

"You don't wear a fur in summer" : Kang Youwei's Impartial Words on Republicanism (1917) and the fate of Chinese democracy

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“You Don’t Wear a Fur in Summer”: Kang Youwei’s *Impartial Words on Republicanism* (1917) and the Fate of Chinese Democracy

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Abstract: This article aims to discuss Kang Youwei’s 康有為 (1858–1927) position on democracy and republicanism in China through the analysis of two major works of his late production: *Datongshu* 大同書 (*Book of Great Concord*, drafted in 1902, but only published posthumously in 1935) and *Gonghe Pingyi* 共和評議 (*Impartial Words on Republicanism*, 1917), seemingly presenting two opposite views on the same issue. Whereas in his most “esoteric” production, represented by the *Datongshu*, Kang prophesied the spread of democracy on a global scale (China included), he remained loyal to the prospect of a Chinese constitutional monarchy in his public appearances after 1911 – the same he had abortively sponsored during the Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898. In 1917, playing an active role in the short and somehow farcical restoration of the last Manchu emperor on the throne orchestrated by warlord Zhang Xun, Kang published *Impartial Words on Republicanism*, a significant essay through which he intended to explain the apparent contradiction between his republican utopia on the one hand and his “imperial” project on the other. Through the translation and discussion of some extracts from the two aforementioned works, I will try to shed more light on Kang’s complex views on the issue and on the ambivalence of his political and theoretical agenda. Finally, I will also suggest that Kang’s reflections may appear to have been successively echoed by later intellectuals in the debate on the possibility and nature of a “Chinese democracy”.

Keywords: Kang Youwei, democracy, Confucianism, utopia, *datong* (Great Concord)

1 Questioning Republicanism: Kang Youwei and the 1917 Monarchic Coup

On July 1, 1917, general Zhang Xun 張勳 (1854–1923) – a former protégé of Yuan Shikai – marched to Beijing to restore Xuantong 宣統, the last emperor of the

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Qing, on the throne. Kang Youwei 康有為, the respected philosopher who had earned a place in history for leading the unsuccessful attempt to reform the Empire from the inside during the notorious Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, and who had been opposing nationalist republicans and Yuan Shikai's ambitions for more than a decade in the name of constitutional monarchism, had arrived in Beijing four days before the announcement of the coup. Previously, he had also directly urged Zhang Xun to take the capital by force several times since June.¹ After drafting an edict celebrating the restoration, Kang promptly resumed his main proposals for a comprehensive reform of the Empire – a renewed policy to be called the “Chinese Empire” (中華帝國) rather than the Great Qing – used 19 years earlier.² His edicts, ignored by Zhang Xun himself, were even more unsuccessful than those of 1898: If at that time Kang's attempt to change China had lasted barely three months, this time it did not outlive the span of two weeks. By July 12, the Republic was back in Beijing.

However “farcical” it may seem now, the abortive restoration of 1917 appeared at that time as a significant symptom of China's chaotic situation after the death of Yuan Shikai, the man who had acted as the only center of gravity left in a young republic: The country was still on the verge of collapse, ready to be divided among the new warlords and its sovereignty to be carved out by foreign powers. Yuan's failed imperial restoration moreover had demonstrated how ideologically fragile republicanism still was: The taboo of the “return of the emperor” had been readily infringed, and thanks to the Republic's failures monarchical ideas had proven to be still alive and usable for political purposes. The *coup d'état* cost much to Kang, who, being already in dire straits with the new *intelligentsia*, was definitively labeled as an anti-Republican, nostalgic conservative.

In an attempt to rebuff these critiques, Kang that same year published a long essay in three parts in the journal *Buren* 不忍,³ expressing his own views on republicanism and democracy: *Gonghe Pingyi* 共和評議 (*Impartial Words on Republicanism*).⁴ Written while he was a political refugee in the American Legation, and issued in Shanghai as a book in 1918, it adds some new considerations and insights to earlier arguments on Chinese and international politics.⁵

1 Hsiao 1975: 253

2 Zarrow 2012: 262–263. On Zhang Xun also see Wang 1998: 272.

3 *Buren* 不忍 was published in Shanghai from 1913 to 1917, edited by Kang himself together with his disciples Chen Xunyi 陳遜宜, Mai Dinghua 麥鼎華 and Kang Siguan 康思貫.

4 This is the translation proposed by Hsiao 1975.

5 Hsiao 1975: 257.

In particular, its third section, titled “On how the *Book of Great Concord*, which I wrote thirty years ago, firstly addressed the issues of democracy and the Republic, and how it was too advanced for the Chinese people”, is both a passionate defense of Kang’s commitment to democracy and a lucid analysis of China’s structural weaknesses. In the second paragraph, Kang directly addresses his fellow citizens, waving his *Datongshu* 大同書 as proof of his sincere commitment to the development of democratic institutions in future China.

Kept unpublished by Kang himself – except for two chapters, which appeared again in the journal *Buren* in 1913 – and finally published posthumously in 1935, the *Datongshu* is considered one of Kang’s major works. Partly translated into English by Lawrence Thompson in the 1950’s, the *Book of Great Concord* – whose first draft was completed as early as 1888 – ambitiously stretches the author’s own progressive interpretation of Classicism – matured through his New Text scholarship – to the limits, vividly depicting the Age of Great Peace as the final stage of human history, foreseen by Confucius and encoded in his historical commentaries. Though commonly labeled as an utopia, the book lacks the “out-of-time” dimension proper to Western utopias (like those of Thomas More, Bacon, and Campanella), rather being a prophecy of the world to come, as well as an interpretive history of mankind up to the author’s time. Applying the Chinese ideal of *datong* 大同 (Great Concord) on a global scale,⁶ Kang argues that in less than two centuries men and women will overcome their racial, sexual, social, cultural, religious and economical boundaries; unified by a world-government of *illuminati* and perfected by magnificent technological progress, the world will be at peace.⁷ Democracy and republicanism will be the foundations of this new world order, Kang assures. The whole planet will be a public (*gong* 公) political entity, eradicating selfishness (*si* 私) and division.

How could such a view, which will be presented in more detail in the paragraph below, coexist with the conservative positioning of 1917? Kang uses the *Datongshu* itself as the bedrock of his defence.

⁶ On the emergence of the *datong* ideal and on its long-lasting impact on Chinese history, see Pines 2012: 11–43. I have chosen to translate *datong* as Great Concord, adopting Kang’s own proposal for the English translation of his book’s title. Alternative (and more frequent) translations of the term include Great Unity or Great Commonwealth.

⁷ For a general summary of the *Datongshu*, see Thompson 1958 and Hsiao 1975: 419–513.

My fellow countrymen, you say that I am defending monarchy against democracy? What about the fact that thirty years ago I wrote about the Great Concord, exposing the theory of a world in which citizens will share suzerainty? I was the first, in our country. My *Book of Great Concord*, which describes the three ages of the world, was published in the eighth issue of this journal, in the eighth month of 1913, and I ask you, my compatriots, to read it carefully. If you read it, how will you be able to say that I have opposed democracy?⁸

And indeed, the *Datongshu* proves to be a sincere example of the author's commitment to his own ideal of world democracy.

