Kang Youwei’s Establishment of the Three Ages Theory

Zhichong GONG*

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an emerging trend in research on Kang Youwei to return to a focus on the civilizational outlook of China, and in particular to return to an understanding of Kang Youwei from the perspective of the Confucian tradition. This article attempts to further advance this trend and analyse a major element of Kang Youwei’s thought, namely his “Three Ages Theory” (sanshi shuo 三世說). Specifically, it will focus on Kang’s combination of ideas of Confucius as a reformer (Kongzi gaizhi 孔子改制) and the idea that humans are born from Heaven (ren wei tian sheng 人為天生), doctrines that he inherited from the Confucian tradition but then transformed. His understanding of Confucius as a reformer was the theoretical starting point of the evolutionary theory of the Three Ages, because it determined the basic form of the Three Ages Theory. The idea that humans are born from Heaven supplemented the Three Ages Theory and served as the value foundation for the construction of “Great Unity” (datong 大同). A major significance of Kang Youwei’s thought is that it acts as a bridge to understanding the Confucian tradition, but it also serves as an example of a Confucian response to the challenges of the modern world.

Keywords: Kong Youwei, Three Ages Theory, Confucius as a Reformer, Humans are born from Heaven

Kang Youweijeva vzpostavitev teorije treh dob

Izvleček

V zadnjih letih je v proučevanju Kang Youweija opazen trend, ki se ponovno osredotoča na civilizacijski pogled na Kitajsko, zlasti pa na ponovno razumevanje Kang Youweija s perspektive konfucijanske tradicije. Ta članek sledi temu trendu in globlje analizira pomemben vidik njegove misli, imenovane »teorija treh dob« (sanshi shuo 三世說). Osredotoča se predvsem na Kangovo povezavo med Konfucijem kot reformatorju (Kongzi gaizhi 孔子改制) in idejo, da Nebo ustvari človeka (ren wei tian sheng 人為天生), torej naukoma, ki ju je prevzel iz konfucijanske tradicije in ju nato preoblikoval.

Razumevanje Konfucija kot reformatorja je služilo kot teoretično izhodišče za oblikovanje osnovne strukture za njegovo teorijo »treh dob«. Ideja, da Nebo ustvari človeka, je to

* Zhichong GONG, Philosophy Faculty, Renmin University of China.
Email address: gongzhichong@163.com
Emerging Trends in Research on Kang Youwei’s Ideas

Kang Youwei (1858‒1927) is a highly influential figure in the history of late 19th and early 20th century China. This influence is not limited to his significant involvement in the politics of the late Qing and Republican eras, but also to the profound influence of his ideas on the intellectual trends and historical movements of the 20th century. This points to a deeper phenomenon: at every important turning point in history since his death, Kang Youwei has been rediscovered and discussed. He was a topic of heated debate in the early days of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, shortly after the opening up and reform era, and remains so in this century, with different themes emphasized in each period. Kang Youwei, it seems, has not yet become a “historical figure”—he is still one of us. This continuing influence is of course due to the breadth and complexity of his ideas, which can provide inspiration and support to people of different intellectual positions. Indeed, it is in this manner that he has influenced modern thinking, as his ideas opened up numerous potential directions of development which were then explored in depth. However, this complexity has also created a fundamental difficulty in studying Kang Youwei’s ideas, as it can be difficult to grasp their sources, nature, and structure. For example, in the early days of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, there was a focus on discussing the nature of his political reforms and his concept of the Great Unity (datong 大同). In the 1980s, the emphasis was on the organization and analysis of his thoughts and their sources. However, due to the intellectual and methodological limitations of their eras, neither of these two stages reached a credible consensus. Without returning to Kang Youwei’s own concerns and positions, it is impossible to comprehensively grasp his ideological system. It was not until this century that the study of Kang Youwei’s thought took a new turn in the humanities, as the nature, structure, and influence of civilizational traditions were re-examined. Increasingly, researchers have come to understand and evaluate Kang Youwei from China’s own perspective, especially from the Confucian tradition.

1 Translated by Oliver Hargrave.
The first person to make progress in this direction was Gan Chunsong 干春松. His 2002 monograph Zhiduhua Rujia jiqi jieti 制度化儒家及其解體 (Institutionalized Confucianism and Its Disintegration) examined the relationship between the political and the religious in traditional China through the lens of the institutionalization of Confucianism (Rujia de zhiduhua 儒家的制度化) and the Confucianization of institutions (zhidu de Rujiahua 制度的儒家化). He placed Kang Youwei in the context of the disintegration of institutionalized Confucianism, and saw Kang’s controversial Confucian Religion Association (Kongjiao hui 孔教會) as his solution to rebuilding the foundations of the Confucian system. This accurately grasps Kang’s fundamental concern: how to separate Confucianism from the old political system while maintaining its institutional form to sustain its vitality.

Gan continued to study Kang Youwei and published two works, Baojiao liguo: Kang Youwei de xiandai fanglüe 保教立國: 康有為的現代方略 (Protecting the Religion and Founding a Nation: Kang Youwei’s Modern Strategy (Gan 2015a)) and Kang Youwei yu Rujia de xinshi 康有為與儒學的「新世」 (Kang Youwei and the “New Era” of Confucianism (Gan 2015b)). The former focuses on how Kang Youwei set about to preserve Confucian civilization and build a modern China in the face of the impact of modernity. Gan is clear on this point: “The most important reason why Kang Youwei has been rediscovered is his thinking on how China should find its own path when entering the modern system of nation-states” (Gan 2015a, 327).

The latter work discusses Kang’s modern reforms and considers him as the starting point and lynchpin of modern Confucianism. The reasons for this can be summarized in five points: first, Kang’s thinking is grounded in the Chinese tradition and its inherent issues; second, his thinking is based on the Confucian classical tradition; third, his programme has a holistic nature, combining individual cultivation and the socio-political order; fourth, his programme embodies a combination of Confucian universalism and local positions—his thought is problem-centred and transcends political positions and doctrinaire ideologies (Gan 2015b, 174‒76). It can be said that this research is forward-looking in terms of its updating of perspectives and paradigms.

Another scholar who has deeply researched Kang Youwei’s thought is Zeng Yi 曾亦 (Zeng 2010), whose work Gonghe yu junzhu: Kang Youwei wanqi zhengzhbi sixiang yanjiu 共和與君主：康有為晚期政治思想研究 (Republic and Monarchy: A Study of Kang Youwei’s Late Political Thought) explores Kang’s political thought after the Xinhai Revolution. This phase of his thought has attracted less attention from scholars because it is not very “glorious” from the perspective of
revolutionary history. The theme of Kang’s late political thought is a reflection on the Republican system, and his series of political insights and sharp criticisms are based on the holistic judgment of the Three Ages Theory. Therefore, Zeng Yi first analysed and evaluated Kang Youwei’s reconstruction of the Three Ages Theory based on the Gongyang Learning (*Gongyang xue* 公羊學). On this basis, Zeng is able to consistently understand and grasp Kang’s conception of the relationship between religion and politics, the relationship between family and state, and the relationship between the central government and local politics, as well as his various insights into the chaos of the Republic. As such, Zeng presented Kang’s later conservative image of deep concern and far-reaching thinking. It is worth noting that this research is subordinate to Zeng Yi’s larger research framework, which is grounded in the New Text classical studies (*Jinwen jingxue* 今文經學) tradition, so both Kang’s strengths and his weaknesses receive attention.

