense of moral utopianism.

74 Wang 2018, 114–118.

jected even the Japanese emperor. In what became known as the “great treason incident” in Japanese history, Kōtoku was hanged and many of his followers arrested. Zhang Taiyan, Zhang Ji 張繼, Wang Jingwei 汪精衛, and other Chinese happened to be living in Japan at the time that Kōtoku was promoting anarchism, and they propagated anarchism when they returned to China. Their anarchism also made an impression on Zhou Enlai 周恩來 and Mao Zedong, who began as anarchists.⁷⁵ Later they rejected anarchism as impractical and turned to communism.

The New Village movement that flourished in the May Fourth period was essentially a kind of minor utopia. It was enthusiastically promoted by Wang Guangqi 王光祈, Li Huang 李璜, and Zuo Shunshen 左舜生, members of the Young China Society (Shaonian Zhongguo xuehui 少年中國學會) along with Mao Zedong. The Japanese anarchist Mushanokōji Saneatsu 武者小路實篤 practiced New Village anarchism in Kijōchō in Miyazaki Prefecture, which influenced Zhou Zuoren 周作人 to advocate New Village anarchism in China. But by the end of 1919, the Beijing Work-Study Mutual Aid Team (Beijing gongdu huzhu tuan 北京工讀互助團) organized by the Beijing Young China Association soon failed, suggesting how difficult utopia is to put into practice. Wang Guangqi and others therefore stopped promoting it. The New Village ideal was for people to live communally, each taking what they need and giving what they can. But a close examination of the actual New Villages (or new societies) shows that due to various problems their principles could not be put into practice. One common problem was that of love, because love cannot be shared with others, being private rather than public in nature.

7 Beyond the *Datongshu*

In the wake of the May Fourth movement and especially after communism entered China, utopianism gradually acquired what Zhang Hao 張灝 has called its air of rigid inevitability.⁷⁶ From the late Qing onward, under the influence of the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment, which posits that human-

75 Snow 1961, 45.

76 Zhang 2018, 321. See my further comments in Wang 2017, 277–306.

ity progresses through stages from the age of hunting, to the age of farming, and onward, combined with evolutionary theory, people came to believe that they could reach the next historical age through their own efforts. Mao Zedong's five-stage theory was derived from Stalin's understanding of Marx, proposing that we will reach the next stage, the Marxist paradise, by overcoming the present stage, for the laws of nature and the cosmos inevitably lead to utopia. The ancient idea of utopia was the "country of emptiness," which may not be attainable, but under the influence of the theories of stages and evolution, modern utopias represent ideals which *must* be attained. In this kind of intellectual atmosphere, the coming of utopia was seen as guaranteed.

It has been quite common in modern times to think of the ideal and the real as simultaneously doubled, creating a strange phenomenon that is particularly clear in the case of Kang Youwei—the discovery of a new ideal that the discoverer himself does not want to put into practice, as Liang Qichao put it. However, the ideas in the *Datongshu* were like dandelion seeds scattered in the wind that landed on the fertile soil of modern China. Their influence was beyond Kang's control. One of the strongest impacts of the *Datongshu* lay in its dismissal of the Chinese tradition of two thousand years as still belonging to the Age of Chaos. The *Datongshu* even dismissed the Confucian golden age of the Three Dynasties as merely representing the Way of the Lesser Peace.⁷⁷ Thus was the entire Confucian civilization of the last two or three thousand years denounced.⁷⁸ The impact of the *Datongshu*'s notion of abolishing the family was also enormous: if the family should be abolished, there was nothing that could not be abolished.

The actual political impact of the *Datongshu* is especially worth noting. In a letter to Li Jinxi 黎錦熙 on August 23, 1917, Mao Zedong wrote, "Confucius knew this [theory of *datong*], and so he set the Great Peace as the ultimate goal, but he preserved the Ages of Chaos and Rising Peace. My goal, however, is

77 Qian 1966, 698.

78 For example, "The Song Confucians were very high-principled and sought to surpass the Sage. They succeeded in causing countless numbers of widows to grieve in wretched alleys, harassed by cold and hunger, their pent-up resentment filling heaven—but [these Confucians] thought it a beautiful custom." DTL, 214; following TTS, 157.

the Datong.”⁷⁹ According to Li Rui, Mao Zedong frequently read Kang’s *New Learning of the Forged Classics* (*Xinxue weijing kao* 新學偽經考) and *Confucius as a Reformer* (*Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考).⁸⁰ But Mao was even more influenced by the *Datongshu* when its first sections were published in *Buren* magazine in 1913. However, in his essay on “The Democratic Dictatorship of the People,” Mao concluded, “Kang Youwei wrote the *Datongshu*, but he did not and could not find any way to attain the Datong”⁸¹

