8

Kang Youwei, The Martin Luther of Confucianism and his Vision of Confucian Modernity and Nation

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1. Introduction

Kang Youwei (1858–1927) is generally remembered in Chinese history as the conservative reformer of the late-nineteenth century. Kang's refashioning of Confucius as a reformer or prophet and his reinterpretation of Confucianism, is commonly equated as a political expedient to counteract the oppositions of the anti-reform faction in court. To other Chinese intellectuals, especially the revolutionaries and post-May Fourth generations, his action was an example of cultural nationalism, a futile effort to preserve the "backward traditions" of China against the tide of western pressure for change. The essentialist reading of Kang as either a political reformer or a cultural conservative cannot account for the religious or redemptive strand of his thought and his Confucian approach to nationalism and modernity. Indeed, Liang Qichao, writing in 1901, remarked that his teacher was a "religionist" who in reforming Confucianism to its original state was the "Martin Luther of the Confucian religion."[1] The thesis that this paper tries to argue is that Kang's action and thoughts cannot be understood without looking at them in the light of the spiritual-religious dimension of Confucianism. The first section of this paper will focus on the spiritual-religious awakening of Kang in the period 1876–1884 and explain how the religious–spiritual dimension of Confucianism affected his intellectual transformation and moral mission to save the world. The second section will explain his development from

1. Hsiao Kung-ch'uan, *A Modern China and a New World: K'ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press 1975), 105.

spiritual concern to practical intellectual endeavor to redeem China and the world through his reinterpretation of Confucianism and formulation of a new vision of modernity (*Datong* or the Great Community) from 1884–1898. The last section will discuss his engagement in the Kongjiao movement in the context of the rising threat of western imperialism and Christianity and explain his religious approach to nation building in the 1890s.

2. The Awakening of the Sage and his Mission to Save the World, 1876–1883

The intellectual and spiritual awakening of Kang Youwei occurred during his late teens and early twenties as a result of some traumatic life experiences. According to his own autobiography, Kang failed the provincial examination in 1876 at the age of 19.[2] This failure left the confident and proud Kang with much disappointment. In the following year, the drowning of his grandfather, who was his teacher and caregiver since childhood, had a traumatic effect on Kang.[3] After the tragic loss of his grandfather, Kang began his study under Zhu Chiqi, a leading Confucian scholar in Guangdong. What makes Zhu's scholarship appealing to Kang was his emphasis on the moral praxis of Confucian teachings.[4] Reminiscing on his teacher many years later, Kang writes:

> In expounding the essence of the great principles of former sages and in teaching the ideals of cultivating oneself and loving others, he brushed aside the schools of Han and Song periods, going directly back to Confucius. At that time, as I received his instructions, it was like a traveler finding a place of lodging and a blind man seeing light [...] I then believed that it was possible for me to read all the books before I was

2. Kang Youwei, "Chronological Autobiography of Kang Youwei (Nan-hai Kang hsien-sheng tzu-pien nien-pu)," in *Kang Youwei: A Biography and A Symposium*, ed. Lo Jung Pang (Tuscon: Unversity of Arizona Press, 1967), 30.
3. *Ibid*, 32.
4. Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890–1911)* (Berkeley, L.A.: University of California Press, 1987), 22.

> thirty, that I alone could establish myself in life, and that I could remake the world. From this time on, I gave up writing examination-style essays and thoughts of becoming rich and exalted. I stood, towering and lofty, above the common people, associating myself with great and good men of the past. It is true that a man of great virtue can inspire other men.[5]

It is obvious that Zhu's influence on Kang was more than intellectual. Through Zhu's emphasis on moral praxis, Kang became more aware of the spiritual element and practical significance of Confucian scholarship. At the age of 20, Kang abandoned his studies altogether and started a spiritual quest with an aim to "rest his mind-heart and settle his destiny."[6] He secluded himself from others and immersed himself in the practice of quiet sitting and mind cultivation. Kang experienced a spiritual enlightenment through these activities, as he writes, "Sitting quietly by myself, I suddenly come to the realization that the universe and its myriad of things were all part of me. A light dawned within me, and believing that I was a sage, I would be happy and laugh; then, thinking of the suffering of the people in the world, I would be sad and cry."[7] At the age of 22, Kang further secluded himself by living in the Xiqiao Mountains, practicing quiet meditation while enjoying the natural beauty. He devoted his time to reading of Taoist and Buddhist books and getting rid of his impure thoughts. Kang felt a sense of spiritual transcendence and senses that he had a spiritual self that existed outside the physical body and he came to view his own body as "nothing but a carcass."[8] In this period, he made the salvation of China and the world his life goal:

> Thus everyday the salvation of society was uppermost in my thoughts and every moment the salvation of society was my aim in life, and for this aim I would sacrifice myself. Since there are many worlds, some large and some small, I could only sympathize and try to save the men who lived close to me and whom I should meet. I would appeal to them everyday and hope that they would listen to me. I made this my

5. Kang, "Chronological Autobiography of Kang Youwei," 31.
6. Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 23.
7. Kang, "Chronological Autobiography of Kang Youwei," 33–34.
8. *Ibid*.

principle, my aim to fulfill.[9]

Kang's spiritual and salvationist impulse points to the religious dimension of Confucianism. Other than a rationalistic philosophy or ethical system, scholars like Tu Weiming and Rodney Taylor maintained that Confucianism can also be viewed as a religious tradition with the unity of the self and Heaven as its main agenda. The religious element of Confucianism, Rodney here argued, "revolves around the Confucian understanding of *Tien*, Heaven, the traditional high god of the early Chou people. The religious core itself is found in the relationship of humankind to Heaven. Heaven is not thought of, as some argued, as an abstract philosophical absolute devoid of religious meaning. In Classical Confucian tradition Heaven functions as a religious authority or absolute often theistic in its portrayal. In later Neo-Confucianism tradition Heaven, or the principle of Heaven, *Tien-li,* also functions as a religious authority or absolute frequently monistic in its structure."[10] For Tu, individuals could realize their humanity and become one with Heaven through contemplation of the *Tao* or Principle of Heaven. This transformation or perfection of the self can be extended to the family, society and the universe to create, what Tu calls a harmonious fiduciary community.[11]

Self-cultivation and world redemption are two poles in the continuum of Confucian religiosities. As Benjamin Schwartz aptly pointed out, "The polarity of self-cultivation and the ordering of the society concern the ideals of the superior man—his life aims. The polarity of the 'inner' and 'outer' concerns two realms of reality which bears most immediately on the achievement of these ideals. The two polarities are intimately related, but their relationship is complex."[12] In other words, the moral-spiritual ideal of a Confucian consists of attaining "sageliness within and kingliness without."[13] The moral-religious quest of Confucianism seen

9. *Ibid*., 42.
10. Rodney Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1990), 2.
11. See Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany: The State of New York University Press, 1989).
12. Benjamin Schwartz, "Some Polarities in Confucian Thought," in *Confucianism and Chinese Civilization* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 7.
13. Julia Ching, "What is Confucian Spirituality," in *Confucianism: The Dynamics of Tradition,*

through the inter-relatedness of the "outer" and "inner" realm consists of "affirming the essential goodness of human nature and the importance of working within the social and political sphere for the dynamic transformation of both self and society."[14] The salvationist impulse of Kang can be seen mainly as his quest to attain the Confucian ideal of "sageliness within and kingliness without." From the mid-eighties onwards, Kang shifted his attention from spiritual enlightenment to the salvation of China and the world.

3. Envisioning a Confucian Modernity: The Virtue of Humanness (Ren) and the ideal of Great Community, 1884–1898

From 1884 to 1898, Kang Youwei deviated from his earlier preoccupation with spiritual-mystical cultivation and devoted himself to practical scholarship and politics. In this period, he sought to "purify" Confucianism and rescue it from the falsehood of "imperial Confucianism." He boldly declared that the teachings of Confucius were corrupted or falsified throughout history because of its association with the imperial government. The state orthodoxy, Kang charged, was a deliberate distortion of Confucianism by the authoritarian state to serve as its ideological tool of control. The primary task that Kang set for himself was to reconstruct the original teachings of Confucius. The original teachings of Confucius, according to Liang Qichao, are "progressive" and preach universal love and equality, as opposed to the conservative and authoritarian tradition of imperial Confucianism.[15] Kang claimed that the New Text was where the "arcane words and great principles" of Confucius lies.[16]

As Chang Hao observes, Kang's interest in reinterpreting Confucianism according to the New Text, in particular the Gongyang doctrines, was "to reaffirm political concern and institutional reform as the central orientation of Confucianism."[17] This is even clearer in his

ed. Irene Eber (New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 63–64.