Moreover, the problems of Confucian Religion (*Kongjiao* 孔教) have been another focus of research on Kang Youwei’s thought at this time, with Tang Wen-ming’s *Fujiao zai kuan: Kang Youwei Kongjiao sixiang shenlun* 敷教在宽：康有為孔教思想申論 (*The Broadening of the Dissemination of Religion: An Essay on Kang Youwei’s Confucian Thought*) being a notable monograph on this theme (Tang 2012). Tang focuses on the connection between Kang Youwei’s early thought and the Learning of Principle (*lixue*),

2 and discusses the role of Kang’s *jiaoxue tongyi* 教學通義 (*General Discourse on Teaching*) in the development of Confucian ideology. It highlights Kang’s efforts to use Confucian thought and institution building to reconfigure Confucian education for both intellectuals and the common people, emphasizing the significance of this endeavour for the construction of modern China as a nation-state.

These works are important examples of recent studies of Kang Youwei’s thought. They focus less on Kang Youwei’s class position, Westernizing reforms, or utopian fantasies, and more on the image of Kang as the defender of Confucianism and China, but at the same time its reformer and even challenger. In Kang’s case, reform was needed to better preserve China and Confucianism—and served to rejuvenate both. As a result, the relationship between Kang’s thought and the Confucian tradition, especially the inheritance and contributions of the New Text classical studies (*Jinwen jingxue* 今文經學) tradition, has received increasing attention.

This is clearly in line with the historical reality. Kang repeatedly made it clear that his intention was to expound on the doctrine of Confucius, and even though his

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2 Translator’s note: Learning of Principle is an intellectual movement most associated with the Song dynasty literatus Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130‒1200). The Chinese term *lixue* is one of the many commonly translated as “Neo-Confucianism” in English.
ideas were new, they were still based on the New Text classical studies' (Jinwen jingxue 今文經學) tradition of Confucius as the “Uncrowned King” (suwang 素王), as a reformer (gaizhi 改制), and the concepts of the “Three Ages” (sanshi 三世), “Humans are born from Heaven” (ren wei tian sheng 人為天生), “Great Unity” (datong 大同), and “Moderate Prosperity” (xiaokang 小康), among others, not to mention that Kang’s most important works were all studies of the classics and the commentarial tradition. As a representative figure of the late Qing revolution in New Text classical studies (Jinwen jingxue 今文經學), Kang Youwei’s Xin xue weijing kao 新學偽經考 (The Forged Classics of the Wang Mang Era), Kongzi gaizhi kao 孔子改制考 (Confucius as a Reformer (2010b)), his research on the Spring and Autumn Annals as well as the results of his work on the theories of the Three Ages and Great Unity all had a huge influence on the history of Chinese classical studies and the history of modern thought. Kang Youwei’s thought is thus mainly a rediscovery and creative reconstruction of the New Text classical studies' (Jinwen jingxue 今文經學) tradition. This is certainly the consensus among researchers, and the direction that further in-depth studies should take.

Indeed, some scholars have already made good progress in this direction. Zeng Yi and Guo Xiaodong 郭曉東 studied Kang Youwei’s Chunqiu Dong shi xue 春秋董氏学 (Dong Zhongshu’s Studies of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Guo 2018; Zeng 2021)), while Ma Yongkang 馬永康 studied Kang’s post-1900 “New Studies on the Four Books” (xin sishu xue 新四書學), namely his Zhongyong zhu 中庸注 (Commentary on the Zhongyong), Liyun zhu 禮運注 (Commentary on the ‘Evolution of Ritual’ Chapter of the Book of Rites), Mengzi wei 孟子微 (The Esoteric Meanings of the Mencius), and Lunyu zhu 論語注 (Commentary on the Analects) (Ma 2008; 2010; 2016; 2019). Zhang Xiang 張翔 has focused on Kang Youwei’s doctrine of “reform” and that of the Great Unity, and noted a change the predated his later position on the classics (Zhang 2014; 2015a; 2015b). Chen Bisheng 陳壁生 (2017) examined Kang Youwei’s systematic reform of the classics by taking his Chunqiu bixue dayi weiyan kao 春秋筆削大義微言考 (The Profound Principles of the Writing and Corrections of the Spring and Autumn Annals) as an example, while Pi Mimi’s Pi Mimi’s “Chongjian Rujia de pubian zhuyi: Kang Youwei jingxue yanjiu 重建儒家的普遍主義: 康有為的經學研究 (Reconstructing Confucian Universalism: Research on Kang Youwei’s Classical Studies)” is the first doctoral dissertation to study Kang Youwei’s classical thought and writings. And the list goes on.

The true framework of Kang Youwei’s ideological system is the theory of the Three Ages. When he said that by the time he was 30 years old he had already...
achieved his great scholarly achievements, he was referring to the establishment of the theory of Confucius as a reformer, which laid down the basic form and nature of the Three Ages Theory. Thereafter, Kang’s writings on the classics and political petitions, his optimism in the early period and his move to conservatism after 1900 were all incorporated into the framework of the evolution of the Three Ages. Moreover, his most idealistic work, *Datong shu* 大同書 (*The Book of the Great Unity* (2010a)), is also a product of the Three Ages Theory, residing at the terminus on the path of the evolution of the Three Ages. Previously, Gan Chunsong 干春松, Zeng Yi 曾亦, Chen Bisheng 陳壁生 and others studied the nature and function of the Three Ages Theory in the context of the New Text classical studies (*Jinwen jingxue* 今文經學). On the basis of their views, this paper focuses on how he inherited and reconstructed the two concepts of “Confucius as a reformer” and the idea that humans are born from Heaven in order to construct the theory of the Three Ages. This paper thus attempts to further advance the recent research trend.

**Confucius as a Reformer: The Starting Point of the Theory of the Three Ages**

The issue of Confucius as a reformer is a pivotal one in Chinese classical studies, and is related to the identity and status of Confucius himself. Historically, classical studies have taken three forms: the New Text School, the Old Text School, and Song Learning, and they all have fundamental differences regarding the identity of Confucius. During the cultural crisis of the late Qing dynasty, Kang Youwei revisited the issue of Confucius as a reformer, not only analysing the dispute over New and Old Texts, but also carving a new image of Confucius from it. This became the starting point of his thinking, and also led him to a very different answer to that given by the New Text tradition.

3 “By the year 1885, my studies were already greatly set in place, and would not progress further” (至乙酉之年而學大定, 不復有進矣 (Kang 2007, 237)). “[Kang] Youwei often said, ‘My studies were complete by the age of 30, afterwards no progress was made, and nor was there need to progress’” (有為常言：吾學三十歲已成，此後不復有進，亦不必求進) (Liang 1998, 90).

4 The main resource that Kang Youwei drew on in developing his thought was the New Text classical studies (*Jinwen jingxue* 今文經學), as while he cared for the whole of the classical tradition he denied the authenticity of the Old Text classical studies (*Guwen jingxue* 古文經學). Moreover, his thought also went on to influence the classical tradition. As such, this paper makes a distinction in terminology, using the term “the New Text classical studies” to refer to the direct source of his ideas, and the term “the classical tradition” to refer to the influence of his thought.

