

A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW OF KANG YOUWEI STUDIES IN CHINA TODAY

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Introduction

It is an irony that whereas the first modern Chinese university was established based on Kang Youwei's reform proposals of 1898, he became a marginal figure in the new disciplinary approach to knowledge production. Prior to the twenty-first century, Kang Youwei was studied mainly in history departments, and was a marginal (or even invisible) figure in the field of Confucianism or Chinese philosophy.¹ He was a leader of late Qing New Text classicism, but he did not receive much attention as a Confucian figure during the "National Learning fever" (*guoxue re* 國學熱) of the 1980s, or even the Confucian fever of the 1990s. However, just in the past decade, he became an important Confucian figure and finally an icon of Mainland New Confucianism. The current article offers a preliminary explanation for the phenomenon of "Kang Youwei Fever" (Kang Youwei *re* 康有為熱) and the emergence of the "Kangism" (Kang Youwei *zhuyi* 康有為主義).

1 From "Confucian Fever" to "Kang Youwei Fever"

If one word could be used to summarize the recent development of Mainland New Confucianism (*dalu xin rujia* 大陸新儒家), it would be "Kangism."²

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1 Historians are more interested in Kang's life in relation to late Qing and early Republic history than in his thought. Xiao Gongquan 蕭公權 (Hsiao 1975) might be an exception, yet his focus remains on Kang's thought during the reform movement.

2 Zhang 2017; Peng 2019.

Regarding the key events of this intellectual trend, a 2017 speech given by Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 is highly informative.³ It offers a concise, if very critical, summary of the recent development of Confucianism in the Chinese mainland. His speech begins by describing three notable events that took place from 2014 to 2016:

In recent years, three events in the cultural circles of the Chinese mainland are particularly notable. The first event is that in 2014, during a seminar which gathered distinguished intellectuals, somebody claimed that “the legislator of modern China is neither Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, nor Zhang Taiyan. Kang Youwei is the very legislator of modern China.” He argued that Kang Youwei was a prophet, who already foresaw all the problems China is now facing, thus calling for a trend of “returning to Kang Youwei.” The second event took place in the year of 2015. Serious disagreements and bitter disputes came about in news media between Mainland New Confucians and Taiwan New Confucians, who used to be allies. After this, in 2016, Confucian scholars on both sides of the Strait organized a “Cross-Strait Summit” in Chengdu. From the 81-page long record of the meeting, we can deduce a heated battle with words of anger. The third event is that in 2016, the “five giants” of Mainland New Confucianism jointly threw a “strong punch.” They published in Singapore a book—*China Must Be Re-Confucianized: New Proposal of Mainland New Confucianism*—stating the political appeals and cultural ideas held by the current Mainland New Confucians.⁴

3 Ge 2017. Ge’s speech was transcribed and widely circulated in social media and websites.

4 In this paper, all the English translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. 最近几年，在中国大陆思想文化界有三个事件相当引人注目。第一个事件，是2014年某次群贤毕至的座谈会，有人在会上声称“现代中国的立法者，既不是孙中山，也不是毛泽东，也不是章太炎，康有为才是现代中国的立法者”，并强力论证康有为对现代世界与中国各种问题的先知先觉，从而激起一种“回到康有为”的潮流；第二个事件发生在2015年，原来还是同盟的大陆新儒家与台湾新儒家之间，出现了深刻分歧和激烈论战，这场论战先在新闻媒体上掀起，接着2016年初两岸儒门学者在成都又搞了一个“两岸会讲”，从事后发表的长达81页的记录来看，唇枪舌剑很有火气。第三个事件是2016年，大陆新儒学的五大“重镇”联袂出演，在新加坡出版了一本号称是“重拳出击”著作的《中国必

At first glance, the three events do not create a unified picture. They are respectively, a claim by mainland scholars that Kang Youwei was a prophet and legislator of modern China and a call for “a return to Kang Youwei” (*buidao Kang Youwei* 回到康有為); a bitter debate between Confucian scholars based in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China; and a publication about Mainland New Confucians’ political and cultural appeals. The unspoken link of the three events is that those involved are all from the same group of scholars, namely, “Kangists.” This group is also known as the “Kang Party” (Kang *dang* 康黨).⁵