However, certain concrete plans in Mao’s political thought clearly showed Kang’s influence. In his early “Student’s Work” Mao wrote:

Combining several new families can create new societies; and the types of these new societies are inexhaustible. The most obvious include public nurseries, public kindergartens, public schools, public libraries, public banks, public farms, public workplaces, public co-ops, public theaters, public hospitals, public parks, museums, and self-government associations. Combining such new schools and new societies creates a “New Village.” I think the area around Yuelu Mountain is the best place to build a New Village near Xiangcheng.⁸²

Mao’s utopianism can be regarded as reworking ideas from the *Datongshu*, anarchism, and Marxism. However, Mao’s comrades may have felt that the People’s Communes were directly inspired by the *Datongshu*. Thus when the People’s Communes began in 1958, the cadres of the Central Agricultural Work Team who were inspecting Xushui County, Hebei, brought with them the *Datongshu* in addition to Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program*.⁸³ Kang Youwei, wanting his utopian vision to fit his theory of stages, would not only not immediately put it into practice but actually blocked its immediate implementation. But Mao’s concept of time was entirely different. In his poem “Reply to Guo Moruo” (*Manjianghong: he Guo Moruo tongzhi* 滿江紅，和郭沫若同志) Mao wrote, “Ten thousand years are too long / Seize the day! Seize the hour!” Mao could not wait to build his utopia.

79 Mao Zedong 1990, 88.

80 Li Rui 1993, 65.

81 Mao Zedong 1991, 1471.

82 Mao Zedong 1990, 454.

83 Li Rui 1993, 69.

8 Conclusion

Utopias like that depicted in the *Datongshu* have had enormous influence. In addition to the great political influence discussed above, they influenced thought, literature, architecture, art, and even historical writing. For example, in mapping out (or discovering) the origins of the impending utopia in past history, people make a "new discovery" in historical sources that may have been previously neglected but that can forge a linear link to utopia in texts, thought, and events. If the Datong is said to be the certain future of humanity at some point, then those who yearn for it will always keep this goal in mind whenever they are making their plans. They set up institutions within existing frameworks that nonetheless push their ideals forward, thus working to change the status quo.⁸⁴

Over the course of just seventy or eighty years, the utopia of morality and poverty found in "Hungry Country," or the kind of utopian ideals found in the Society to Pursue Aspirations that emerged a little earlier than the *Datongshu*, gave way to the utopia that rested on abolishing the Three Bonds and Five Relations to transform human relations, on material plenty, and on science as outlined in the *Datongshu*. In this regard, the *Datongshu* was completely different from traditional Chinese utopias, and it was also significantly different from other utopias of its own time.

Overall, Kang Youwei's thinking was quite consistent. We can see that his early work, the "Esoteric and Exoteric Essays of Master Kang" (*Kangzi neiwai-pian* 康子內外篇), already broke with prior Chinese thinking in its emphasis on material and human intelligence. In his "Theory of Material Salvation of the Nation" (*Wuzhi jiuguo lun* 物質救國論) of 1908, he still doubted that republicanism could save the nation but he put enormous emphasis on the importance of material and advocated "materiality studies."⁸⁵ We can thus see that Kang's fundamental beliefs were consistent: that materialism and human intelligence formed the intellectual basis for solving real problems and creating utopia. Al-

84 For example, from his youth, Lü Simian 呂思勉 aspired to Kang's Datong but had no idea how to reach it; he commented, however, that, "Taking the first step toward the Datong lies in changing politics." See Li and Zhang 2012, 62.

85 Blitstein 2016, 230, 246.

though the *Datongshu* did not mention Henri Saint-Simon by name, we can infer that Kang may have read his writings and was aware of Saint-Simon's materialistic and scientific utopia.

Finally, I would like to point out that there are often huge tensions between various utopias. The tensions between great utopias and minor utopias are also sometimes immense. One of the biggest debates during the New Culture Movement was that between communism and anarchism, whose arguments displayed the irreconcilable differences in their two types of utopia. A large problem remains in utopian thinking: once utopia is no longer simply envisioned as the "country of emptiness" but put into practice, it requires a bureaucracy and raises the question of fair distribution. Kang's vision of a utopian bureaucratic system may set him apart from the majority of modern utopian thinkers, but it also illustrates his commitment to working through how a utopian impulse might actually be put into practice.

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