2 Dreaming of a Global Commonwealth: The *Datongshu* and Mankind's Progression to Democracy

“When the Great Way was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all-under-Heaven”, reads the *Book of Rites*.⁹ As Kang's disciple Liang Qichao later wrote in his survey on the *Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period*, published in 1927 and translated into English by Immanuel Hsü in 1959, the forementioned passage from the Confucian Classic if “translated into modern terms, contains the idea of democracy, a League of Nations, public upbringing of children, sickness and old-age insurance, communism and the sanctity of labor”.¹⁰ And Kang's *Book of Great Concord*, especially in those sections describing the establishment of a World Parliament, of a global welfare system and the abolition of any form of private property – proves that he shared such a visionary interpretation of what the *Book of Rites* may have actually implied. But what kind of democracy does Kang dream of, in his description of the world to come? Does it imply the existence of different political parties contending for power as in the classical Western liberal democracy? Does it envision the election of public officials? Does it rely on checks and balances and on the division of power or is it rather a universal application of the Mencian principle by which “unity is stability”, and consequentially “division (or pluralism) means instability”, hence transferring the

⁸ “吾國民乎？得無以我偏主民主，而攻民主乎？然吾三十年前，發大同之說，明天下為公民有之義，舉國莫我先也。吾《大同書》言合國三世表，已於癸丑八月印在第八卷中，請吾國民疑我者細讀之。吾國民覽此乎，吾豈偏攻共和民主者乎？Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1047.

⁹ Legge 1885: 366.

¹⁰ Liang 1927: 96.

imperial concept of *gong* 公 into an institutional framework in which there is no emperor and yet there still is only one *dao* 道, one valid principle of government and there is no real competition between different alternatives? In other words, where do the roots of Kang’s democratic ideal lie, and what are its concrete consequences in political terms?

Leaving behind the main examples of what we could call a “debate on democracy” in the Confucian tradition – such as the Mencian theory of *minben* 民本, or “people-at-the-basis”,¹¹ or the reflection on the “democratic” role played by grassroots rebellions throughout imperial history¹² – it is well accepted that a new page in the history of Chinese political thought was opened, quite forcibly, after the first comprehensive contact with the West, starting from the last decades of the Great Qing’s rule over China.

In those years “democracy” and “republicanism” – both understood as generally vague categories, often idealistically abstracted from their concrete manifestations – entered the Chinese debate on the country’s future as a symbol of Western supremacy in the eyes of those intellectuals who were at the time passionately trying to repair the crumbling imperial system. From the point of view of the reflection on political organizations and historical development, the impact of the translation of John Fryer’s *Political Economy*, presenting a three-stage evolutionary theory of institutional systems – monarchy, oligarchy and democracy – can be considered as a watershed.¹³ Only a few years after the Manchu Court impotently witnessed the breakup of China and the obvious failure of the *ti-yong* 體用 slogan (“Chinese essence, Western tools”) elaborated by Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), under which the *yangwu* movement’s efforts to modernize China had been advanced for three decades and which had dodged any discussion on the imperial system at large, the doors were finally opened to the discussion on the responsibilities of traditional political culture *as a whole* for the decline of the country.

In this context, Kang and his disciple Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) must be counted among the most prominent thinkers trying – though in slightly different ways – to transplant statism, the main feature of nineteenth-century

¹¹ As Andrew Nathan correctly pointed out, *minben* “has never meant people’s rights (*minquan*) or people’s rule (*minzhu*)”. (Nathan 1985: 127).

¹² Yuri Pines notes that “rebellions can be interpreted as a peculiar (and very costly) readjustment system, a kind of bloody popular ‘election’”; at the same time “any new rebel-turning-emperor served as a proof that there was no real alternative to the political system established in the aftermath of the Warring States” (Pines 2012: 161).

¹³ On this, and more generally on late-Imperial and early-Republican political and philosophical debate, see Zarrow 2012.

Western political theory,¹⁴ into Chinese political culture, thus underlining the necessity to restructure the Empire in order to fence off the external aggression and encounter the internal centrifugal forces.

However, Kang's intellectual efforts, unquestionably stimulated and strengthened by his encounter with the West – indirect at first, and then personal in his later years – were only superficially influenced by European philosophical thought. Rather, it appears as a heterodox offspring of Chinese tradition, modeled by the global tides of the long nineteenth century forcing its interaction with “foreign” currents.¹⁵

As Philip Kuhn has argued in his essay on the imperial legacies of the modern Chinese State, wide sectors of the so-called gentry from the late Ming onward started to claim more significant participation in the public sphere, laying the foundations for later political debates.¹⁶ In this context, the New Text school interpretation of Confucianism, which Kang would take to its extreme, emerged among some illustrious gentry lineages of seventeenth-century Central China as a reaction to their exclusion from central administration; veiled under a philological debate on the Classics, a voluntaristic vision of Classical philosophy and the subsequent call for a renewed participation in state affairs by the local elites were pursued, as Benjamin Elman has extensively pointed out.¹⁷ It was an invitation to the *literati* to abandon their passive acceptance of orthodoxy and of an unquestioned imperial rule in favor of a vigorous and active political action: Confucius himself, New Text thinkers claimed, although unquestionably devoted to tradition, was a sort of “uncrowned king”, a prophet and an active political leader. His words were less an empty homage to past kings and venerable rites than an invitation to act *in the present*. This interpretation of Classicism came to Kang through its

14 Statism, more than nationalism, can be considered the major external influence on Chinese political thought through the so-called “long nineteenth century”. For a recent view of this theme from a global perspective, see Osterhammel 2014: 572–629; for Kang's own theory of statism, see Zarrow 2012, esp. ch. 1–3.

15 Kang was certainly influenced by Western technical knowledge, first through Japanese translations and later thanks to his extensive journeys through Europe and the Americas. The *Datongshu* itself, with its huge presence of Western citations witnesses Kang's sincere interest in “foreign” phenomena and practices. My point, however, is that from a strictly philosophical point of view, Kang's thought was fully developed *within* the framework of Chinese Classicism, albeit through an unorthodox lens. Western elements appear as examples validating his own ideas and theories, especially when it comes to the so-called “material culture” (scientific and economic progress) for which Kang highly esteemed Europe and the USA. On this, see Wong 2008: 15–26.

16 See Kuhn 2002 and Pines 2012.

17 See Elman 1990.

Guangdong agents, at the Xuehaitang Academy,¹⁸ but was rethought and reshaped under diverse influences, finally coalescing into his famous political call-to-arms, *Confucius as a Reformer* 孔子改制考, written in 1897 and serving one year later as the ideological basis to the abortive 1898 Reforms.

For Kang and his followers, the main urgency before and after 1898 was to support the establishment of a “public-minded rule” (*gong* 公), in contrast to a “selfish” (*si* 私) vision of power which, in their opinion, had progressively weakened the Empire.¹⁹ Clearly, the direct participation in the state by the *whole* of the Chinese people was not even an issue: If seen under this light, democracy “has a lot more to do with the empowerment of the people *in* the state than it does with a concept of top down state power”.²⁰

Kang’s proposed reform of monarchy, then, was much more indebted to statism than to a general plea for people’s participation. And yet, democracy and even republicanism were not simply discarded by Kang. On the contrary, they were considered as one of the markers of the “end of history” and the attainment of the Great Concord prophesied by Confucius.