The increasing role of Kang Youwei in contemporary Chinese academia is evident, but the question remains why Kang Youwei has recently emerged as the Confucian figure most relevant to contemporaries. A few Chinese overviews of Kangism have been published. Yet most are more evaluative and critical than descriptive and explanatory.⁶ In English-language scholarship, an explanation of Kang’s peculiar role in contemporary Chinese academia is also missing. This is partially because of the “tentative or unfinished nature of much of the new thinking.”⁷ Kangism is an ongoing phenomenon that is still taking shape. Thus, characterizing this new trend of thought with academic rigor and confidence is difficult. Another reason for the general neglect of Kang’s increasing relevance is that Kangism is equated with the new generation of Mainland New Confucianism. Thus, it is often (mis)understood and assessed in the light of the previous generation of Mainland New Confucianism, especially in terms of Jiang Qing’s 蔣慶 “political Confucianism” (*zhengzhi ruxue* 政治儒學).⁸

须再儒化——“大陆新儒家”新主张》，全面提出当下大陆新儒学的政治诉求与文化理念。

5 For the first gathering of the “Kang Party,” see Gan 2015b; Ju 2017.

6 Ge 2017; Ju 2017; Peng 2019.

7 Angle 2018, 84.

8 Stephen C. Angle (2018), for example, describes “political Confucianism” as the “infancy” stage and Kangism as the “adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism.” While he rightly points out that Jiang Qing “is playing much less of a role” in this “adolescence” stage, Angle appears to view the new generation of Mainland New Confucianism as evolving from Jiang Qing’s “political Confucianism” and downplays the role of Kang Youwei in the new intellectual trend. See also Zang 2015; Huang 2018.

Today's Mainland New Confucianism stems from an intellectual trend of cultural conservatism that emerged following the "National Learning fever" of the 1980s and the "Confucian fever" of the 1990s.⁹ Its Confucian narratives, many believe, present a pernicious form of nationalism and cultural conservatism or cultural chauvinism.¹⁰ Scholars have thus tended to be preoccupied by such questions as whether Kangism is a continuation of Jiang Qing's controversial political Confucianism, or whether it is a side effect of growing cultural confidence and nationalistic sentiment alongside the rise of China. As a result, the question why Kang Youwei is favored by this new trend of thought remains unanswered.

2 An Unanswered Question: Why Kang Youwei?

Why have Mainland New Confucians in effect chosen Kang Youwei over seemingly more obvious candidates such as Confucius 孔子, Zhu Xi 朱熹, Wang Yangming 王陽明, or Zhang Taiyan 章太炎? If this new school of thought is predominantly about cultural conservatism, Kang Youwei does not appear to be the best fit. He was not antimodern or anti-West, nor was he an ardent advocate of traditional national learning (*guoguo xue* 國故學). The Kangists have cited many reasons for their enthusiasm for Kang Youwei in monographs and articles. This article cannot review all their views in detail. Instead, it briefly introduces two of the most noteworthy ones: Confucianism as classicism (or national learning) and Confucianism as political participation. The slogan "a return to Kang Youwei" is a call for a return to Confucianism in its traditional meaning of "classicism." It is also a call for a reassessment of Confucian resources for China to tackle today's domestic as well as international issues.

3 Guoxue and Confucianism as Classicism

The first reason why Kang Youwei is perceived to be relevant is that he is a scholar of Confucianism in the traditional sense of classicism.¹¹ "Kangists" are a mi-

9 Gan 2015b; Tang 2015; Zeng 2016b; Zeng 2016a.

10 Zang 2015; Angle 2018.

11 For analyses of Kang's work as a classicist, see the articles by Carine Defoort and Seán Moores in this issue.

nority in the field of Confucian study. Compared to Confucius, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming scholars, and scholars who study Confucianism philosophically, Kangists are rather few. However, their minority voice seems to sound louder than the majority because it focuses intensively on the long painful struggle Confucianism has had with modern university and knowledge categorization; that is, specialists on Confucianism usually work in philosophy departments. Philosophizing Confucianism thus became the predominant way of studying Confucianism. As a result, Kang Youwei, who was once a leading (if controversial) figure of Confucian classicism, was marginalized in the Confucian studies conducted in philosophy departments.

