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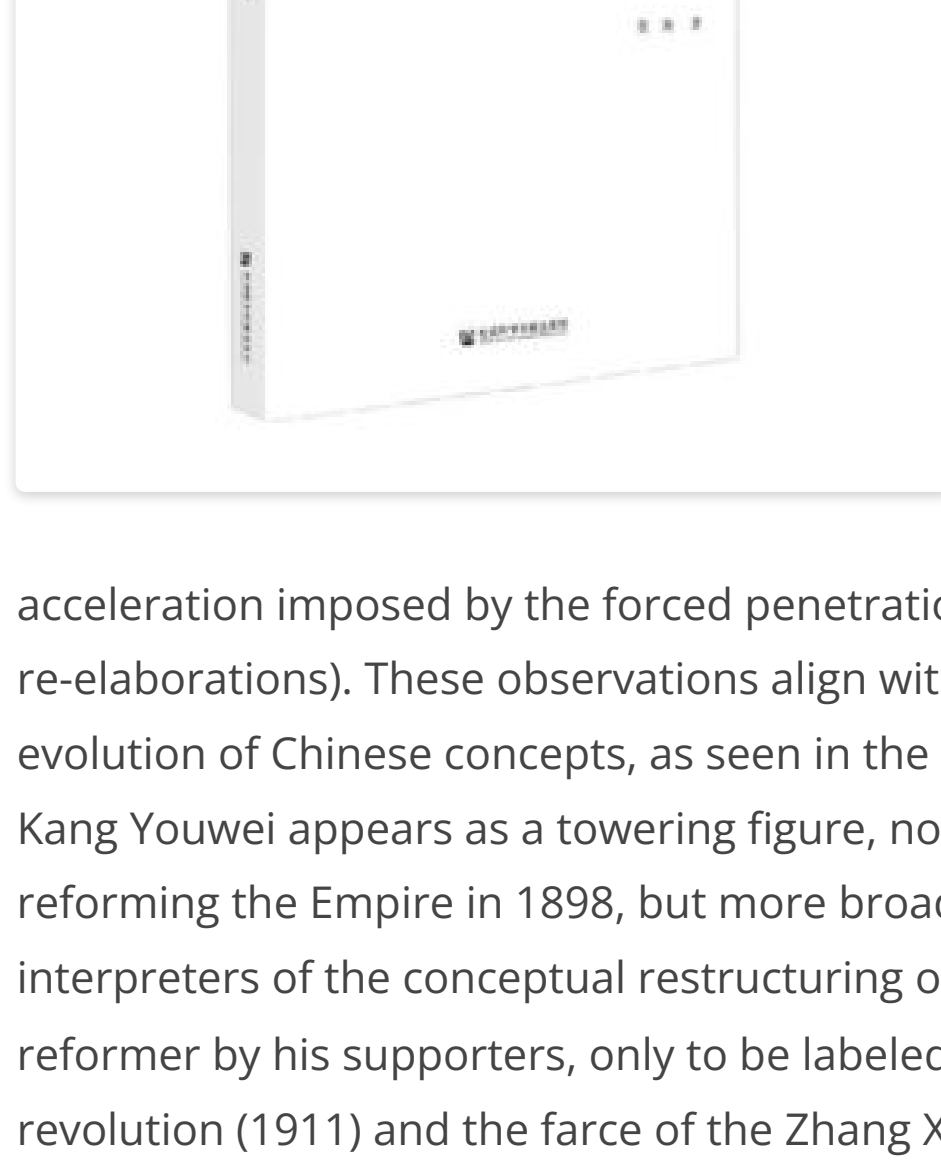
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## [Review] 张翔：《大同立教——康有为政教思想研究》(Zhang Xiang: Establishment of Confucianism on Datong: A Study of Kang Youwei's Political and Religious Philosophy)

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Zhang Xiang 张翔, *Datong lijiao: Kang Youwei zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu* 大同立教——康有为政教思想研究 (Establishment of Confucianism on Datong: A Study of Kang Youwei's Political and Religious Philosophy), Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2023. ISBN 9787520185844, 356 pages, 128 RMB.

Reviewed by [Federico Brusadelli](#) (University of Naples "L'Orientale")



Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, studies on Kang Youwei (1858–1927) have experienced a steady and consistent surge, especially in the context of reassessing the late Qing period beyond the traditional interpretation of the “Western shock” as the predominant (if not the only) impulse to the radical transformation of China at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the last decades, more careful observation of the developments from the Jiaqing 嘉庆 period (1796–1820) onward has demonstrated the multiplicity of “intellectual paths” that Chinese élites were exploring well before the

acceleration imposed by the forced penetration of Euro-Atlantic concepts (and their Japanese re-elaborations). These observations align with a more nuanced and detailed approach to the evolution of Chinese concepts, as seen in the light of *Begriffsgeschichte*[1]. In this framework, Kang Youwei appears as a towering figure, not just for his leadership in the failed attempt at reforming the Empire in 1898, but more broadly as one of the most influential and stimulating interpreters of the conceptual restructuring of his time. Hailed as a bold and progressive reformer by his supporters, only to be labeled as a nostalgic conservative after the Xinhai revolution (1911) and the farce of the Zhang Xun 张勋 Restoration he supported in 1917, Kang remained after his death an ambiguous and contradictory figure, embodying all the ambiguities and tensions of the tumultuous transition between Empire and Nation. Although Mao Zedong 毛泽东 himself appreciated Kang's utopian thrust and a young Li Zehou 李泽厚 tried to combine the materialist and progressive philosophical foundation of the philosopher's “bourgeois reformism” with Marxism in the mid-1950s.[2] Orthodox communist scholarship on Kang remained for more than three decades anchored in an inauthentic interpretation of the late Qing period as the “last stage of feudal capitalism,” which deprived Kang of any concrete viability.

In the post-Maoist era, Wang Hui 汪晖 – author of the monumental *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (中国现代思想的兴起), an eminent member of the so-called “new left,” and former editor of the journal *Dushu* 读书 and professor at Tsinghua University – has been among the most prominent thinkers challenging the “de-politicization” of the Chinese public discourse, and looking seriously at the potential of the late Qing period as a repository of conceptual experimentations using Classical categories to reshape the political debate. Wang, who interpreted Kang Youwei's intellectual endeavor as the search for a universal principle that could unfold a common path for China and the rest of the world in the “modern” era[3], significantly contributed to the overall appreciation of Kang's thought as a more complex and intriguing creation than what Tang Wenming 唐文明 has recently described as, “putting old wine in new bottles”[4] or what Chen Boda 陈伯达 in 1936 called “bourgeois optimism.”[5]

Along these lines, a fresh contribution to the Chinese scholarship on Kang comes from Zhang Xiang, professor at Capital Normal University (首都师范大学), author of dozens of articles and essays dealing with the intellectual history of China from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards and a specialist in the political thought of Kang Youwei. Zhang has a direct and deep knowledge of Kang's biography and textual production, and in this important book aims to “revisit” Kang's thought by placing it in its historical (global and local) circumstances and examining its contribution to our “new understanding” of the Chinese intellectual development of the last century. He identifies Kang's contribution to the reconceptualization of “religion” and its relation to the newborn political sphere (as separated from family, education, and culture) as a privileged viewpoint to assess the relevance of his intellectual experience.

Wang Hui wrote the preface to Zhang's study, and indeed the two authors share an evaluation of Kang's philosophy as a reaction to the “fragmentation of the Dao over the world” (道术已为天下裂) manifested throughout the political and intellectual crisis of the Qing dynasty. In those dramatic years, the closed and centripetal spiraling circularity of the imperial era was replaced by the open and centrifugal trajectory of progress; the holistic society, in which no borders were conceptualized between State and society, individual and community, culture and power, was broken into groups that came to see the country as a battlefield for hegemony. Against this backdrop, as Zhang writes, “Kang Youwei's efforts to establish Confucianism as the state religion, as well as the different types of political or ideological struggles he encountered, are complex and important political phenomena in modern China, and their implications require a deeper understanding” (康有为的立教与定孔教为国教的努力, 及其遇到的不同类型的政治或思想斗争, 作为现代中国复杂而重要的政治现象, 其含义需要更深入的认识).

Zhang's book is structured into seven chapters and a conclusion, thematically arranged as almost autonomous essays that refract the content and context of Kang's religious project from different perspectives:

Kang's lifelong effort to build a Confucian Church is framed by Zhang in the first chapter as an attempt to reconstruct a holistic polity, a way to bridge the new fractures that had deprived the imperial system of its universality – and the intellectual class of China of its cosmopolitan legitimacy. The author convincingly uses the triangular relationship between politics, culture, and the people to shed light on Kang's contribution to the re-filling of the political authorities with a refreshed cultural legitimacy, given the rise of a “professionalized” class of intellectuals and the dismantling of the venerable examination system in 1905 – a decision that deprived an entire class of its legitimacy and its “horizons of expectations” to join the imperial bureaucracy. This deep transformation makes Kang's mission to connect Confucianism into the State Church a much more significant and urgent initiative than the manifestation of a banal nostalgia for Classicism. In his elitist approach, Kang – as Zhang argues – considered the people (in the aforementioned triangle) as a field to “conquer” rather than as agents, and this makes his effort difficult, and ultimately divergent from, the revolutionary path that was about to open in the same years. It also helps understand why, at a time of post-revolutionary reformism launched by the CCP, the “top-down” view of change proposed by Kang and analytically illuminated by Zhang appears as an interesting and even palatable precedent.