14. Mary Evelyn Tucker, "The Religious Dimension of Confucianism: Cosmology and Cultivation," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Jan., 1998): 14.
15. Hsiao, *A Modern China and A New World*, 47.
16. *Ibid*., 43.
17. Chang Hao "Intellectual Change and the Reform Movement, 1890–8" in *Cambridge History of China Vol.11, Late Ching, 1800–1911Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge

book, *Confucius the Reformer*, which portrays Confucius as the creator of the sacred institutions or traditions of Chinese civilization. He accepted the interpretations of Dong Zongshu and other New Text scholars who used the "esoteric passages" of the *Gongyang Commentary* to fashion a divine image of Confucius as an uncrowned king or a Prophet of Heaven. Kang's endorsement of Gongyang's image of Confucius as the transcendental sage, however, cannot be read purely as a legitimation for his political reforms. Like other New Text advocates, Kang believed that Confucius was the messianic Prophet who revealed the true teachings of Heaven to mankind.

The central tenet of Confucius teaching, Kang believed, is the doctrine of *ren* (human-ness).[18] Kang interpreted ren as the compassionate mind, similar to Buddhism, a mentality that "can't bear" to see the sufferings of others and the world. He insisted, like Mencius and Wang Yangming before him, that the nature of human beings is good as they all possess *ren*. Kang believed that *ren* is a virtue endowed by Heaven and he quoted the following passage approvingly from Dong without much elaboration: "Man receives his mandate of Heaven. He takes *ren* from Heaven and thus become a man of *ren* [...] *ren* is the mind of heaven."[19] According to Kang, *ren* is what allows man to achieve oneness with Heaven. In the *Datong shu*, Kang wrote, "*ren* means to form one body with all things" and "when the self and others are not separated, when all things form one body, and when the feeling of compassion is aroused, then that is the short cut of finding *ren*."[20]

In the *Datong shu*, Kang endowed *ren* with cosmic and historical significance through his application of the Gongyang idea of the Three Ages in the understanding of *ren*. Like the spirit in Hegelian philosophy, *ren* evolves or matures progressively to a higher stage of development in history. From the doctrine of the Three Ages, Kang saw history as progress from the Age of Disorder, to the Age of Approaching Peace

University Press, 1980), 277–278.

18. Chan Wing-tsit, "Kang Yu-wei and the Confucian Doctrine of Humanness (Ren)," in *Kang Youwei: A Biography and A Symposium*, ed. Lo Jung Pang (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1967), 357.
19. *Ibid*., 365.
20. *Ibid*.

and ends at the Age of Universal Peace. In its historical progress towards the Age of Universal Peace, *ren* slowly but progressive abolishes the boundaries, such as social class, sex, race and nationality, that prevented human beings from attaining the *Datong* utopia. In Kang's utopia, social institutions such as the family will disappear and their functions will be assumed by public institutions. Women will attain absolute equality vis-à-vis men in political, economic and social life. Nation-states will wither away and be replaced with a world government made up by representatives from all parts of the world. Kang's utopia will also be a world of material abundance and a classless society where private property and poverty are eradicated.[21]

Kang believed that Confucianism held the universal Truth for mankind. Through his New Text interpretation of Confucianism, Kang derived a new vision of modernity not only for China but the whole world. By modernity, I meant a new historical epoch, or in Anthony Giddens words, the "idea that human history is marked by certain 'discontinuities'" with the past.[22] In Kang's Confucian modernity, the new world that humanity is moving towards is marked by great technological advancement as well as material abundance. Most importantly, this Confucian modernity is also the pinnacle of human moral progress as *ren* is fully realized as people transcend their selfishness and greed and become One with "all under Heaven."