A better academic home for such Confucian scholars (scholars of classicism in particular) might be “national learning” rather than “philosophy.” During the past decades, many national learning programs or institutions have been founded in Chinese universities. The boom of such programs or institutions is impressive and has already captured scholarly attention in the West.¹² Yet, for Chinese scholars who have endeavored to promote national learning or classical studies, this remains far from satisfactory as long as it is not a first-level discipline (*yiji xueke* 一級學科) or an officially independent discipline.

In the past decade, Wuhan University, Xiamen University and other universities have installed undergraduate, MA and PhD curricula on national learning, which are adjuncts to first-level discipline such as philosophy [...]. The issue of the establishment of national learning as a first-level discipline was gradually put on the agenda. I think, for “national learning” to become an official discipline in modern higher education, there are still some issues that need to be solved.¹³

The academic status of national learning has been a tricky issue. It has many programs and institutes across the country, but it is not an official discipline. It is often administered as an adjunct organization under a philosophy department. This situation is called by some as national learning’s *hukou wenti* 戶口

12 Dirlík 2011.

13 Sun 2010: 近十年來，武漢大學、廈門大學等學校相繼掛靠哲學等一級學科辦起了國學本科、碩士、博士專業[...] 國學一級學科建設逐漸被提上議事日程。筆者認為，“國學”要成爲一個正式的現代高等教育學科，還有一些問題需要解決。

問題 (problems with household registration). In an essay titled “It is Urgent to Establish ‘National Learning’ as a First-Level Discipline” 設立“国学”一级学科是当务之急, Shen Ting commented:

There has already been fifteen years of autonomous discipline-building and educational reform with regard to “national learning” in higher education since Wuhan University established in 2001 an undergraduate “experimental curriculum on national learning.” Now, as the progress of national learning is unfolding, there are already dozens of higher educational institutions that have established national learning programs or research institutes. They have not only undergraduate curricula but also master and doctoral training. As “national learning” gradually becomes a specialization basic to humanities education, the “national learning” discipline’s *hukou* problems have not yet been resolved.¹⁴

Not only is “national learning” not a first-level discipline; it not a formal academic discipline at all. It has no *hukou*. This gives rise to a problem with degrees.

However, since national learning is not an independent discipline in the country’s disciplinary organization, students of national learning faculties and curricula, including the Faculty of National Learning at Renmin University, [encounter the same situation that] throughout the four years of their undergraduate study, they took classes in the same classrooms, took the same curricula, but when they graduated, they were endowed differently with degrees in literature, history, philosophy, and so on.¹⁵

The painful struggle Confucianism (in the sense of classicism) or national learning has with modern disciplinary categorization is not only about financial sup-

- 14 Shen 2015: 从2001年武汉大学设立本科“国学试验班”算起,我国高校自主设立“国学”学科建设和教学改革已经进入第十五个头。当前,高校的国学教育方兴未艾,已经有数十所高校先后设立了国学教学或研究机构,既有国学本科教学,亦有硕士、博士学位培养,“国学”专业教育日渐融入大学基础文科教学培养体系,但“国学”学科的“户口”问题却一直没有得到解决。
- 15 Fang 2011: 但是,由于在国家的学科设置中,国学不是一个独立的学科,包括中国人民大学国学院在内的国内相关学校的国学院或国学班的学生,大学本科四年,同在一间教室上课,学着共同的课程,毕业的时候,却只能分别授予文学、历史、哲学等学位。

port or practical problems such as issuing diplomas. It also reflects the nature of its system of knowledge, which is hard to reconcile with modern disciplinary approaches. To become a discipline, national learning must find its category (*xueke menlei* 學科門類) in the country's catalogue (*xueke mulu* 學科目錄). The existing best option in the catalogue is the category of "philosophy."