The following extract from the *Datongshu* – a “table on the advancement of human equality” left untranslated by Thompson – will serve as a useful compendium of Kang’s blueprint for a global commonwealth. It is one of many tables provided by the author throughout the book, with the intent of summarizing the history of the past – analyzing, for example, how tribes,

18 The *Xuehaitang* (‘Hall of the Sea of Learning’), founded in Guangzhou by governor-general Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) in 1821, served as a major cultural hub in Southern China for almost a century, “transplanting” the new philological and philosophical currents of Jiangnan and mingling them with more local cultural (and social) concerns. For a detailed history of Xuehaitang see Miles 2006.

19 As Kang himself explained in his commentary on the *Book of Rites*, “to constitute all-under-heaven [*tianxia*] in a public space [*gong*] means that each and every man is treated in one and the same way”. (*Liyun zhu*, quoted in Hsiao 1975: 199). More generally, the speculation on the difference between public-minded and selfish-oriented politics certainly does not appear for the first time in late Qing. The famous historian Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1323), who lived in Mongol-ruled China during the Yuan dynasty, in his masterwork *Wenxian Tongkao* 文獻通考 used the categories of *gong* and *si* as key elements in the understanding of China’s historical evolution through the different dynasties of the past, noticing, for example, that “ancient emperors never considered the world as their private property” (古之帝王未嘗以天下自私也). For a survey of the concepts of *gong* and *si* in the *Datongshu*, see Huang 2002. In this article, I have generally translated *gong* as ‘public’, although it must be noted that in late Imperial China it was also used to define the sphere of action of the local *gentry* rather than of the Imperial State, therefore appearing more similar to a Western concept of “civic space”. On this, see Rankin 1993 and Rowe 1993.

20 Kane 1990: 8.

kingdoms, empires and nations have constantly tended towards an ever wider unification – and anticipating the next steps of human evolution up to the attainment of its final stage.²¹

人類平等進化表 據亂世	Table: Progression to mankind's equality Age of Chaos
人類多分級。 有帝，有王，有君長，有言去君為叛逆。	Mankind is extremely divided. There are emperors, kings, princes; those who claim the abolition of monarchs are considered to be rebels.
以世爵、貴族執政，有去各分爵級者， 以為謬論。	Noblemen and aristocrats exert power; the idea of overcoming class and grade distinctions is considered as heresy.
有爵，有官，殊異於平民。	There are noblemen and functionaries, both separated from common people.
有天子、諸侯、卿、大夫、士。	There is the Son of Heaven, then princes and dukes, ministers, high officials and literati.
有皇族，機貴而執權。	At the top of aristocracy, there is an imperial lineage which exerts power.
有天僧，為法王，法師，法官。	There is a Grand Priest, acting as King of the Dharma, Master of the Dharma and Judge of the Dharma.
族分貴賤多級，仕宦有限制，賤族或不 得仕宦。	Social classes are numerous; access to official positions is limited; low people are excluded.
族分貴賤，職業各有限制，不相同。	The population is divided among noblemen and low people, the system of working classes is rigid and no passage from one category to another is allowed.
女子依於其夫，為其夫之私屬， 不得為平人。	Women are their husbands' property and respond to them; they are not valued as equal [to men].
一夫多妻，以男為主，一切聽男子所為。	A husband can have more than one wife and exerts his masculine authority: Whatever he says, he must be obeyed.
族分貴賤，多級，各不同婚姻。	Population is divided in many classes and inter-class marriage is not allowed.

(continued)

²¹ In the Shanghai Zhonghua edition of 1935 it is published as part of Chapter 4, whereas in the more recent version based on a manuscript found in Hangzhou, it is part of Chapter 2.

(continued)

人類平等進化表 據亂世	Table: Progression to mankind’s equality Age of Chaos
種有黃、白、棕、黑貴賤之殊。	The existing races are the following ones: yellow, white, brown and black, from the highest to the lowest.
黃、白、棕、黑之體格、長短、強弱、美惡迥殊。	Yellows, whites, browns and blacks present clear differences of physique, stature, strength and beauty.
白、黃、棕、黑之種不同婚姻。	Yellows, whites, browns and blacks cannot marry [someone of another race].
主國與屬部人貴賤迥殊。有買賣奴婢。	Citizens and rulers are strictly separated. There are slaves and servants.

Source: Kang 2010: 79–80.

升平世	Age of the Rising Peace
人類少級。 無帝王、君長，改為民主統領，有言立帝王、君長者為叛逆。	Mankind is less layered. There are no emperors and kings, nor princes; democratic leadership has emerged. Those who claim their will to establish a dynasty are fought as rebels.
無貴族執政，雖間存世爵、華族，不過空名，無政權，與齊民等。	Power is not exerted by aristocrats; noblemen and members of high families, albeit still surviving, are considered as equals – they only keep their titles, without exerting any authority.
‘無爵，有官，少異於平民，而罷官復為民。	There is no nobility; there are only functionaries slightly differing from common people; when they cease from their duty, they return to be common citizens.
官級稍少。有統領、大夫、士三等。	The grades of government officials are less numerous, reduced to three: the president, high officials and functionaries.
皇族雖未廢而僅有空名，不執權。	The imperial family has not been abolished yet. However, it enjoys a merely nominal prestige, without exerting any real power.
削法王，猶為法師、法官、議員。	There is no Grand Priest anymore; however, the roles of Master of the Dharma and King of the Dharma still exist, albeit covered by an official.

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升平世	Age of the Rising Peace
雖有貴賤之族而漸平等，皆得仕宦。	Class differences still exist, and full equality has not been attained yet; however, every citizen can become a public official.
雖有貴賤之族，而職業無限，得相同。	Population is still divided among noblemen and common people; however, the system of working classes is not rigid and moving from one class to another is permitted.
女子雖不為夫之私屬而無獨立權，不得為公民、官吏，仍依於其夫。	Women are no longer their husband's property; however, they are not yet fully autonomous, they cannot exercise their rights as citizens nor can they be public officials. They are still dependent on their husbands.
一夫一妻，仍以男為主而妻從之。	Each husband can have only one wife. He still exerts his masculine authority, though, and his spouse has to obey him.
族雖有貴賤而少級，婚姻漸通。	The population is divided into classes, but to a lesser extent. Inter-class marriage is permitted.
棕、黑之種漸少，或化為黃，隻有黃、白，略有貴賤而不甚殊異。	Blacks and browns have gradually decreased, or they have merged into the yellow race; there are only yellows and whites, although not so strictly separated.
棕、黑之種漸少，或化為黃，隻有黃、白，略有智愚而不甚懸絕。	Browns and blacks have gradually decreased, or they have merged into the yellow race, and there are only yellows and whites: they still present differences – although not in an extreme fashion – in terms of intelligence
棕、黑之種漸少，或化為黃，隻有黃、白，雖有長短、強弱、美惡而不甚懸絕。	Browns and blacks have gradually decreased, or they have merged into the yellow race; there are only yellows and whites: they still present differences – although not in an extreme fashion – in terms of physique, stature, strength and beauty.
棕、黑之種漸少，各種互通婚姻。	Browns and blacks have gradually decreased, and interracial marriage is allowed.
主國與屬部人民漸平等，不殊貴賤。放免奴婢為良人，隻有雇仆。	The people and the rulers are progressively considered to be equal, not separate classes. Slavery is abolished, and servants are retributed.