4. Creating a Confucian Nation: The Kongjiao Movement, 1895–1898

Chinese nationalism developed in China in the late nineteenth century as a result of the fear for the survival of China as a socio-political entity. This fear was acutely felt by the Chinese as shortly after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the German occupation of the Bay of Jiaozhou and Qingdao in 1897. The defeat by Japan was particularly devastating for the Chinese as Liang Qichao remarked that the war awakened the Chinese

21. Jerome Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China: A Narrative History* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), 125–126.
22. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 4.

people "from the dream of 4000 years."[23] It was in the context of rising national crisis and nationalism that Kang proposed the establishment of Confucianism as the national religion. Kang's slogan of protecting the Chinese state, religion and nation reflected his main objectives in instituting Confucianism as the national religion.

Like the Great Promulgation Campaign and the creation of state Shintoism in Meiji Japan,[24] the reinvention of Confucianism as a religious-cultural system by Kang was to protect the indigenous faith [*baojiao*] and to compete with Christianity for the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. To Kang, Christianity was a great menace also because of its association with imperialism. Kang believed that Christianity and Western imperialism fed on one another in their encroachment of non-Western societies. In a memorial submitted to the emperor in 1898, Kang warns that "the West relies on military power to conduct trade and missionary activities" and "the difficulty of (resolving) Christian lawsuits created fear 'all under heaven' [...] the recent Jiaozhou incident had led to the cession of many territories". He added "when there is dispute regarding the missionaries, foreign encroachment will follows. Foreign churches can be found all over China, conflicts can be provoked (by the missionaries) anytime [...] one spark can set the whole plain on fire...one incident may lead to the end of the empire."[25]

Kang proposed to set up Confucian churches all over China, in all prefectures, counties and even villages. These national churches would be officiated by Confucian clergies and they would read the classics to the people during Sunday worship. Confucius birthday would be celebrated as a national holiday and a Confucian calendar would replace the current calendar based on the emperor's reign. The Kongjiao movement wanted to adopt the institutional strength of Christianity and replace its theological content with Confucianism.[26] More importantly, the movement

23. Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 17.

24. See Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially Chapter 2 for the Great Promulgation Campaign.

25. Gong Guoqing, *Lun wuxu wenxin shiqi Kang Youwei de kongjiao gouxiang* 论戊戌维新时期康有为的孔教构想(Kang Youwei's idea of Kongjiao during the Hundred Days reform), in *China Academic Journal*, 130.

26. Prasenjit Duara, "Religion and Citizenship in China and the Diaspora," in *Chinese*

sought to replace the "Son of Heaven" with Confucius as the symbol of the Chinese nation.

Kang insisted that Confucianism is the soul of the nation. He believed that Confucianism as the national religion could unite the Chinese people as one nation and instill morality and national spirit in them. As Liang Qichao points out, "[Kang] thinks that the Chinese people lacked civic virtues [*gongde*], [as a result] the people is loose in spirit, and cannot survive in the world. Thus he sought to unite the people. Without a symbol that the whole nation can identify with, it is impossible to unite them emotionally and cannot enhance their nature [therefore] the revival of Kongjiao became his number one task."[27] Furthermore, Kang maintained that many European nations have national churches which instill patriotism, morality and civic mindedness in its people.

In his Kongjiao project, Kang submitted the *Memorial Requesting (the Emperor) to Order that Academies and Improper Temples be Changed to Schools* to the throne on 10 July 1898, In this memorial, Kang vehemently attacks the immoral cults and proposed the confiscation of temple properties to provide compulsory education for village children. Unlike Zhang Zhidong's *Exhortation to Build Schools* which proposed seizing 70 percent of temple properties, Kang did not set any quota for his plan. It was clear from his memorial that Kang wanted the total destruction of all non-Confucian temples inside or outside the Official Sacrifice.[28] In other words, Kang wanted to create a state cult exclusively for Confucius, even temples for other saints of Confucianism were not excluded from the plan. The July 10 edict can be seen as a socio-political project to encourage the creation of talent for the state, most importantly it was also a religious project to reform the spiritual life of the Chinese people totally.[29]

In sum, through the Kongjiao movement Kang wanted to foster

Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation, ed. Mayfair Yang (Berkeley, L.A.: University of California Press, 2008), 50.