However, advocates of "national learning" find this disciplinary hierarchy and categorization problematic and would endorse the traditional Chinese knowledge classification scheme. For classicists, classicism is the first category in the classification of *jing* 經 (classics), *shi* 史 (history), *zi* 子 (masters), and *ji* 集 (collections). They argued also that the study of classics should not be broken down into literature, history, and philosophy (*wen shi zhe* 文史哲): one does not understand the meaning of a classic by understanding its literary value, its production and transmission history, and its philosophy. National learning or classicism, they added, is also a discipline that cannot be confined to humanities: it is also a political science or a technique of governance.¹⁶ In sum, it is interdisciplinary in nature. To make it possible for national learning to become an independent discipline, some argued, the country should revise the catalogue creating the new category of "interdisciplinary research."¹⁷

In December 2020, the Degree Committee of the State Council (*Guowuyuan xuewei weiyuanhui* 國務院學位委員會) and Ministry of Education (*Jiaoyu bu* 教育部) of the People's Republic of China announced the establishment of "interdisciplinary research" (*jiaocha xueke* 交叉學科) as the fourteenth disciplinary category. With this new decree, "national learning" (*guo xue* 國學), "classical studies" (*gudian xue* 古典學), or "China studies" (*Zhongguo xue* 中國學) finally became an independent discipline.¹⁸ It is now officially listed under the category of "interdisciplinary research." Its interdisciplinary nature has been recognized, and it is no longer a temporary adjunct to philosophy. The 2020 announcement, therefore, is a milestone in the history of Confucianism (in the traditional sense of classicism).

16 Wu 2017.

17 Sun 2010.

18 Zang 2015.

The struggle of national learning with the modern Chinese university is the background against which Kangism emerged. The members of the Kang Party are scholars from philosophy departments, though this is where Kang's thought has been little studied because he is not a "Confucian" according to the standards of the philosophy discipline. Nonetheless, as the leading scholar of New Text classicism in the late Qing, Kang Youwei should be an important Confucian thinker and politician. "A return to Kang Youwei," therefore, means not to see Confucianism as a subject of philosophical study, but precisely as classicism. Chen Bisheng 陳璧生, for example, explains Kang Fever as a classicism trend in mainland China, not in Confucian philosophy. As he suggests, whether Kangists are "Confucians" in its "popular" sense is still an open question.¹⁹ Accordingly, what really concerns "Kangists" is not how to distinguish themselves *philosophically* from Hong Kong or Taiwan Confucians, but how to "return to Kang Youwei" to continue the unfinished New Text and Old Text controversy, namely the model of Confucian scholarship in the late Qing and Republic. This classicism controversy and the model of scholarship stopped abruptly after the New Culture and May Fourth movements.

The scholarship of the late Qing and Republic differs from post-New Culture movement scholarship. The most important difference is that the great Confucian classicists in the late Qing and Republic had a holistic approach to Chinese civilization; they did not study it fragmentally in multiple disciplines. We could also say that their creative contributions to Chinese scholarship were often grounded in their profound overall understanding of the tradition, and they utilized the tradition to respond to challenges that come from modernization. [...] Kang Youwei is highly valued in recent years because his thought contains abundant responses to the challenges that Chinese civilization has been facing since its encounter with the West in the late Qing.²⁰

"A return to Kang Youwei," therefore, is also a suggestion for contemporary Con-

19 Chen 2016.

20 Cheng 2016: 清末民初学术与新文化运动后学术的差别，最重要一点在于清末民初经师大儒们大多对中国文明有一种整全性的眼光，而不用分科式的研究。也可以说，他们对中国学术的创造与发挥，往往植根于深厚的传统内部，以传统自身的思想资源来回应现代化问题。[...] 康有为之所以在近年开始受到高度重视，缘于在康氏思想中，包含了清末以降中国文明面对西方的大量问题。

fucians to revisit the model of late Qing classicism. This model takes a holistic approach to classicism (it does not split it into literature, history, and philosophy disciplines) and utilizes the classics to formulate answers to the questions that China must answer as it encounters the West and embarks on the journey of modernization. Kang Youwei is an icon because his scholarship represents these two traits.

This brings us to the second dimension to the call for “a return to Kang Youwei,” namely Confucianism as a form of political participation.

4 Confucianism as Political Participation

Confucian or classical studies is not only a matter of textual study; it is also concerned with participation in policymaking and institutional design. As Ge points out, throughout history Confucianism has been an “art” of seeking rulers’ approval and serving as their political consultants (*diwang shi* 帝王師).²¹ A good Confucian, therefore, is a good political adviser, who has keen insights into what policies or institutional emendations the state or empire needs to make to survive or thrive.