太平世

Age of Supreme Peace

人類齊同無級。

Mankind, devoid of divisions, attains unity.

無帝王、君長，亦無統領，但有民舉議員以為行政，罷還復為民，有言立統領者以為叛逆。

There are no emperors, kings nor leaders, only representatives of the people taking care of public affairs; once their appointment has ceased, they return to being common citizens; those who proclaim their intention to become leaders are fought as rebels.

無貴族、賤族之別，人人平等，世爵盡廢，有言立貴族、世爵者，以為叛逆。

There are no aristocrats separated from commoners: persons are all equals, nobility has been abolished and those who proclaim their intention to establish a clan or a house are fought as rebels.

民舉為司事之人，滿任復為民，不名為官。

Those who act as representatives, once their appointment has ceased, return to being common citizens and they do not retain the qualification of ‘functionaries’.

官級極少。隻有大夫、士二等。

The grades of government officials are few. There are only two of them – high officials and functionaries.

無皇族。

There is no imperial lineage.

無大僧。

There is no Supreme Priest.

無貴賤之族，皆為平民。

There are no classes – citizens are equal.

無貴賤之族，職業平等，各視其才。

There is no aristocracy and there are no low people; professions are all considered as having the same dignity and everybody follows their talent.

女子有獨立權，一切與男子無異。

Women are autonomous, fully equal to men.

男女平等，各有獨立，以情好相合而立和約，有期限，不名夫婦。貴賤之族，婚姻交通皆平等。

Men and women are equal and free. Those who share reciprocal love can sign a fixed term contract of partnership, which is not a ‘wedding’. Inter-class marriage is allowed.

黃、白交合化而為一，無有貴賤。

Yellows and whites mingle to form one race, with no discrimination.

諸種合一，並無智愚。

All races have unified, with no differences in intellect.

諸種體格合一，皆長，皆強，皆美，平等不甚殊。

All racial types have unified; therefore, there are no differences of stature, strength and beauty.

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太平世	Age of Supreme Peace
諸種合一無異，互通婚姻。	All races have unified and interracial partnerships are free.
無主國屬部，人民平等。	There is no such thing as a ‘governing class’ – people are equal.
人民平等，無奴婢，亦無雇仆。	Since people are equal, there are no slaves nor retributed servants.

As simple as this chronological progression from the Age of Chaos to the Age of Supreme Equality may appear, it still leaves some open questions lingering.

As anticipated earlier, we might first have to ask if Kang’s concept of democracy, much more rooted in “equality” (公) than in “freedom” or “pluralism”, fits into a Western understanding of democracy as the competition and/or regulation of private interests, representing that very same “selfishness” (私) against which Kang firmly stands. One of Kang’s main concerns, which he had been expressing since his early political writings, is the construction of a “world where the hierarchical distance between people and their rulers and between different individuals in their social relations would be markedly diminished”.²² The *Datongshu*’s social ideal thus gravitates around “the elimination of political, racial, sexual and national barriers, not so much because these hierarchies were evil, [but] because all differentiation of phenomena obscures the truth that on the level of philosophic truth ‘reality’ is ‘one’”, as Charlotte Furth put it.²³ It appears more like a *moral* ideal, often pervaded by a sort of mystical aspiration to mankind’s salvation, than a concrete political concept, hence showing once again its debt to Confucianism and Buddhism. Given that the search for *gong* 公 and *tong* 通 – the rule by the public good and the abolition of distances, be they geographical, social or economic – seems to be the core value of Kang’s own concept of *minzhu*, his vision, taken to its extreme, can lead to results which appear quite distant from a Western liberal concept of democracy. For example, the racial policies illustrated in the previous table undoubtedly constitute a significant example of such a different orientation. To Kang’s eye, the idea of a universal racial assimilation, causing the extinction of “less-developed” human ethnic groups, might have been perceived as a positive historical outcome, signifying the abolition of one of the most heinous

²² Furth 2002: 20.

²³ Furth 2002: 22.

boundaries that divide individuals.²⁴ To our eyes, though, it is a rather sinister anticipation of twentieth century racial discrimination and even extermination policies. When differences are considered as an enrichment rather than a brake to mankind’s progression towards a better future, Kang’s ideal of democracy centering around the notion of *unity* as the abolition of diversity, assumes a somewhat undesirable flavor, to put it mildly.

Second, once Kang’s specific concept of democracy is better clarified, can we consider his vision for the future of mankind at odds with his role in China’s political arena in the first decades of the twentieth century? This presumed contrast was especially visible after the Xinhai Revolution, when Kang, as we have seen, publicly assumed a much more “conservative” stance, defending the idea of a constitutional monarchy even when such a stance patently seemed a move back towards a dismissed past: In almost twenty years, China had so profoundly changed that the previous reformer now appeared as a staunch nostalgic betraying his earlier progressivism and his dream of a worldwide *datong*.

3 Training for Democracy: Kang Youwei and the “Fount of Time”

Now back to the *Gonghe Pingyi*. The contrast between the political agenda lying behind Kang’s 1917 essay and his private dream of democracy has been readily pointed out. The point is this: Why was Kang actively pursuing the restoration of monarchism in China while considering the abolition of kings and emperors as a necessary step towards a global *datong*? The solution, partly anticipated above, is provided by the general framework of Kang’s philosophy of history. Adapting the classical “three ages” theory of human development, Kang considers democracy (*minzhu* 民主) and the Republican regime which is its most perfect realization as the ultimate institutional form in the evolution of mankind towards the Age of Great Concord. Hence, building a democracy is a *universal* goal rather than a *local* matter of “values” and/or “cultural identities”. At the same time, however, whether these universal trends can be realized in any *specific* context, is a matter of time and circumstances. And China at the beginning of twentieth century was not ready for it yet, according to Kang.

²⁴ Kang’s opposition to any political platform based on “racial discrimination” is evident in some of his pamphlets and essays written against Chinese Nationalists, witnessing his sincere commitment to a very Confucian universalism. See Brusadelli 2014.

I did not dare to speak publicly of democracy, believing that its time had not yet come. As the *Invariable Mean* says, “vast and profound is the fount out of which time flows”. And in the *Analects*, it is said that: “The phoenix sits on the mountain’s peak, oh times, oh times!” The *Book of Changes* reads: “Great thing indeed is to follow the times”. Fur in winter, hemp in summer: These are people’s normal clothing. If I wore a fur in June, would I not die from heat? And if I wore hemp in January, would not I suffer cold? So I believe that this hour, in which we confront ourselves with the Great Powers, is not the hour of democracy for us. It is not that I don’t have hemp or fur: I store them in the cupboard, waiting for their time to come; similarly, I hold in great esteem the discourses on democracy and on republicanism, but I have stored them, waiting to use them when the time of Great Concord comes. Today, my fellow citizens wrongly believe that democracy is fit for this time; but wearing a fur in summer you die from the heat, wearing a hemp in December you die from cold. I see it, and dread. I cannot help weeping their bitter fate, urging them to change their clothes.²⁵

Republicanism needs a democratic terrain out of which it can develop. It cannot be imported nor transplanted, Kang points out:

I think that for thousands of reasons it [establishing democracy and a republic in China] is not possible; because among one hundred republics you will not find two equals; due to historical, geographical and cultural factors, [a republic] cannot be imitated nor is there a universal technique to preserve it.²⁶