5 Translator’s note: Song Learning (*Songxue* 宋學) is another term that is often translated as “Neo-Confucianism” in English.
In classical studies, no matter how one answers the question of whether or not Confucius was a reformer, the issue itself unfolds in a common context: that of the tradition of the Sage King (shengwang 聖王). However, the arrival of modernity saw the collapse of both the traditions of the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) and the Sage King, and thus Kang Youwei could easily accept the idea that Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹 were “like the tribal headmen of Yunnan and Guizhou today” (Kang 2010c, 17). The traditional Sage King was reduced to being the tribal leader of early human society, which led to the value of the Six Classics being in doubt. In order to overcome this difficulty, Kang Youwei attributed the “authorship” of the Six Classics to Confucius alone, and the glories of the Five Emperors and Three Kings that appeared in the Six Classics were merely the “ancient pretext” (tuogu 托古) of Confucius.

Therefore, Kang Youwei’s conception of the reforming Confucius fits the narrative of civilizational history in the modern era, and completely separates the Six Classics from the tradition of the Sage Kings, placing them into the era of uncultivated barbarism. But he nevertheless insists on Confucius as the last bastion to defend the value of the Six Classics, seeing his reform of these as the beginning of civilized life. This brought about a number of significant changes. First, the subject of the Six Classics became civilization. Kang wrote (2012b, 127):

蓋至孔子而肇制文明之法, 垂之後世, 乃為人道之始, 為文明之王。蓋孔子未生以前, 亂世野蠻, 不足為人道也。蓋人道進化以文明為率, 而孔子之道尤尚文明。

Confucius created a system of civilization, which was handed down to future generations and he became the first to take the human way (rendao), becoming the king of civilization. Before Confucius, the world was disordered and savage, and one could not take the human way. The evolution of the human way is toward civilization, which is why the Confucian way especially reveres civilization.

“Civilization” (wenming 文明) here is not being used in the classical sense, but rather with its modern meaning, that is, the “evolution” of human life toward a better form. Kang Youwei accepted the modern narrative of the history of civilization, but he made the reforming of the Six Classics by Confucius the pivot of this transition. He believed that human beings did not naturally emerge from barbarism into civilized life, but that they were guided by Confucius’ reforms.

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6 On page 4, Kang also says “In the time of Yu there were ten-thousand states, which if this is the case, then they certainly were [tribal] headmen” (禹時有萬國，其說確是，即土司也).
In volume nine of his *Confucius as a Reformer*, Kang Youwei cites “cap and costume (guanfu 冠服), the three years of mourning (sanniansang 三年喪), the greeting fiancée rite (qinying 親迎), the well-field system (jingtian 井田), the school (xuexiao 學校), and selection for posts (xuanju 選舉)”, among others, as typical examples of Confucius’ reforms (Kang 2010b, 191). However, these ritual systems have a long history in the classical tradition and are not regarded as being “reforms of the system” (gaizhi 改制). To take the three-year mourning period as an example, *The Book of Documents* (Shangshu 尚書) records that “Gaozong in his mourning hut did not speak for three years”, and when asked about this line by Zizhang, Confucius replies, “Not merely Gaozong, all the ancient people did so”. The “Questions on the Three Years” (sannianwen 三年問) section of the *Book of Rites* (Liji 禮記) states: “On this the one hundred kings agree, and the ancients and moderns are united.” From here we can see that the three-year mourning period was not presented as a reform by Confucius. However, Kang noticed that, from Confucius’ disciple Zaiwo to the Mohists outside the Confucian School, many questioned the necessity of the three-year mourning period (Kang 2010b, 208, 225, 227, 275). He thus asks: If the three-year mourning period is indeed a solid historical tradition, why were there still such doubts and dissent? Clearly this is an extreme form of scepticism.

In Kang’s view, the era before Confucius was one of benighted and barbaric pre-civilization. It lacked a tradition of Sage Kings and also lacked the three-year mourning period upon which “the one hundred kings agreed, and the ancients and moderns were united”, as well as the greeting fiancée rite, the well-field system, schools, and other ritual systems. As for Confucius’ “reforms of the system”, these were a reform of the system of “immemorial old customs” (taigu jiusu 太古舊俗), and not—as traditional belief has it—a reform of the system of the Five Emperors and Three Kings (Kang 2007, 2:24). This can also be said to be Confucius’ “creation of a system”. In ancient times, everything was wild and primitive, so there was no guidance on values and ideals in people’s lives. It was not until Confucius established systems such as the three years of mourning, the greeting fiancée rite, and criticizing hereditary ministers (jii shiqing 譏世卿) that the values of filiality between fathers and sons (fuzi qin’en 父子親恩), unity between husband and wife (fufu qiti 夫婦齊體), and the selection of the worthy and able (xuanxian yuneng 選賢與能) were established. In terms of values, Confucius created something out of nothing.8

7 Translator’s note: Gaozong is the posthumous title of the Shang king Wuding.
8 The author has another article on “Confucius as a Reformer” which explains this in more detail (Gong 2022, 62–69).
However, according to Kang Youwei the system was reformed by Confucius, marking a change from barbarism to civilization, and there must therefore have been a change in that system. But in fact the difference between the old system and customs of the ancient times and the system as reformed by Confucius is not significant. For example, during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, lords were all hereditary, and the reform of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was only extended to “criticizing hereditary ministers”, while the succession of the Son of Heaven and the vassal lords remained hereditary. According to Kang, this indicated that the reform of the system had not been completed, a problem rooted in the limitations of history.

The establishment of laws in the ancient times was initiated by the strong, as the strong always impose their will upon the weak. In the case of national laws, they were derived from military laws, where the authority of the generals and the obedience of the soldiers governed the country. This resulted in the hierarchy of a revered ruler, subservient officials, and enslaved commoners. As for family laws, they originated from clan systems, where the authority of the clan elders and the obedience of the younger generations governed the household. This led to the hierarchy of respected males, subordinate females, and obedient children. Even if there were sages, the establishment of laws had to consider the prevailing customs and circumstances of the time, such as the ruler being the mainstay for the subjects and the husband being the mainstay for the wife. Consequently, the ruler became more respected and arrogant while his subjects became more subservient and wretched. Similarly, the husband became more respected and wanton while the wife became more subservient and wretched. As these power propensities solidified over time and the oppressive system persisted, they eventually became regarded as the norm in terms of morality and justice. (Kang 2010a, 7–8)

As such, the ancient barbaric era was not a blank nothingness, but the hierarchy it formed was the historical background of Confucius’ reforms, and Confucius
had no choice but to compromise with it. This amounts to saying that Confucius’
document had a certain “historicity” (lishixing 历史性), or that the development of
Confucius’ doctrine was limited by (a barbaric) history.