Kangists regard Kang Youwei as the champion of Confucianism because he was not only the leader of New Text classicism but also the leader of the Hundred Days of Reform. Kang symbolizes dual-faceted Confucianism (classicism and political participation). More importantly, Kang was a prophet and a pioneer of modern Confucianism. According to Kangists, he foresaw the problems modern China was destined to face when becoming a modern nation, and his reform proposals contain prescriptions for their solution. As Kang Youwei was the first Confucian who conceived of a systematic solution to these problems, Kangists see him as the legislator of modern China. Whether one agrees with his solutions or not, one cannot not deny his significance as the first modern Confucian and accordingly his contemporary relevance.

The second meaning of “a return to Kang Youwei,” therefore, is that modern Confucians should turn their gaze to Kang-style questions (*Kang Youwei shi de*

21 Ge 2017.

wenti yishi 康有為式的問題意識).²² Kang-style questions revolve around the problems of China transforming into a modern nation. In the Kangist view, there are two main problems: the multiethnic nation (*duo minzu guojia* 多民族國家) and the modern “international” (*guoji* 國際) “world” (*shijie* 世界). These are respectively a domestic and an international problem. In other words, how does the modern Chinese nation maintain the Qing empire’s state sovereignty and territory, and how does it insert itself into the modern international world? For Kang Youwei himself, there were three paths forward: a republic with a titular monarchy (*xujun gonghe* 虛君共和), Confucianism as the state religion (*Kongjiao* 孔教), and the Utopia of All-under-Heaven (*tianxia datong* 天下大同).²³

The first set of Kang-style questions deals with the Chinese polity. Kangists repeatedly suggest that to appreciate Kang’s insights, one should put aside New Culture movement assumptions, which are still prevalent. New Culture movement intellectuals endorsed progressivism and revolution (political and cultural) and viewed traditional thought (especially Confucianism) as inherently despotic. Under the influence of the New Culture movement, Kang Youwei has been dismissed as a conservative for his “zealous” advocacy of the monarchy.²⁴ This new appraisal leaves room for respecting the earlier Kang Youwei of the Hundred Days of Reform while dismissing the Kang Youwei of the republican era who attempted to restore the monarchy and establish Confucianism as the state religion. But for Kangists, it is the New Culture dichotomy between progressivism and conservatism that is misleading. As they point out, the anti-Qing revolutionary movement was rooted in ethnic antagonism and thus detrimental to the development of the Chinese nation as a multiethnic entity. In this view, the revolution, made in the name of the Han, led to ethnic violence and long-

22 Gan 2015b.

23 Gan 2015a.

24 After the failure of the Hundred Days of Reform, Kang founded “Protect the Emperor Society” (*baohuanghui* 保皇會) to support the Qing emperor, and engaged in debates with revolutionaries. On February 12, 1912, as a response to the 1911 revolution, the last emperor of Qing announced his abdication. After the founding of the Republic of China, Kang continued to advocate constitutional monarchy and even planned to restore the emperor to the throne.

standing distrust. The ability of the postrevolutionary regimes to overcome this disaster by turning to the discourse of “the unity of the five races” (*wuzu datong* 五族大同) owed much to Kang. In the wake of the revolution, Kang continued to advocate monarchism and promote Confucianism as the state religion because he wished to prevent China from falling apart due to ethnic conflicts and political power struggles.²⁵ This can be seen as a strategy adopted by many Chinese dynasties.

Looking back from today’s perspective, Kangists see Kang as a prophet because China did go through ethnic and political chaos during a whole series of revolutions. It thus seems fair to ask whether it would have been better for China to pursue constitutional reform. By reflecting on this Kang-style question,²⁶ one may see that Kang’s insight into the dangers of revolution underlay his argument for constitutional monarchy and state religion, rather than any kind of belief in authoritarianism. In its historical context, Kang’s advocacy of monarchy did not necessarily imply the rejection of democracy. He began to promote constitutional monarchy and Confucianism as the state religion around the time that Japan, a successful constitutional monarchy, was also trying to establish a state religion. Japanese intellectuals experimented with cultural and religious approaches, such as appropriating Confucianism, to justify the existence of an emperor in a modern democratic Japan.²⁷ This seemed to be a path for the gradual transformation of an old empire into a modern state. As Zeng Yi suggests, Kang Youwei’s adherence to constitutional monarchy takes on a new meaning in contemporary China for this reason.²⁸ More and more mainlanders came to realize that the radical revolutions in the past did not lead China to a harmonious and stable modern nation.