According to Kang’s self-defence, then, the effort to restore Qing rule in 1917, albeit on new premises, should not be seen as contradicting his utopian dream of a global democracy. Rather, it is based on a pragmatic evaluation of the actual circumstances of China. The utopia of Great Concord is not betrayed, but “maintained”, waiting for the right time to come. If the unquestioned goal of history is unity, the fact that it could be achieved by China simply dismissing the Empire is far from evident, Kang argues. Even less if the new Chinese state is to be based on “racial” and “divisive” premises, as he frequently underlines in his anti-Republican essays.²⁷

25 然我且不敢言民主共和者，誠以未至其時也。《中庸》曰：“浦博淵泉，而時出之。”上《論》末章曰：“山梁雌雉，時哉時哉。”《易》曰：“時之為義大矣哉。”夫冬裘夏葛，人之常服也，若五月披裘則喝死，十二月衣葛寒侵，吾以今列國競爭之時，非行用民主之時也。吾非無裘葛也，藏之篋笥，待其時而用之，吾於至珍民主共和之說，亦藏之篋笥，待大同時而用之。今吾國民，誤行民主於今，則五月披裘，當喝死也，十二月衣葛，當冷死也。吾見而懼之，不能不苦口流涕，而勸其易服也。Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1047.

26 吾即以爲萬不可行，百國共和，又無一同者，吾即自有歷史地理風俗，不可效人，則無一術維持共和矣。Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1047.

27 On this, especially on Kang’s stance against Han nationalism as the main ideological factor behind Chinese Republicanism, see Brusadelli 2015.

Kang’s proposal for the institutional resurgence and reform of the Empire is better defined in the following passage, where he displays his passion for world and comparative history, nurtured by his international peregrinations since the exile of 1898, as documented in his biography and travel diaries.²⁸ Again, the starting point is a classic quotation: A hexagram from the *Book of Changes* – the “headless dragons” – serves here as an introduction to the author’s own theory of constitutional monarchism.²⁹

I imagined it for China, thinking carefully, and studying deeply, considering the features of uncountable countries, collecting good examples, ancient and modern, and finally building my own theory. For a long time I have retained it, but now I intend to hand it over to you, my fellow citizens. Confucius thus comments on the *qian* hexagram from the *Book of Changes*: “To see dragons with no head. Auspicious”. The *Commentary of the Images* says: “*Qian* originally uses nine and rules the world”. Where do its political implications lead us to? To Greece, where there was an assembly of people chosen for their merits; to Rome, where there were a Senate and a triumvirate, with senators all chosen for their political prominence or for their personal reputation. To Germany, where seven Prince-electors used to nominate the king; to Switzerland, where there are seven ministers who in turn act as president for a year-long mandate; to the United States of America, where each State chooses two delegates for the Senate, which is charged with supervising the President and controlling him on foreign policy and great issues; to France, where the President has ceremonial functions but no actual power and administrative functions belong to the cabinet; to the time of Tang Yao,³⁰ who consulted with the four Yues for important issues; or to the time of the Zhou, when the Republic of Zhou-Shao was established.³¹

28 For an account of Kang’s journeys, see Lo 1967. In the *Datongshu*, large sections dealing with the historical evolution of the world up to the twentieth century might be considered as “comparative history” rather than “utopian fiction”, as already pointed out in paragraph 1. This is not to suggest that the author’s activity as a historian meets *our* scientific standards, but it certainly was a “scientific” accomplishment in the eyes of a man who, like Kang, was influenced by Confucian historiography.

29 The image of “headless dragons” has been diversely interpreted throughout the centuries, as a group of dragons physically with no heads or as a group without a head or leader. Kang seems to follow the latter, to justify his ideal of an “empty monarchy”. Legge has a completely different translation: “If the host of dragons (thus) appearing were to divest themselves of their heads, there would be good fortune” Legge 1885.

30 Tang Yao, one of the Five Legendary Emperors, according to the myth lived in around 2200 BCE.

31 In ninth century BCE, following a rebellion against the tyranny of King Li of Zhou, the new king – Xuan of Zhou – decided to share his power with Duke Mu of Shao and Duke Ding of Zhou; this institutional experiment was later dubbed “Zhou-Shao Republic” (周召共和). This episode is mentioned by Sima Qian in the *Shiji*.

Now, drawing inspiration from the sentence of Master Kong, and taking into account the foreign systems of Greece, Rome, Switzerland, America and France, as well as the domestic ones of Tang Yao and the Republic of Zhou-Shao, melting them together and harmonizing their different flavors, can [the result] be something fit for us? Aside from a National Assembly, I therefore propose to establish a Senate as the highest institutional body of the country, with the 22 provinces plus Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Qinghai sending a representative each; and if there is someone of great virtue and of great learning whose provincial seat has already been filled, he can nonetheless be nominated by the Senate as a member of the assembly; of the 28 members, seven are chosen in turn as standing members; the administration of the State is divided into five offices: one is called ‘Foreign Affairs’, dealing with the great issues of foreign relations; one is called ‘Military Affairs’, declaring wars and making peace, with the Marshall of the Army being subject to the cabinet; one is called ‘Law’, deciding on great judicial matters; one is called ‘Political Stability’, deciding on political litigations; one is called ‘Education’, being responsible for national education and not subject to the policies of the cabinet; in addition, a president and a vice-president of the assembly are chosen, following the Swiss system, where in case of illness or absence of the president, the vice-president acts as his substitute”.³²

The 1917 project, when seen from this perspective, was not a simple dynastic restoration, as it may have seemed to Qing nostalgics, such as Zhang Xun himself. Rather, it implied an almost revolutionary change of perspective: The power of the monarch had to be scooped out, leaving only his sacral charisma and ceremonial duties. Such an institutional asset serves as the main feature of Kang’s theory of the empty monarch in which, following a fully statist approach, Kang moves sacrality “from the king to the state”.³³ Quoting the *Book of Changes*, the “head” is cut off and the empire is transformed into a ‘public’

32 吾為中國計之，昧昧我思之，沈沈吾畫之，斟酌萬國之宜，薈萃古今之美，無亦有一創說焉。懷抱之久，今願以敬獻吾國民。孔子系《易》之乾曰：“見群龍無首。吉。”象曰：“乾用九，天下治也。”此其政治之極軌那？其在希臘，則有賢人會議；其在羅馬，則有元老院及三頭政治，其元老皆選專於政治而有重望者元焉。德國則有七選侯以選立王者，其在瑞士則以七部長，歲選議長；其在美國則以每周選二人為上議院議員，以監督總統，握其外交及大政；其在法國則有代表王之虛總統與責任內閣；其在唐堯則大政咨於四岳；其在周室則周召共和。吾今上稟孔子“群龍無首”之言，外採希臘、羅馬、德、瑞、美、法之制，內採唐虞四岳，周召共和之法，合一爐而冶之，調眾味而和之，其貨可行乎。請於國會而外，立元老院為最高機關，凡廿而行省，及內外蒙古、西藏、青海、各公舉一人，入充元老，其有大功德、大文學，雖其省額滿，亦可由元老公請入院，額數以廿八人為度，輪選七人為常，駐辦事員分五司焉：一曰外交，凡有外交結約之大事者斷焉；一曰兵，凡開戰議和，及參謀部元帥府隸焉；一曰法律，凡大審判決焉；一曰平政，凡政之訟決焉；一曰教，凡國教任，凡不隸於內閣之大政隸之，更公舉一議長，一副議長，其議長之制如瑞士，其議長以病或事缺席，則副議長代之。

Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1047–1048.