Consequently, Kang Youwei’s theory of Confucius as a reformer encompasses not
only a general value judgment on Confucius and the Six Classics as the begin-
nong of humanity’s transition from barbarism to civilization, as it also explores the
specific institutions within the Six Classics, which contain numerous hierarchical
relationships centred around the Three Mainstays (sangang 三纲). Kang Youwei
believes that these are historical remnants from the barbaric era that Confucius
could not completely eradicate, as the inertia of history cannot be suddenly over-
turned, and thus many old historical accounts and rituals were retained within
the Six Classics. In fact, this represents a deepening of the theory of Confucius as
a reformer after it was integrated into the classical system, aiming to explain the
relationship between the institutions of the Six Classics and Confucius’ reforms.
It led to a unique way of interpreting the Six Classics, commonly known as “one
divides into two” (yi fen wei er 一分為二). To take the example of the relationship
between husband and wife:

蓋太古蒙昧之世有一妻數夫者，亦有一夫數妻者，而男子尤強，
故一夫數妻之制行之最久。孔子一時不能削之，故為之定制。天
子娶十二女，諸侯九女，大夫三女，士一妻一妾，庶人匹夫匹
婦。....蓋一夫多妻之世，至國主尤為無限，孔子定此已為減之
又減，亦不得已之制，欲其易行者也。然男女同為天生之人類，
本無高下，特以男強女弱，積久相凌。然孔子制昏禮首曰下達，
又曰妻者齊也，義本平等。

In the ancient benighted era, there existed practices of one wife having
multiple husbands and one husband having multiple wives. However,
men were generally stronger, so the practice of one husband having mul-
tiple wives prevailed the longest. Confucius was unable to immediate-
ly abolish this practice, so he established regulations for it. The Son of
Heaven could marry twelve women, vassal lords could marry nine wom-
en, high-ranking officials could marry three women, low-ranking no-
bles (shi) could have one wife and one concubine, and commoners were
couples of one husband and one wife. [...] In an era of one husband and
multiple wives, the rulers of the states especially indulged in unlimited
marriages. Confucius tried to lessen it through regulation, but it was a

9 Translator’s note: The Three Mainstays (or guide ropes) were the three defining hierarchical human
relationships in Confucian thought, consisting of the relationship between ruler and minister, fa-
thor and son, and husband and wife.
reform without alternative, and it was his aim to make it likely to be implemented. However, men and women are both human beings born from Heaven and inherently equal; there is no inherent superiority or inferiority between them. It is only due to the physical strength of men and the weakness of women that over time transgressions have accumulated. Confucius’ reform of marriage rituals emphasizes the use of a matchmaker to seek out a suitable woman (xiada) and also claim the equality of the wife, thus it embodies equality in principle. (Kang 2007, 6:78)

On the one hand, both the concepts of the husband as the mainstay of the wife (fu wei qi gang 夫為妻綱) and many wives for one husband (yi fu shu qi 一夫數妻) are remnants of barbaric history and should be rejected in terms of value, but historical trends cannot be changed abruptly, so the Six Classics are still dominated by such concepts, which is an unavoidable compromise with history. On the other hand, Confucius, through the matchmaker ritual (xiada 下達), the unity of husband and wife, and so on, demonstrated the equality of “men and women both humans born from Heaven” (男女同為天生之人類) which is the actual future direction of civilization. To put it in Kang’s terms, the former is the doctrine of “Moderate Prosperity”, and the latter is the doctrine of the Great Unity.

The so-called barbaric age of the ancient past, or the “Chaotic Age” (juluanshi 據亂世), should be overcome and transcended in value, but it also has in reality a “historical” body, becoming a force that hinders the evolution of civilization. Confucius reformed the system by injecting the spirit of civilization into the historical remnants of barbarism, which is synthesized into the doctrine of “Moderate Prosperity”. The true future of civilization lies in continuously overcoming the “body” of history with civilized values, ultimately achieving an utterly transformed civilization of Great Unity.

For this reason, Kang often said that Confucius “established the Three Ages in an era of chaos, thus while his regulations were numerous, his heart was focused on great peace (taiping 太平), which is the essence of his intentions” (Kang 2007, 6:3). Here, the “mind-body relationship” (shenxin guanxi 身心關係) of Confucius actually refers to the “mind-body relationship” of the Six Classics. Confucius, being situated in an era of chaos, gave rise to traditional history and rituals within the Six Classics. However, Confucius’ thoughts were aimed at achieving great peace, thus the ultimate spirit of reforming the Six Classics transcended the physical realm and represented the ideal of a harmonious world. The theory of Confucius as a reformer can be likened to a sharp blade named “civilization”.

10 In the magazine Buren, the word “intentions” (yisi 意思) was originally written “state of mind” (shensi 神思). See also Kang (2012b, 18).
Kang Youwei took up that knife and stuck it into the classical system, probing the cracks and gaps, and what “dropped to the ground like earth”\(^\text{11}\) was physical body of the system, which can be classified as remnants of the era of chaos. What was liberated from it was the spirit of civilization, which in turn blossomed into the doctrine of Great Unity.

Therefore, when Kang Youwei scrutinized each regulation of the classics through the lens of modern civilization, their meanings were reconstructed. Each regulation was divided into two aspects—a synthesis of barbarism and civilization. He further enriched these two aspects into different ideal types, imagining a civilizational order purely organized by certain values, thereby giving rise to the ascending stages of Moderate Prosperity and Great Unity, or Chaotic Age, Rising Peace (shengping 升平), and Great Peace. Strictly speaking, Kang Youwei reconstructed the significance and meaning of the classics through the theory of Confucius as a reformer and extended the process of construction into different ideal types, which can be seen as purely theoretical. The framework of the Chaotic Age, Rising Peace, Great Peace or Moderate Prosperity and Great Unity is primarily an analytic framework for political philosophy.

However, Kang Youwei’s original intention goes beyond this, and the substantive effect of this theory extends beyond it as well. The Three Ages Theory becomes a theory of historical evolution. All of this stems from the fact that Kang regards Confucius’ reform of the classics as the beginning of the history of civilization. As he repeatedly states:

太古、中古皆當亂世，爭殺無道，去禽獸不遠。孔子改制撥亂後，乃為人道，故以為人道之始也。……孔子以人世宜由草昧而日進於文明，故孔子日以進化為義，以文明為主。

The ancient and medieval world were both considered chaotic eras, filled with violence and lawlessness, little different from the realm of the birds and the beasts. Once Confucius carried out his reforms and swept away the chaos, then the human way could be taken, thus it was the establishment of the human way. ... Confucius believed that in the human world, it is natural for society to gradually progress from primitiveness to civilization. Thus, Confucius saw evolution as his guiding principle, and gave priority to civilization. (Kang 2007, 6:11)

This places Confucius in an important position within the narrative of modern civilizational history. Prior to Confucius, history was wild and barbarous, and

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11 Translator’s note: this is a reference to the story of the masterful Cook Ding from the Zhuangzi.
civilization originated in the legislative moment of Confucius’ reforms. After this, China entered a historical period marked by civilization. The framework of barbarism-civilization within the theory of Confucius as a reformer is not merely a framework for value judgments, it is also a fundamental coordinate in the history of civilization.

We can observe that this theory itself is an irreducible “process”. It provides concise answers to the questions of how civilization originates and develops, and in this sense it discusses “evolution”. Although the subsequent path of civilization can be divided into different stages, the driving force and direction throughout the entire process stem from Confucius’ reforms. Therefore, the meaning of “evolution” is “the entering into transformation by civilization” (進於文明之化), where “entering” (jin 进) carries the connotation of “those who first entered [into study]” (xianjin 先進) and “those who later entered [into study]” (houjin 後進) from the Analects, and “transformation” (hua 化) embodies the education (jiaohua 教化) significance of Confucianism. It is based on that original legislative moment where people first entered into the transformation by developing civilization out of barbarism, and the subsequent unfolding of the process depended on the continuous implementation of the originating driving force. Thus, in the Book of Great Unity we can see that Kang’s work begins each aspect of the construction of the Great Unity by retracing the history of civilization, returning to the moment of Confucius’ reforms, and showcasing Confucius’ civilizational judgment. If the Three Ages Theory represents a beam of light projected towards the future, its source of light is Confucius’ reforms, and the ultimate projection is the construction of the Great Unity. The path of the evolution of the Three Eras is the gradual realization of the direction and momentum set by Confucius’ reforms.