The second set of Kang-style questions deals with China’s role in the world. According to Kangists, Kang was the first Confucian politician to tackle the issue. In an early memorial, he reminded the emperor that China is no longer an empire of All-under-Heaven (*tianxia* 天下) but merely one state among other

25 Zeng 2016a.

26 Tang 2015; Gan 2015b.

27 Lee 2020.

28 Zeng 2016b.

states that cannot be classified as barbarian tribes or realms outside of “All-under-Heaven.”²⁹ This is a problem that modern China inevitably faces when it becomes a nation in an *international world* (a notion that did not exist in imperial China). This implies a change in the meaning of *tianxia*, which used to denote the cultural and political realms defined by Chinese imperial authority.³⁰ To tackle the problem, Kang Youwei envisioned a new “Utopia of All-under-Heaven,” which was based on the removal of all the boundaries between nations, peoples, classes, and genders, and so realizing the All-under-Heaven vision as a Great Unity (*datong* 大同). This utopian thesis was not prioritized in Kang’s early works (during the reformation period) because, according to his Gongyang theory, it was a mission for the next historical phase of China and the human world.³¹

It is interesting to note that “Kangism” and a reconceptualization of *tianxia* to articulate alternative theories of international relations both emerged around the same time. Many Chinese and Western scholars have noted the peculiar interplay between the rise of Confucianism and the rise of Chinese international relations theories in recent decades. The most well-known of this approach is the *tianxia* system laid out by Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽.³² Western scholars call the attempts to deploy classical Chinese notions to construct alternative international relations theories the “Chinese school of international relations” or a “theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics.”³³ Mainland New Confucians and Kangists also contribute to the theory with Kang Youwei’s utopian thinking and Gongyang frameworks. As Gan Chunsong 干春松 puts it, employing the *tianxia* ideal to articulate an alternative theory of international relations is a global version of reforming the present in the name of antiquity (*tuogu gaizhi* 托古改制).³⁴

Zhao Tingyang and many scholars of the Chinese school of international re-

29 Gan 2018.

30 This is of course an oversimplified characterization of *tianxia*. For a detailed discussion, see Pines 2002.

31 See the article by Wang Fansen in this issue for Kang’s notion of the Great Unity.

32 Zhao 2016.

33 Hückel 2013; Babones 2017.

34 Gan 2006.

lations theory are not classified as Mainland New Confucians or as “Kangists”; yet they share core ideas and make references to Kang Youwei. They share the Kang-style question: asking whether the current international order is sustainable and what role China will play after China’s rise. It is difficult to tell if they have inspired one another, but they both point to Kang Youwei’s contemporary relevance. Likewise, this trend of international relations theory with Chinese characteristics is an ongoing phenomenon. Scholars are not yet in a position to agree or disagree with it, or to predict if it will interact or merge with Mainland New Confucianism or Kangism. However, it attests to Kang Youwei’s increasing importance, implicitly or explicitly, and explains why he is seen as a prophet and the first modern Confucian. As Ge Zhaoguang suggests, whether we accept the *tianxia* theory or not, it is becoming a “science”—namely, a serious research topic—and may possibly influence China’s future policies.

5 Conclusion

In recent decades, many works have been published on such timely topics as the rise of China and its relation to the National Learning fever, the emergence and nature of Mainland New Confucianism, and the theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics. However, little attention has been paid to the omnipresence of Kang Youwei in their respective discourses. This article offers a preliminary overview of the phenomenon of “Kang Youwei fever” and the emergence of “Kangism,” summarizing Kangists’ reasons for believing in Kang’s contemporary relevance. According to Kangists, Kang’s contemporary relevance lies in his being the first modern Confucian to foresee the systematic problems that China as a modern nation cannot escape. He then laid out a reformation proposal to navigate China through the process of transforming an empire of All-under-Heaven to a modern multiethnic nation in the international world. This is why Kangists are convinced that all the productive efforts throughout recent generations to build China as a modern nation were attempts made within the scope of Kang’s blueprint for China’s reformation.

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