Kang's remodeling of Confucius as the “Master of the Earth” (大地教主) is addressed in the second chapter. Here, Zhang focuses on the philosopher's ambition to systematize 2000 years of Chinese thought (a “unifying process” in the cultural sphere, mirroring his unifying ambitions at the political level) and, at the same time, placing it in a global context, making it a world religion with a competitive advantage over Western faiths. Here, Zhang touches on the dominant question of Kang's relation to the so-called Western philosophy. Convincingly, he affirms that Kang tried to demonstrate the presence of “traces” or “shadows” (影子) of Euro-American thought in the Chinese tradition – otherwise, the possibility of providing the common lens of “universal axioms” (公理) would have been negated from the beginning – but at the same time acknowledged that the transformation of those ideas into political models and practices had been obstructed by the official discourse up to that moment. The importance of the New Text School in this regard, both in Kang's individual formation and in the “global history” of Chinese thought, is highlighted by Zhang in the following chapter, which pays particular attention to the role of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and the response that the late Ming transformations provoked among the class of the *Ru* 儒, who had to face both the challenges posed by new “foreign” ideas and – more importantly – the tensions aroused by the deep social and economic transformations of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The fourth chapter deals with the pivotal experience of Kang's exile after the 1898 failure and the role that the rise of revolutionary thought in China and among overseas Chinese played in the adjustment of the philosopher's agenda. The project of a Confucian religion as the basis for political action and party organization is framed by Zhang in a fascinating analysis of Kang's conceptual articulations and re-articulations in the decade between 1901 and 1911. During this period, the thinker tried to bend his progressive Confucianism to accommodate the revolutionary fervors of many of his supporters without losing the original ambition of building a “global principle” or denying his support for constitutional monarchy. The focus on Kang's interpretation of “hegemonism” (霸权主义) in connection with the rise of Western imperialism and the debate on “civilization” is particularly interesting here.

The utopian phase of Kang's thought is the protagonist of Chapter Five, where Zhang looks at the *Datongshu* 大同书 (Book of Great Concord) in connection with his research on the Confucian Church project and concludes that these two elements in the philosopher's agenda (a religious/political organization inspired by Confucius, and the realization of a global utopia in which the spread and institutionalization of universal principles will dissolve religious organizations and make peaceful coexistence possible) could not stand together. Therefore, Zhang argues, Kang could not publish the full text of his utopian masterpiece while at the same time promoting the Confucian Church: the full scope of his prophetic description of a “universal order” would have undermined the “cultural” foundation of a religious organization based on the (reinterpreted) Chinese tradition. This is a stimulating reading of the relationship between Kang's utopia and his organizational efforts, which integrates the theory of the “three ages of the world” (三世) with a more specific understanding of the philosopher's social and political dimensions and of the influence that the expectations of his supporters played in adapting his thought to history – as anticipated in the previous chapter.

In the last part of the book, Zhang Xiang makes the global and comparative framework of his study of the “Datong religion” even clearer. “At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” he writes, “Europe experienced a major transformation in which religious struggles over the state gradually faded away and party politics gradually emerged. After more and more European countries established the principle of separation of Church and State and dismantled state religions, the political field underwent important changes. The church was no longer the main participant in national political struggles, and social divisions were no longer mainly expressed in the form of religious differences, as political struggles were mainly carried out in the form of party competition” (19世纪末20世纪初, 欧洲经历了围绕国教问题的宗教斗争逐渐淡出, 政党政治逐渐兴起重大转型。越来越多的欧洲国家确立政教分离原则, 不再设立国教之后, 政治场域发生了重要的变化, 教会不再是国家政治斗争的主要参与者, 社会分裂不再主要以宗教分歧的形式表达, 分裂的社会各方越来越多地以政党的形式组织起来).

However, in these party competitions characterizing the “new” era of mass mobilization – especially during Kang's lifetime – the clergy became very active in social movements and electoral politics, and political parties led by members of the Church appeared in countries such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Equally noteworthy is the fact that between World War I and World War II, the Catholic Church supported both authoritarian regimes and movements that opposed these regimes. Again, quoting directly from Zhang's conclusions: “Judging from Kang Youwei's failure to promote the establishment of a state religion and the development of religious movements such as the Confucianist and Buddhist movements, the interaction between religious politics and party politics in China in the early 20th century was in sync with Europe. The key reason for the failure of the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion was that the rulers, inspired by the European and American principle of separation of Church and State to avoid religious disputes, opposed and prevented a state religion from becoming another political center that competes with the others” (康有为为推动立教失败以及孔教运动、佛教运动等宗教运动的持续发展来看, 20世纪初中国的宗教政治与政党政治的互动, 与欧洲有同步之处。定孔教为国教失败的关键原因, 自然是执政者基于避免教争的欧美“政教分离”原则, 反对和避免国教成为分庭抗礼的另一政治中心).