33 Chang 1987: 5–6. Kang’s theory of the “empty-monarch” is thoroughly examined in Zarrow 2012: 24–55.

(*gong*) polity ruled through a diffused and multilayered institutional system. Moving one step further towards the “age of democracy”, then, constitutional monarchism is considered as closer to the Age of Supreme Peace than a fragile republic built on wrong premises and incapable of reforming the country, rather functioning as a screen for old-fashioned authoritarianism (as the years of Yuan Shikai’s rule over China had suggested): “Introduced without an intervening age of constitutional monarchy, and amid great confusion, to a largely unprepared population, the Republic, not surprisingly, malfunctioned”.³⁴ Consequently, in Kang’s opinion, restoring and adjusting the Empire may be a way to gain time and prepare China for the Age of Rising Peace without causing the country to collapse backward into chaos. Constitutional monarchy is the solution, as Kang had already claimed in his essay “Saving the Country” (*Jiuwanglun* 救亡論), published in 1911:

Constitutionalism is a great revolution, the right revolution for a country that has been a monarchy for millennia. This year’s revolution, on the contrary, is nothing but a small revolution; it is a ‘one people, one dynasty’ revolution, with the purpose of taking power back to the hands of the Han people.³⁵

The historical linearity pointing to the Great Concord does not imply a sort of “institutional linearity”: A non-public (and therefore non-democratic, according to Kang’s vision) Republic, may be more chaotic and even less democratic than a monarchy based on the revival of *gong*. This point, in particular, is developed in the first paragraph of *Gonghe Pingyi*’s third essay, “Rome and England both passed from democracy to monarchy, attaining a new strength” – another example of Kang’s fascination for comparative and global history *ante litteram*.

Those who say that establishing a monarchical system after democracy is not possible shall change their mind. Was not Rome, in ancient times, a democracy? Since Augustus, though, it became an autocratic monarchy, and it prospered, expanding its rule over thousands of *li*, governing Europe until the age of Constantine: For two thousand years it was a great empire. Until recent times, England and Wales were small and uncultured democratic countries. Then monarchy was established and in 300 years the kingdom conquered the Netherlands, later conquering India and colonizing Canada and Oceania. It is today a great country, whose flag waves everywhere in the world.³⁶ Now, can we deny

34 Pines 2012: 168

35 故言立憲者，大革命也，革數千年國為君有之命。今號革命者，小革命也，僅革一朝一族之命而已，其為復漢人之權利則一也。Kang 1981: vol. 2: 668.

36 This point of England being a republic which successfully turned to monarchism is widely used by Kang, see for example his telegram to Feng Guozhang, mentioned in Hsiao 1975: 255.

that Rome and England are both countries ruled by law? From small and weak barbaric countries to great and powerful empires, is this not what we call progress? But maybe it is not enough to convince those who believe that after democracy it is impossible to establish monarchy. Germany, for example, today exerts a huge influence: It has just taken the city of Riga away from the Czar, and is now heading to the Russian capital with its army. A democracy which cannot exert its full control over the country can hardly be strong. The United States of America is the best example of a democratic system; however, they have declared war on Germany, sending its citizens to the battlefield for many months,³⁷ because when war is unavoidable, that is not the moment for people's rule [democracy]. As for today, what time is it for us? Isn't this the time of war, for our country? Please, my fellow citizens, follow and value these considerations.³⁸

The previous passage is also a useful indication to better frame Kang's general views on democracy. We have seen that in his writings – in particular those presented in this paper – democracy and republicanism often appear as synonyms, indicating a political system in which, all citizens being equals, there is no room for a monarch and where common people can temporarily serve as administrators of the common good. This would suggest that in Kang's scheme constitutional monarchy would represent a stage *prior* to a full-fledged *gonghe*. Such a conclusion, although much debatable from a Western perspective, is indeed consistent with Kang's choice for constitutional monarchy as the fittest institutional framework for China at his time. Also, Kang's remarks on the presumed weakness of democratic institutions in war times might be interpreted not as a *diminution* of democracy's value or effectiveness, but as the application of his theory on historical progression: As the last stage of human development, democracy can work only if the Age of Concord is fully attained on each level. It can therefore express its full potential only when conflicts are quelled and peace and equality thrive throughout the globe. This scheme may lack the depth of contemporary reflections on democracy, yet it is Kang's theoretical framework as derived from unorthodox Confucianism.

Finally, in the third section of the third essay of *Gonghe Pingyi* – explicitly entitled “Chinese people, citizens of a country which has never been a

³⁷ Kang refers here to World War I.

³⁸ 或謂民主之后不可改君主，改則退化，其謬至易知矣。羅馬之先，豈非民主乎？而自奧古士多之后，改為專制君主，羅馬乃盛，拓地萬裡，為歐正統，至君士但丁，二千年為大帝國矣。至今英克林威爾民主也，在小國未文明時，其后英改為郡主，垂今三百年矣，始收荷蘭，滅印度，定加拿大及澳洲，英乃曰大，英旗於日月出入。羅馬與英，豈不足稱法乎？由弱小蠻，進為文明霸國，非進化乎？此之不足，而謬雲民主之后，不可改為君主。今德國已勝勢，取俄裡加，已為全軍扑俄京。蓋民主之國勢難統御，無能強其國者。美為民主政體至今美矣，然日號其民，欲與德戰，而招兵數月，故國爭未免之時，非行民主制之時也。今何時乎？豈非國爭時乎？請懸記其得失以規之。 Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1046.

democracy, ignore what a republic is and that is why they are foolishly losing their struggle" – Kang returns to many of the previously examined points (i. e. the need for a full comprehension of republicanism as a product of specific historical and social circumstances, the peculiarities of twentieth-century China and the dangers of an extemporaneous or "copied" democracy), adding precise accusations to his contemporary Republican and nationalist intellectuals. They may claim to be sincere democrats, and yet they still act as imperial censors, condemning and ostracizing counter-current thinkers such as him, Kang denounces:

My fellow intellectuals, aiming for higher discourse and pressing the times, are forcing it [i.e. the establishment of a republic] without having actually reflected critically upon it, even for one single day. [...] You can establish a school following a teacher only after receiving teaching [from him]; you can set up a strategy only if you are trained in it. That is because in order to pass on their knowledge, their experiences and their activities, people need to master them through many years of study and many years of exercise. Only then they can be implemented. Every art is subtle and studying it seems hard for a long time. Thus a republican system is a similarly manifold, subtle and abstruse matter. Recently, among our country's scholars of America and Europe, many have used Japanese translations as short-cuts, but Japan does not have a republican system and [those translations] do not give details on republicanism! So, if before the Xinhai Revolution in China there was not a single book on republicanism, since then, in the entire country there has not yet been a single true scholar of republicanism. [...] Following my return to China I have met not a few scholars: Old students know much about China and ignore the outer world; new ones have superficial knowledge of the outer world and do not understand China. Talking about "foreign studies", Europe, America, Asia and Africa are different and distant. It is difficult to visit them all, their systems are manifold and ever-changing and it is difficult to study them all. Talking about a republic, under its name only a general idea is included and examining its actual content you may see its inevitable variations, the whole course of its institutional forms, its pros and cons, as well as the reciprocal followings and imitations: among the many republican countries throughout history, not a single one is similar to another, and even Rome did not follow the example of Greece. The seventy-two cities of the Hanseatic League did not follow Rome, the Commune of Florence did not follow Germany, the Swiss Confederation did not follow the Italian Communes, the United States did not follow Switzerland, France did not follow America, Portugal did not follow France, and the twenty American Republics may look similar from the outside but from the inside are actually different; coming to the European revolutions, they followed up the American and French examples, they took the essence of the republic, distilled it and caught its spirit without necessarily copying its formal appearance, and this ultimately shows the wide transformative power of republicanism. Name and reality differ, but those who only have a superficial knowledge ignore it and are misled. So, the republican system considers the nation as a public affair and the country as a people. It is a peaceful common vision, and it is in this sense different from autocracy. France is a purely republican country, but among the parties today [represented] in Parliament there is still a party marked as "monarchical"; moreover, the German Empire is considered by many to be an