Therefore, Kang Youwei stated that the theory of the Three Eras encompasses Confucius’ doctrines, while the Six Classics were limited by the historical context of their chaotic era and are insufficient to fully embody Confucius’ spirit. However, it is precisely because it starts with the structure of a “process” that the subsequent path of the Three Eras has a clear historical nature. From the perspective of human evolution as a whole, although “Confucius’ reform and creation of the Six Classics” (孔子改製作六經) marked the first transition between ancient and modern in the history of human civilization, with significant foresight and spiritual power, it was still just a “transition” (guodu 過渡). The journey of evolution is a long one, and only through the comprehensive realization of the initial

12 “According to the Book of Changes, ‘Writing does not exhaust words, words do not exhaust meaning’. Those under Heaven who read Confucius’ writings well must know that the Six Classics are insufficient to reveal all of Confucius.” (《易》曰：‘書不盡言，言不盡意’，天下之善讀孔子書者，當知六經不足見孔子之全) (Kang 2012b, 63)
Zhichong GONG: Kang Youwei’s Establishment of the Three Ages Theory

plans can it be considered complete. Therefore, it requires continuous transitions. Each typified conception in the theory of the Three Eras represents a transition that sheds the body of Moderate Prosperity and realizes the spirit of the Great Unity. Theoretically, the theory of the Three Eras is not limited to just three eras, as Kang Youwei later envisioned nine eras and then even eighty-one (Kang 2012d, 222–23; 2007, 5:415–16). These repeated transitions between ancient and modern form a cohesive path of evolution. Each era, as a step in the evolutionary path, is designed for upward progression, and each advancement entails abandoning the previous step. Therefore, each era of the Three Eras is historical in nature. The theory of the Three Eras can only be considered as a historicized theory, making it a theory about how human history evolves.

As such, a significant consequence of the theory of historical evolution is the belief that it predicts the end of history. The era of Great Unity represents both the most perfect world and the endpoint of civilization. Since the endpoint is the fulfillment of its origins, it also means that when the era of Great Unity is fully realized, then the mission of Confucius, the Six Classics, and the theory of the Three Eras are also fulfilled. At the conclusion of the Book of Great Unity, Kang Youwei presents a scene that traditional Confucianism dared not imagine:

大同太平，則孔子之志也。至於是時，孔子三世之說已盡行，惟《易》之陰陽消息，可傳而不顯矣。蓋病已除矣，無所用藥，岸已登矣，筏亦當捨。

Great Unity and Great Peace, this is Confucius’ aspiration. When they arrive, Confucius’ theory of the Three Eras will have been fully realized, and only the secrets of yinyang in the Book of Changes will be passed down without being revealed. For the illness will have been cured, and there will be no need for medicine. The shore will be reached, and the raft can be abandoned. (Kang 2010a, 325)

According to the New Text School tradition, due to Confucius’ position as an “uncrowned king” who “possesses virtue but lacks office” (youde wuwei 有德無位), so his doctrine was not fully implemented in his own time. However, in Kang Youwei’s theory of Confucius as a reformer, Confucius is regarded as the “spiritual leader” (jiaozhu 教主) who shaped Chinese—and even human—civilization. Kang Youwei believed that the two-thousand years of Chinese history had proven the effectiveness of Confucius’ doctrine, providing historical confidence in its eventual complete realization. From a more Confucian standpoint, the history of human civilization is a process of progressing towards the ideals of Confucius. Once the era of Great Unity is realized, Kang Youwei believed,
“the shore will be reached, and the raft can be abandoned”—an outcome that Confucius himself would have welcomed.

Above, we have briefly explained how the theory of Confucius as a reformer shaped the basic form of the Three Ages Theory. However, the spiritual direction of the theory of Confucius as a reformer, which determines the substantive content of the evolutionary process of the Three Ages, is encapsulated by another doctrine known as the theory that “humans are born from Heaven”. It serves as the core principle in Kang Youwei’s construction of the society of Great Unity, and we will discuss it in detail in the following section.

“Humans are Born from Heaven”: The Value-Principle of the Construction of the Great Unity

For Kang Youwei, writing the Book of Great Unity was a way to carry on the “unfulfilled wishes” of Confucius regarding the Great Unity. Therefore, his annotations on the “Great Unity” section of the “Evolution of Ritual” serve as the key to unlocking the spirit of the Great Unity, which he personally provided. In his annotations, there is the following general discussion:

然人之恆言曰天下、國、家、身，此古昔之小道也。夫有國有家有己，则各有其界而自私之，其害公理而阻進化甚矣。惟天為生人之本，人人皆天所生而直隸焉，凡隸天之下者皆公之。故不獨不得立國界，以至強弱相爭，並不得有家界，以至親愛不廣，且不得有身界，以至貨力自為。故祇有天下為公，一切皆本公理而已。公者，人人如一之謂，無貴賤之分，無貧賤之等，無人種之殊，無男女之異。……此大同之道，太平之世行之。惟人人皆公，人人皆平，故能與人大同也。

Thus the common phrase ‘All Under Heaven, the nation, the family, the self’ reflects a lesser way of the ancients. When there is a nation, a family, and a self, then each has its boundaries and partialities, which greatly hinders the principles of the impartial and obstructs evolution. Only Heaven is the origin of human life, as everyone is born from Heaven and directly under Heaven’s jurisdiction and All Under Heaven belongs to the Impartial. Therefore, not only should there be no boundaries between nations, as they lead to conflicts between the strong and weak, but also there should be no boundaries between families, as they limit the breadth of affection. Furthermore, there should be no boundaries within oneself, as they lead to exploitation and self-interest. Thus, only All
Under Heaven can be impartial, with everything based on the principles of impartiality. “Impartial” (gong) means that all people are considered as equals, without distinctions of rank or status, without distinctions of wealth or poverty, without distinctions of race or ethnicity, and without distinctions of gender. This is the way of Great Unity, to be practiced in an era of Great Peace. When everyone is equal and on the same level, it becomes possible to achieve Great Unity with others. (Kang 2007, 5:555)

Traditionally, it was believed that the chapter on the Great Unity in the “Evolution of Ritual” (liyun 禮運) section of the Book of Rites was Confucius looking back on a simpler time. Therefore, its tone is generally descriptive, with only the phrase “All Under Heaven is impartial” (tianxia weigong 天下為公) carrying some conceptual significance. In other words, the “Evolution of Ritual” does not provide theoretical explanations or discuss how to live in an era where “All Under Heaven is impartial” is practiced, it simply depicts a historical period. However, for Kang Youwei the Great Unity represents the ambition of Confucius’ reform, and thus the “Evolution of Ritual” must possess theoretical space and power. Therefore, the introduction in the previous passage includes the fundamental principles of the doctrine of Great Unity. The key distinction between Moderate Prosperity and Great Unity lies in the establishment and dissolution of boundaries. Pursuing Great Unity requires breaking down the boundaries of nation, family, and self (status, wealth, ethnicity, gender) because “only Heaven is the origin of human life, as everyone is born directly under Heaven’s jurisdiction, and All Under Heaven belongs to the public”. In fact, his interpretation of “All Under Heaven is impartial” is completely new. Indeed, it can be said that he injected new vitality into the concept of “All Under Heaven is impartial” by introducing the concept of “Humans are born from Heaven”. The various innovations in the construction of Great Unity are all based on the concept that humans are born from Heaven. Now, let us briefly explore the origins and development of this doctrine.13