In this sense, Kang's campaign for the promotion of a Confucian Church (as unsuccessful as his effort to reform the Qing monarchy from the inside) should be interpreted as an act of radical innovation rather than as a pre-modern attempt at merging again dogma and power. Zhang's problematization of Kang's religious policies is a mature and refined act of historical contextualization, and the author's profound understanding of the local and global dynamics of modern intellectual history prevents any explicit political manipulation of the philosopher's agenda for internal use – differently from other recent uses of Kang's conceptualizations for openly revivalist operations.[6]

And yet, following Wang Hui's example, Zhang bridges the debate from the late Qing to the contemporary challenges of China by stressing the “implications” of Kang's theories and historical initiatives in relation to unresolved tensions between China and the modern world. Again, quoting from the last pages of the book: “Kang insisted on the establishment of Confucianism and the establishment of a state religion, but had no intention of returning to the traditional pattern of harmony between politics and religion.” Rather, he moved from a pattern of a “doctrine” integrated within “politics” to a conceptualization of the “doctrine” that educates and leads “politics” in its new organizational forms. In fact, “if the Taiping Uprising initiated the process of exploring the use of ‘doctrine’ to lead ‘politics’ in modern China, and Kang Youwei's establishment of religion and promotion of the establishment of a national religion was the second wave of exploration, then the New Culture Movement was the third wave of exploration,” Zhang notes. This makes Kang's theory and project of establishing a Confucian religion based on the principle of Great Concord (*Datong lijiao* 大同立教) still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and consequently makes Zhang's book a welcome and precious contribution to historicizing the relationship between state and official doctrine in China, but also a stimulating suggestion to approach the negotiation between “cultural unification” and “globalization” – as a salient part of “China's unfinished agenda” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

[1] See among the others: Jin Guantao 金观涛 & Liu Qifeng 刘青峰, *Guannianshi yanjiu* 观念史研究 [Studies in the history of concepts], (Beijing: Falu chubanshe, 2009). See among the others: Kai Vogelsang, “Chinese ‘Society’. History of a Troublesome Concept”, *Oriens Extremus* 51 (2012), pp. 155–192; Zhang Fengyang 张凤阳 & Sun Jiang 孙江, *Yazhou jinianshi yanjiu* 亚洲纪念史研究 [Researches on Asian conceptual history], (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2013); Dominic Sachsenmaier, “Chinesische Begriffe der Gesellschaft zwischen der ausgehenden Qing-Zeit und den 1920er Jahren”, *Moving the social* 52 (2014), pp. 199–221; Marc A. Matten, *Imagining a Postnational World: Hegemony and Space in Modern China*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[2] Federico Brusadelli, “A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei's Communism, Mao Zedong's Classicism and the ‘Accommodating Look’ of the Marxist Li Zehou”, *Asian Studies* 5.1 (2017), pp. 103–122.

[3] Wang Hui 汪晖, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* 现代中国思想的兴起, (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2004).

[4] Gan Yang, et al., “Kang Youwei and Institutional Confucianism”[1], Translated by David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream blog*: <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/kang-youwei-and-institutional-confucianism.html> (accessed Jan. 22, 2024).

[5] Quoted in Nicola Spakowski, “Dreaming a Future for China”, *Modern China* 45.1 (2019), pp. 91–122, here p. 103.

[6] See, for example, Gan Chunsong, who uses Kang's theory of Datong to prove that the Chinese discourse developed in an anti-hegemonic direction when compared to the West while also looking at his Confucian Church proposal as an interesting anticipation in the redefinition of a national essence in the post-revolutionary period. Gan Chunsong 干春松, *Baojiao liguo: Kang Youwei de xiandai fanjue* 保教立国：康有为的现代方略 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2015).



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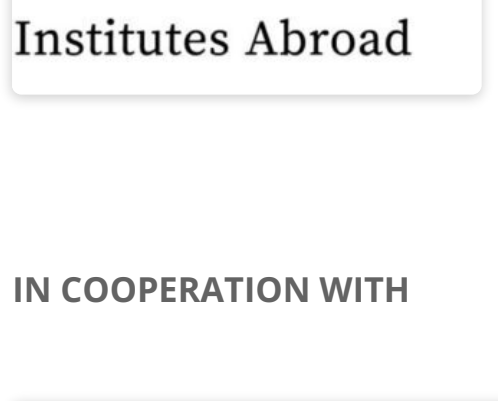
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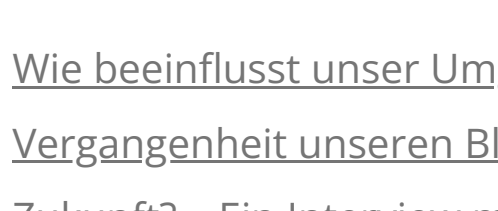
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