autocracy. The German Socialist Party is now represented in Parliament and publicly discusses democracy ... French Monarchists express their own views although republicans have extensive prejudices against them, condemning and debating their ideas. Because a republic is to be considered as the representation of the ideas and visions of every person, putting together their multiplicity, it cannot force everyone to promote democracy. If there are taboos, that is, a suppression of citizens, it is an autocracy, not a republic. Our country, since 1912 has reformed its institutional system, becoming a republic, and nobody dared to discuss it. If someone does not advocate democracy and republicanism, and he openly speaks out, he is immediately viewed as a traitor, as in the former Empire, when those who talked about democracy were considered rebels. The intellectuals of our country have preserved the bad habits of the Empire, and albeit enchanted by republicanism they are actually practicing autocracy. Somebody should dare to ponder on the pros and cons of the Republic, to ask whether it is fit for China's geography, habits, history and sensibility, to examine it critically, inviting intellectuals and scholars from all over the country to reflect on it again and again, balancing gains and losses and only then implementing it. Even if they have not analyzed it thoroughly yet, and even if they ignore the possibility to implement and enforce it, they wish to attain the benefits and security of a republic – which they consider as a *sine qua non* for the interests of the country and the wealth of the people – therefore causing troubles and losses. [...] Now, we will not reply here to the ancient scholars' attacks on democracy; however, how can I deny that among the numerous Chinese modern intellectuals there is not a single one who has a clear understanding of what a republic is? Because, if they had a deep knowledge of its perils, they would first of all admit that it is completely unfit for China. They should be denounced publicly as if they were rebels: in order to protect themselves, they are not brave enough to speak openly; aspiring for rank and wealth and hoping to jump on the Republic to gain some power, they do not dare to express themselves.³⁹

39 然犹必立学从师以受之，设局整陈以操之，入传习所、试验场、作工厂以习之，需以数年之学力，尚须实地练习者数年，然后乃施之实用焉，然后可占其能否。夫以工艺之微，学之犹若是至难且久也，况夫共和政治之深繁奥赜也。近者吾国求欧、美之学，多假途于日本之译本，而日本既非共和政体，其于共和政皆语焉而不详，故辛亥以前，吾国竟无共和政体之一书，即辛亥以后，全国亦未有共和政体之一学。[...] 吾归国以来，所接人士，不为少矣，其旧学者，多知中而寡知外；其新学者，略知外而不知中。就言外学，则欧、美、亚、非，地势遥远，游者难于遍至，国体整变，学者难于尽悉。就言共和，举其广名，则大略若同，考其内实，则无不变异，其立法之本末，成效之得失，相师互鉴，而古今万国之共和，无一同者，故罗马不师希腊也。德之汉堡七十二市府，不师罗也，意之佛罗练士五市府，不师德国也，瑞士联邦，不师意大利之五市府也，美不师瑞，法不师美，葡不师法，而美洲之二十共和国，外全相似，内实不同，至欧洲诸国之革命，则尽以美洲、法国为戒，取共和之精华，而去其糟粕，得其神意，而不必泥其形似，此尤共和变化之至者矣。名实少异，宜浅识者不知而反感也。且夫共和之制，以国为公有，全国之民，和平公义之也，此所以异于专制也。故法国为纯粹共和之国，而今议院之政党，尚有特标明为王党者，甚至德之帝国，几为专制矣。而德之社会党，乃于议员公言民主之制，而奥无论也。法之王党，各发其心思议论，虽共和党之偏至极端者有驳难而无非议之。盖以共和者，为代表全国人之心思议论，从其多数而行之，非强人人之必言民主也。若有所禁，则是遏抑国民也，是专制也，非共和也。吾国自壬子以后，改国体为民主共和，无人敢议之者。其有不言民主共和，而他及者，即视若悖逆，有若昔日帝国之言民主，视为叛乱焉。盖吾国之学者，皆染中国帝国之余风，虽心醉共和，而实行专制若也。然则谁敢

The conclusion, for Kang, is unquestionable: At the moment, “The Republic and China cannot stand together”:

For six years democracy has brought disasters to our country, and its advocates have trapped 400 million Chinese into this tragedy; those who are aware of it and yet do not talk – some for fear, some for interest – do not love their country anymore. To say it simply, the Republic and China cannot stand together. When the Republic was established, China was lost; if the Republic endures, China will disappear. My fellow citizens, please, think about it with a fair mind, if you still love China.⁴⁰

4 Conclusion: Training for Democracy?

As summarized in the previously examined “tables on mankind’s progression to equality”, Kang in his *Datongshu* prophesied that the “end of history” will manifest itself as a global democracy, a one-world republic tearing down barriers and boundaries, whose nature has been briefly examined as implying more than one difference from the classical Western ideal of democracy.

However, while revising and completing his utopia, Kang acted on the political stage of China as a critic of republicanism, confronting publicly Sun Yatsen and Yuan Shikai, and even attempting in first person to restore the last Qing emperor on the throne, as the failed *coup* of 1917 demonstrates.

In this framework, the interest of a work like *Gonghe Pingyi* does not lie exclusively in its being an anti-Republican manifesto. Kang himself used this work to present his comprehensive view on the future of China, somehow justifying his plea for a renewal of the Empire in a country which had just rid itself of its last dynasty in the name of modernity. As Kang underlines in the last passage of *Gonghe Pingyi*, republicanism and democracy are “practices” which need training (*cao 操*) in order to be successfully mastered. In synthesis, Kang “rested his arguments sometimes on theoretical grounds, that is, political

以共和之得失利害，宜于中国地理风俗历史人情与否，考而辩之，更安能集一国学士大夫、通人才士讲求反复，穷极得失，而后行之。夫既未尝考辩讲求，不知其可否而强行之，而欲其得共和之宜，受共和之安，以为国利民福，必不可得也，故召乱败也。[...] 夫旧学之攻民主者不论，虽然，吾国新学者至多，吾岂敢谓其无一通共和者。盖新学者深知其害，而谓万不可行于中国者固有矣。然以得罪于众，等于叛逆，以保身家，故不敢昌言，或心既利禄，欲乘民国而图权利，至不敢微言。 Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1049–1051