Kang Youwei had previously written a book titled Common Principles of Humanity (Renlei gongli 人類公理) which is highly likely the same as the Complete Book of True Principles and Public Laws (Shili gongfa quanshu 實理公法全書) that we see today. The first principle in this book is “Each person is allocated the original essence of Heaven and Earth to become human” (人各分天地之原質以為人) (Kang 2007, 1:148). However, this book was only a rough draft, and the nature and meaning of this principle is somewhat ambiguous. Kang Youwei properly

13 The author has another article on “Humans are Born from Heaven” which explains it in more detail.” (Gong 2018, 91‒97)
clarified the doctrine that humanity is born from Heaven during his time in the Thatched Hut of Ten-Thousand Trees (*wanmu caotang*萬木草堂) (Kang 2012c, 87, 136).

In fact, the doctrine that humanity is born from Heaven is a conceptual trend within the Confucianism of the Warring States and the Han dynasty. It originated from the traditional study of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and can be found scattered throughout works such as the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*孝經), the *Book of Rites*, the *Xunzi* (荀子), *Elder Dai’s Book of Rites* (*Da Dai liji*大戴禮記), and even in the *New Text classical studies* (*Jinwen jingxue*今文經學) and memorials of the Han dynasty. It was further elaborated as a philosophical system of the relationship between Heaven and humans by Dong Zhongshu. The doctrine that humanity is born from Heaven essentially deepens the existential aspect of Confucian humaneness, confirming the connection between humans and Heaven and affirming the connection between humans and humaneness (*ren*仁) (Gong 2021).

After his failed attempt at submitting a petition to the emperor in 1888, Kang Youwei spent several years disengaging from political affairs and focused on studying the classics. He returned to the traditional study of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and, particularly inspired by Dong Zhongshu, rediscovered the doctrine that humanity is born from Heaven. He keenly grasped the significant value of this doctrine and believed that “it was a unique creation that was part of Confucius’ oral discourse” (當是孔子口說特創此義) (Kang 2012a, 129). In the traditional study of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, “oral discourse” (*koushuo*口說) was equivalent to “subtle words” (*weiyan*微言), but for Kang Youwei it was in these “subtle words” that the spirit of the reformer Confucius was truly embodied. Thus, he further stated, “These are truly the subtle words of Confucius’ school, and they encompass all the meanings of Confucius” (此真孔門微言, 而為孔子一切義所出也) (Kang 2007, 6:60). The theory that humanity is born from Heaven became for Kang the fundamental purpose underlying all of Confucius’ teachings.

This belief, when combined with the theory of Confucius as a reformer, can be understood as stating that the fundamental principle of the spirit of Confucius’ reforms is that humanity is born from Heaven. Since the theory that humanity is born from Heaven is essentially a manifestation of Confucian humaneness, this proposition is essentially equivalent to another frequently stated proposition by Kang Youwei: that Confucius established his teachings based on humaneness.

14 Translator’s note: The Thatched Hut of Ten-Thousand Trees was a private college in Guangzhou where Kang Youwei taught from 1891 to 1898.
仁者，在天為生生之理，在人為博愛之德。……尸子曰：「孔子本仁。」此孔子立教之本。孟子謂：「道二，仁與不仁而已。」老子以天地為不仁，故自私；孔子以天地為仁，故博愛，立三世之法，望大道之行。

Humaneness is guided by the principle of nurturing life, which originates from Heaven, and resides in the virtue of universal love among people. [...] As Shizi said, ‘Confucius is fundamentally humane.’ This forms the base of the founding of Confucius’ teachings. Mencius stated, ‘There are only two ways: the humane and non-humane’. Laozi regarded Heaven and Earth as non-humane, and thus there is selfishness, while Confucius regarded Heaven and Earth as humane, and thus there is universal love. He established the doctrine of the Three Ages, anticipating the realization of the great way. (Kang 2012d, 208; 2012a, 154)

Kang Youwei’s basic judgment is accurate. The Confucian principle of humaneness is based on the recognition of the virtue of Heaven and Earth (tianshi zhi de 天地之德), and the doctrine that humans are born from Heaven vividly and deeply reflects this. However, the way in which Kang Youwei understands and applies the doctrine that humans are born from Heaven is fundamentally different from the tradition in New Text classical studies (Jinwen jingxue 今文經學). Although the tradition takes humaneness as its fundamental purpose and regards the illumination of Heaven and Earth as the basis of the proper order of ritual and music, humaneness and the concept of “Heaven-born” (tiansheng 天生) are not in opposition to other principles. In particular, the establishment of hierarchical relationships based on natural differences among people is a fundamental principle in creating order. The New Text classical studies (Jinwen jingxue 今文經學) tradition was not unaware of the potential gaps in this regard, but always sought to balance these relationships.

However, when Kang Youwei states that the fact that Confucius established his teachings based on humaneness (孔子立教本仁) and the idea that humans are born from Heaven are the source of “all the meaning of Confucius”, he embeds them within the theoretical framework of Confucius making reforms towards a future civilization. These theses became the most ideal principles of value and the goal of the evolution of human civilization. Under their influence, various hierarchical orders and ethical relationships that formed due to natural differences among humans lost their legitimacy. The latter includes many “boundaries” (jie 界) as Kang refers to them: national boundaries, family boundaries, personal boundaries (class, wealth, ethnicity, gender), and so on. Their tense opposition to the “humaneness” of humans being born from Heaven constitutes the core value that
distinguishes Kang Youwei’s vision of Moderate Prosperity from the Great Unity. Below, we will briefly provide examples to demonstrate this.

First, we will focus on the political sphere. The hierarchy of political order, with its distinctions of rank and status, is summarized in the Confucian tradition by the relationship of “ruler and minister” (junchen 君臣). Kang Youwei was from the beginning particularly concerned with the issue of hierarchy. Drawing from the New Text School tradition, he discovered an inclination towards equality, an innovation that he attributed to Confucius (Kang 2010a, 64). His theory of Confucius as a reformer implies that prior to Confucius society was characterized by a rigid division of ranks, but Confucius introduced a turn towards an egalitarian civilization. The basis for this is the concept that humanity is born from Heaven. Kang Youwei states, “All people are born from Heaven, they are equally the children of Heaven, sharing the same rounded head and square feet, belonging to the same human race, and thus achieving equality” (人皆天所生也，同為天之子，同此圓首方足之形，同在一種族之中，至平等也) (ibid., 59).