27. Yu Dahua, *Lun Kang Youwei de Kongjiao Sixiang ji qi changli Kongjiao yundong* 论康有为的孔教思想及其唱立孔教运动 (Kang Youwei's Thoughts on Kongjiao and his Promotion of the Kongjiao Movement), *Nankai Academic Bulletin,* No. 4 (2002): 53.
28. Vincent Goossaert, "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?," *The Journal of Asian Studies,* Vol. 65 No. 2 (May 2006): 313.
29. *Ibid*., 314

a national identity among the Chinese people. Kang argued that the Chinese nation is defined essentially by their common Confucian culture and heritage.[30] Through the national churches, Kang wanted to spread the teachings of Confucianism to the masses and create an imagined sense of "religious-cultural" community. However, the Kongjiao movement did not ultimately take off because Confucianism was not popular among the masses unlike the popular religion, and most importantly it lacked the support of the monarchy. The veneration of Confucius as the creator of Chinese civilization and Confucianism as the essence of the Chinese nation desacralized the role of the monarch as the Son of Heaven and symbolic head of China. Moreover, Kang's insistence that political legitimacy resided in popular sovereignty as opposed to monarchial autocracy directly challenged the cosmological basis of kingship.

5. Conclusion: Kang Youwei and the Modern Fate of Confucianism

Kang's practical concern for modernizing the institutions of China as well as his universalistic vision has long perplexed historians. Fredric Wakeman remarked that "Kang is the most intriguing-if seemingly inconsistent-Chinese intellectuals."[31] In a similar vein, Hsiao Kung-chuan argued that Kang can be understood as a practical reformer or a utopian thinker.[32] I would like to argue that the dichotomy maintained by Hsiao is a false one and what makes Kang hard to understand is that we have not view his action and thoughts in the light of the religious-spiritual dimension of Confucianism which is inner as well as this-worldly in orientation. The main point that this essay tries to underline is that Kang's political engagement and his utopian thoughts were shaped by the moral mission imbued in him by the "prophetic voice" in Confucianism.[33] The

30. Prasenjit Duara, "De-constructing the Chinese Nation," in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 41.
31. Fredric Wakeman Jr., *History and Will: The Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 115.
32. See Hsiao, *A Modern China and A New World*. Hsiao basically saw Kang's thought as divided in two strands, a practical strand concerned for political reform and a religious-utopian strand which was focus on the salvation of mankind.
33. See Theodore de Bary, "The Prophetic Voice in the Confucian Noble Man," in

desire or intensity experienced by Kang in redeeming China and the world was a result of what S.N. Eisenstadt calls "the Axial-age tension" or the dissatisfactions caused by the difference between actual reality and transcendental ideals.[34] Indeed the China and the world in which he lived in the nineteenth century were characterized by social suffering, wars and intense international rivalries. In short, the absence of Confucian virtue of *ren* in the world. From 1884 to 1898, Kang sought to redeem the world through his revival of the "true teachings" of Confucius which are centered on the virtue of *ren*, and to create a new vision of modernity for mankind. Thus in late imperial time, it was certainly untrue, as Joseph Levenson argued, that Confucianism was drained of its relevance for the Chinese as China faced the challenge of Western civilization.[35] What we witnessed from Kang Youwei was the enduring strength of Confucianism in the intellectual life of the Chinese. Indeed, Kang's vision of *Datong* wasn't simply a "conservative response" to the West or the "westernizing of Confucianism". It was an attempt to remake the world, and to refashion Confucianism so as to make it relevant to the modern world. To deal with the absolutism of the monarchy and encroachments of foreign imperial powers and Christianity, Kang tried to transform Confucianism into a national religion in the 1890s. However, it ultimately failed because of oppositions from the monarchy and the traditionalists who accused Kang of corrupting Confucianism. Nevertheless, we witnessed a bold attempt by Kang Youwei to create a Confucian nation through the Kongjiao movement by blending Confucianism with the new force of Nationalism.

Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical And Contemporary Perspective, ed. Peter K.H. Lee (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 352–368. He argues that Confucianism wasn't conservative as what Max Weber and others have claimed. He asserted that there was a "prophetic voice" in Confucianism which propels the Confucian noble man to reform or redeem the world according to the way of Heaven.

34. See S.N. Eisenstadt, "Introduction: the Axial Age Breakthroughs-their characteristics and origins," in *The Origin and Diversity of Axial age Civilizations,* ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (Imprint Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986).
35. See Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: The Problem with Intellectual Continuity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958).

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