40 夫是以民主之害国殃民者六年，而议共和者无之，是以陷中国四万万入至于此惨也，有所畏，有所利，知而不言，皆不爱国而已。要之一言，民国于中国不并立，民国成则中国败矣，民国存则中国亡矣，吾国民爱中国乎，其平心思之。 Kang 1981: vol. 2: 1051.

change must be compatible with the historical circumstances prevailing at a given period of time”, consequently viewing republicanism as something that “was intrinsically desirable but lay beyond China’s immediate reach”.⁴¹

Furthermore, Kang’s attack on his fellow intellectuals who act with no respect for the Chinese situation reminds us of more recent confrontations on the exportation of democracy in alien contexts. “Few, if any, Western liberal democratic theorists in the post-World War II era have sought to learn from the traditions and experiences of East Asian societies [...] and defenders of ‘Asian values’ are viewed as archaic or politically dangerous”.⁴² This contemporary address by Bell to Western intellectuals’ “provincialism” may have sounded familiar to Kang’s ears, who – as we have seen – directed similar accusations against *Chinese* political theorists: copying the West in order to compete is not the solution. China must recover with its own remedies, they said. The theoretical consistency, and the actual feasibility, of a democracy based on the Classical Chinese political vocabulary appears problematic, both today and at Kang’s times. Indeed, *minzhu* and *gonghe* can mean all and nothing, appearing in human history under many disguises, as Kang himself interestingly observes throughout his work. Again anticipating more recent approaches to the issue, Kang affirms that if democracy is to be considered as an exceptional European or American phenomenon, then it has nothing to do with China, due to the extreme dissimilarities in terms of historical evolution between East and West. However, whereas democracy is scraped of its “Western-superiority” veneer and fully understood in all its differences and complexities, then it may also be considered as already being a part of Chinese historical legacy. Just as the historian Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990) found some democratic seeds in the Song dynasty examination system,⁴³ Kang considered the mythical virtuous kings of

⁴¹ Hsiao 1975: 220.

⁴² Bell 2006: 4.

⁴³ In a nutshell, Qian Mu stated that whereas the West had established “contractual” institutions (from the *Magna Charta* onwards), accepting and even prescribing a dialectic interaction between the “people” and the “ruler” (with the former attempting to somehow control the latter), communities in China had rather chosen to historically “entrust” their ruler(s), thus producing a hierarchical and familistic sociopolitical system based more on “responsibility” and “moral expectations” than on reciprocal suspicion or the search for a balance of powers.

Defying the mainstream bias towards Chinese autocracy, seen as one of the key elements in China’s backwardness vis-à-vis the West, Qian shifted his argument further: China had even experienced a *sui generis* form of “representative democracy”, embodied by the examination system as implemented from the Song dynasty to the last years of the Qing; this peculiar form of interaction between the literati and the State, in Qian’s view, supplied the Empire with a sort of

Zhou as valid an example of democracy as the actual institutions of France or the USA, and to the question of whether a meritocratic oligarchy can be considered a form of “democracy”, Kang answered that yes, a constitutional monarchy with a nominal emperor at the apex legitimating a mechanism of checks and balances below can be more public-minded (and therefore “democratic”) than an autocratic republic.⁴⁴

Finally, the self-evident divergence between the project of a constitutional monarchy and the dream of a global democracy is explained by Kang as presenting a difference in *time* and not in *ideals* or *values*. Showing a pragmatic – more than “gradualist”, as Hsiao Kung-chuan defined it – approach to historical evolution, Kang clearly states that democracy and republicanism will eventually thrive on a global scale, but also that each community will reach that point at its own pace. As it was pointed out earlier with regard to Kang’s comment on the “weakness” of democratic institutions in times of war, monarchism and republicanism are not *wrong* or *right* in their own terms: They can only be valued in relation to the circumstances generating and sustaining them. If they follow the “flow of time”, they will function correctly. Understanding the “vast and deep source of time”, as the *Invariable Mean* prescribes, is the only way to save a country on the brink of collapse. Kang thus stresses *timeliness* as one of the most important virtues in politics, paying his debt to classical Chinese philosophy and strategy.⁴⁵

In the debate on whether Confucianism can generate democracy – which, far from being a historical curiosity, has been a key point in recent decades, both in Taiwan and in the PRC – Kang assumed a purely Confucian and “universalist” approach. His main concern was not the definition of a Chinese cultural model – a “national essence” – as opposed to the Western one, but the understanding of how China can generate its own “democratic” system in the long term. “Superficially, democracy may appear as a universal value, in a ‘every street leads to Rome’ fashion; and in today’s world, the

“meritocratic government”, thus providing a fruitful connection between the local power of the so-called gentry and the central authority of the dynastic administration. See Qian 2012: 98–99. For a summary of Qian’s position in the debate on “Confucian Democracy”, see Deng 2009.

44 For a recent view on the issue of meritocracy vs democracy in a “Confucian” context, see Bell and Li 2013.

45 On the importance of *shi* 勢 (momentum, disposition) in Chinese traditional strategy, and its implications in the construction of a concept of ‘efficacy’ fairly different from the Western one, see Jullien 1997

political systems realized by numerous countries may seem to have similar features, all known as ‘democracies’. However, the historical roots of each country’s realization of democracy are actually different, and the effects of democracy in each country’s modern and contemporary historical development are equally dissimilar”.⁴⁶ Almost a century after the publication of *Gonghe Pingyi*, and more than fifty years after Qian Mu’s reflections, this was the premise of sociologist Fang Ning 房寧 in the introduction to his essay “The Chinese Experience with Democracy”. Underlining China’s historical, geographical, social and cultural peculiarities in comparison to the West, and extensively stressing how democracy can be inflected differently in different places and times, Fang seems to share Kang’s inclination for the contextualization of political systems (although his conclusion is a negation of the possibility for China to have a multi-party system, conversely envisioned by Kang in his constitutional monarchy project).

Kang’s focus on the creation of a *gong* polity and his vision of *Datong*, on the other hand, have been often used by Wang Hui 汪輝 – a “new-left” intellectual who supports “grassroots democracy” experiments in the PRC and urges the emergence of “social groups” rather than “political parties” as a counterbalance to a capital-driven CCP.⁴⁷ The fact that two intellectuals providing substantially different solutions for contemporary China can both claim a part of Kang’s legacy certainly shows the latter’s pivotal role – his political failures and short-sightedness notwithstanding – in the shaping of modern and contemporary Chinese thought.

Being more focused on the comprehension of ever-changing circumstances in *time*, than on the definition of some given identities in *space*, Kang was unsurprisingly a minority in a world set on fire by the quest for “national characteristics” as the reasons behind each country’s failures or successes. However, it would be ungenerous not to assess Kang’s importance as a witness to and interpreter of his troubled time, or to underestimate the significance of his intellectual wandering between utopianism and realism – here briefly traced through the analysis of two of his writings – as embodying a fundamental feature of Chinese intellectual and political history, both before and after 1911.

⁴⁶ 《从表面上看，民主似乎是一种“普世价值”，似乎“条条大路通罗马”，当今世界上多数国家采取的政治制度在形式上是类似的，都被称为民主政治。但是，实际上各国实行民主政治的历史原因有差别的，民主政治在各国近现代历史发展所起的作用也不尽相同。》 Fang 2013: 1–2.

⁴⁷ On both Fang and Wang, see Leonard 2008.

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