As for the hierarchy of rank and status, in Kang Youwei’s work it comes about as a result of human vices such as selfishness, deceit, and tyranny that have existed since ancient times, taking form over the long course of history. The “spiritual leaders” of various ancient civilizations, including Confucius, had no choice but to compromise with the already-existing hierarchical social structure. Unlike traditional Confucianism, which upholds the significance of hierarchical order, Kang Youwei, invoking the notions of barbarism and history, rashly undermines the significance of hierarchy in civilized life. As such, equality and hierarchy become the yardstick by which he measures civilization. As he says,

大抵愈野蠻則階級愈多，愈文明則階級愈少。

Generally speaking, the more barbaric a society, the more classes there are, while the more civilized a society, the fewer classes there are. (Kang 2010a, 60)

且以事勢言之，凡多為階級而人類不平者，人必愚而苦，國必弱而亡，如印度是已。凡掃盡階級，人類平等者，人必智而樂，國必盛而治，如美國是也。其他人民、國勢之愚智、苦樂、盛衰，皆視其人類平等不平等之多少分數為之。

Moreover, speaking in terms of practical situations, whenever there are many classes causing inequality among human beings, people are bound to be ignorant and suffer, and the country is bound to be weak and perish, as is the case with India. On the other hand, when classes are eradicated and
human beings are equal, people are bound to be intelligent and happy, and the country is bound to prosper and be well-governed, as is the case with the United States. The level of ignorance or intelligence, suffering or happiness, prosperity or decline in other peoples and nations is all determined by the degree of equality or inequality among their people. (Kang 2010a, 65)

Following this trend of the evolution of civilization, in volume two of his Book of Great Unity Kang Youwei provides a “Table of Human Equality and Evolution” (人類平等進化表). He envisioned a world of Great Unity with no monarch but with a democratic system and no distinction between nobility and commoners, and where the people elect officials who serve a limited term and then return to being ordinary citizens (Kang 2010a, 79‒80). In short, the Great Unity is a world where the masses are the political subjects, organizing and functioning autonomously—a world without a “ruler” (jun 君). The Great Unity dissolves “ruler and minister”, that symbol of the system of hierarchy and social rank, thus realizing universal political equality.

Furthermore, let us turn our attention to the domain of family and society. The relationship between men and women in the household is traditionally summarized by the Confucian concept of “husband-and-wife” (fufu 夫婦). Its core principle is that there is a distinction between the genders, and in practice this leads to women’s lives being confined to the household and makes them heavily dependent on their fathers, husbands, and sons. Kang Youwei, however, responded to this using the principle of humanity being born from Heaven:

人者天所生也，有是身體即有是權利，侵權者謂之侵天權，讓權者謂之失天職。男與女雖異形，其為天民而共受天權，一也。

Human are born from Heaven, and with their physical existence comes their inherent rights. Those who violate these rights are infringing upon heavenly rights, while those who relinquish their rights are failing in their heavenly duties. Although men and women have different physical forms, as heavenly people, they share the same entitlement to heavenly rights – this is unity. (Kang 2010a, 91)

女子為天生之人，即當同擔荷天下之事者也。性分所固有者，分於天之仁智，當施於人人；職分所當為者，既有人之心思，當任其事業。

Women are born from Heaven, and so should equally shoulder the responsibilities of All Under Heaven. The qualities inherent to their gender, bestowed upon them by the humaneness and wisdom of Heaven,
should be shared with all people. When duties are assigned to those who should do them, since women are humans with thoughts, they ought to be trusted with various tasks. (Kang 2010a, 106)

Kang Youwei acknowledges that there are differences between men and women in terms of physical abilities and temperament. However, he believes that these natural differences should not overshadow their equal qualifications as human beings. Since both men and women are equally human, they should enjoy the same happiness and possess an equal degree of freedom and independence. He argues that the hierarchical relationship of male superiority and female subordination has existed since ancient times, based on male physical advantages and the necessity of procreation. However, Confucius' reform of the classics introduced the greeting fiancée rite which signified the equality between men and women. In short, in early human society “nature” (ziran 自然) gave rise to the dominance of men and the subordination of women, but Confucius revealed the equality of men and women, since there were both “naturally” (tiansheng 天生) equal. The progress of civilization thus requires the complete and independent equality of men and women.

For this reason, Kang Youwei tentatively set out what marital relationships in the era of Great Unity would look like. Men and women would be completely equal in marriage, with complete freedom in forming and dissolving unions. He even proposed that marriage contracts should not be long-term to avoid creating dependency (Kang 2010a, 127‒30). In reality, however, this type of marital life lacks a shared purpose and substance, leaving only an empty form. Kang has only one purpose: to guarantee absolute individual independence and freedom. This, however, undermines the Confucian concept of the husband-and-wife relationship.

Kang Youwei clearly recognizes that an important reason for the establishment of the relationship between husband and wife is the “deep affection between father and son” (篤父子之親). Therefore, his dissolution of the husband-and-wife relationship also laid the groundwork for dissolving the relationship between father and son. Kang Youwei was not unaware that the relationship between father and son is a prerequisite for human existence, the most natural ethical relationship, and the foundation of human society’s procreation and survival. However, he also sees that making the family the foundation of society has various shortcomings. Firstly, within the family there are conflicts, troubles, and resentments that suppress individual desires. Furthermore, the societal impact of the family is a particular focus of his criticism. He sees that the limited love within the family is the root cause of social inequality, as when people only love their own relatives then all kinds of resources and wealth will not flow into other areas of society, and public affairs are destined to be weak, hindering the progress of civilization. Moreover, when people
only care about their relatives they will do anything for them, which leads to various evil deeds. Therefore, basing societal development solely on the family will limit society to a lower stage, and human nature will not be fully realized.

In sum, Kang Youwei’s criticism is not directed at the family itself but rather at a particular type of civilization. This is his reinterpreted conception of “[Ruling] All Under Heaven [Like] a Household” (jiatianxia 家天下), which refers to a civilization centred around the family that leads to a situation where there is only the household and no country (or politics), only private matters and no public affairs. To transcend this stage, it is necessary to dissolve the foundational relationship between father and son and enter a civilized order where everyone is subordinated to “natural” (tiansheng) public values. He writes:

康有為曰：孔子曰: 人非人能為, 人皆天所生也, 故人人皆直隸於天而獨立。政府者, 人人所共設也, 公立政府當公養人而公教之、公恤之。......故必天下為公, 而後可至於太平大同也。

Kang Youwei said: ‘Confucius said: A human is not able to be produced by a human. Humans are all born from Heaven. Thus, people are directly subject to Heaven alone. Governments are established by people, and a public government should provide for and educate the people, and care for their welfare ...' Therefore, it is necessary for the world to be governed impartially before we can achieve Great Peace and Great Unity.’ (Kang 2010a, 157‒58)

For this reason, he designed a comprehensive public system to replace the functions of the family and to take on the responsibility for life, aging, sickness, and death (ibid., 156‒201). He hoped that through this a new civilizational order would arise where a new meaning of “All Under Heaven is impartial” could be established.

This article has, in brief, demonstrated how Kang Youwei used the idea that humans are born from Heaven to dissolve the three ethical relationships of ruler and minister, husband and wife, and father and son, as well as three major aspects of human life: politics, gender, and the family. However, these three relationships are the most cherished parts of the Confucian political and ethical tradition, known as the “Three Mainstays”. In this sense, Kang Youwei’s ideal of the Great Unity, constructed based on the principle that humans are born from Heaven, represents a profound breakthrough in the Confucian tradition.

For example, even his contemporary Liao Ping (1852‒1932), who shared Kang’s progressive stance, sharply criticized the era of Great Unity depicted in the “Evolution of Ritual” for retaining a monarch (Liao 2015, 11:835). Moreover, the
statement “women have their [husband’s] family” (nü you gui 女有歸) that appears in the “Evolution of Ritual” suggests their subordination to the male household, so Kang Youwei had to change this to “women have prominence” (nü you kui 女有巋) to emphasize female independence (Kang 2007, 5:555).

Furthermore, the line “Do not only treat your kin as kin, do not only treat your children as your children” (不獨親其親, 不獨子其子) in the “Evolution of Ritual” suggests that individuals could expand their love to others while still having a family. Kang Youwei understood this as the elimination of familial attachments in order to achieve selflessness, which was a daring interpretation. Therefore, although he claimed that his construction of the Great Unity was expounding on the spirit of Confucius’ reform, his ideal of the Great Unity was constructed after placing the concept that humans are born from Heaven within it, and so was far removed from the original “Evolution of Ritual” itself, and it greatly exceeded the ideal scope of the Confucian tradition.

However, we should not simply conclude that Kang Youwei is not a Confucian, a recurring claim since his appearance on the stage of modern history which has proven to be unhelpful in understanding his ideas. We must first grasp his fundamental ambition, which is to demonstrate Confucian universalism in the face of the modern world, preserving China’s cultural status and revitalizing it. In terms of this stance and its historical influence, Kang Youwei can be considered to be a pioneer who expanded the theoretical vision of Confucianism and responded to the modern challenges his era faced.

Conclusion: Kang Youwei’s Reinterpretation of Classical Studies and Its Modern Challenges

Although this article has emphasized the significance of Kang Youwei’s theory of the Three Ages, it has also recognized the difficulties and shortcomings inherent in it. Therefore, we do not consider it as a definitive answer to any of the questions raised, but rather as a bridge to understanding the Confucian tradition, especially the tradition of classical studies, and as a response to contemporary challenges.

In summing up, first let us discuss the significance of Kang Youwei’s understanding of the classical studies tradition. His theory of the Three Ages is built upon

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15 Translator’s note: Kang has changed the character gui, which here refers to women “returning” to their husband’s household after marriage, to the similar-looking character kui, which is a word that refers to the protruding qualities of mountains. Indeed, the only difference in the characters gui and kui is that the latter has the semantic component for “mountain” at the top.
two fundamental theories: the reform by a spiritual leader, and the concept that humans are born from Heaven. They both are ancient theories that had long been obscured in the history of classical studies, but due to Kang’s adherence to that tradition they were rediscovered and further developed into stronger and more thorough forms.

Fundamentally, the intent behind the traditional view of Confucius as a reformer is to emphasize for later generations the eternal value and significance of the Five Classics, with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* being the pivotal text. This theory was a product of classical studies, but had not yet entered into history. Since the establishment of the Erudites of the Five Classics (*wujing boshi* 五經博士) by Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝, classical studies began to exert its power in shaping civilization, and some have said that at this point classical studies entered the history of civilization. In a sense, the theory of Confucius as a reformer had fulfilled its mission and gradually faded from the intellectual stage. However, in modern times, figures like Kang Youwei and other scholars of classical studies recognized that the true crisis of the civilizational change of modernity lay in the separation between classical studies and the history of civilization, and that perhaps classical studies could no longer continue to have an impact on Chinese civilization. It was thus for this reason that Kang Youwei revived the theory of Confucius as a reformer, in order to defend the civilizational significance of classical studies.

In this sense, it is not unreasonable for him to define “civilization” as the fundamental principle of the Six Classics. The concept of civilization not only aptly encapsulates the profound significance of classical studies in the last two thousand years of China’s history, but it is also a central topic in the modern world where civilizations coexist and compete. Only by addressing how classical studies have shaped the history of civilization and can lead us to a better civilization in the future, can classical studies overcome the danger of being separated from the history of civilization and maintain the continuity of the Chinese civilizational tradition. This is the profound and far-sighted thinking behind Kang Youwei’s construction of his theory of the Three Ages.

Next, let us look again at his theory that humans are born from Heaven. In unearthing the theory that humans are born from Heaven, and fully developing its conceptual power, Kang Youwei has made a significant contribution. This unique ancient theory serves as a space for the expression of numerous precious virtues and values within Confucianism, and its influence is profound. By examining the dimensions of the idea that humans are born from Heaven and the natural differences between individuals, we can uncover many fundamental tensions in human life and use it as an analytical framework to understand the various institutional designs in classical
studies. Kang Youwei, through a process of “ideologization” (zhuyi hua 主義化), constructed a symmetrical portrayal of Moderate Prosperity and Great Unity that can serve as an ideal model, demonstrating its theoretical significance.

Let us look at the issue from another perspective. Being thrust into the modern world was a fate that China just had to accept. Confucianism and classical studies can only respond to the various challenges of modernity though a swift adjustment of mindset and by having a clear understanding of those challenges. Compared to many conservatives, Kang Youwei was sufficiently clear-minded and insightful in this regard, and his fundamental understanding of the modern world is something that later generations cannot ignore.

Firstly, he recognized that modernity is represents the disenchantment of the world. As a result, the revered historical accounts of the Sage Kings preserved in the Six Classics have lost their status as models of civilization. The continuing nostalgia of Confucians for the virtues of the illustrious Five Emperors and the rituals of the flourishing Three Dynasties is an anachronistic sentiment. From his portrayal of Yao, Shun, and Yu as local chieftains to his critique of the antiquated nature of the Six Classics, what Kang Youwei said was indeed startling and continues to be difficult for people to accept. However, this demonstrates his frank confrontation with modernity.

Moreover, in the modern world people believe that civilization has evolved away from the eras of barbarism and ignorance. One cannot but accept this belief, but it carries a hidden danger: if we simply adopt the narrative of modern civilizational history then the entire Chinese cultural tradition becomes a mere validation or puzzle piece in world history, and the continuity with that cultural tradition becomes severed. So, how can we relate China’s own narrative within this framework? This fundamentally requires an interpretation of civilization in the Chinese context, and the answers must be sought within the Confucian classics that shaped Chinese civilization. After the decline of the historical accounts of the Sage Kings, Confucius, the last author of the Six Classics, stands as the sole answer to assume this significant cultural responsibility. Only by taking Confucius’ reform of the Six Classics as the beginning of civilization can China’s civilizational identity be maintained, which opens up the discussion of civilizational history starting from Confucian classics. Therefore, to a large extent, this is not even about personal sentiments towards Confucius, but is rather a necessity to safeguard China’s cultural tradition in the face of the challenges of the times.

Furthermore, in a modern world characterized by the coexistence of multiple civilizations, the dominant position held by the West, with its entirely different way of life and civilizational order compared to China, poses a significant challenge to
China’s traditional standards of civilization. On the other hand, China itself is undergoing a transition from an ancient empire and traditional society to a modern nation and society, necessitating guidance on what constitutes a better civilization. Therefore, the modern mission of classical studies is to provide a comprehensive explanation and evaluation of issues such as the existence of other civilizations, China’s position in the world, and its own future path. In essence, it is about providing a universal interpretation of world history. For Kang Youwei, the challenges of the modern world revolve around the relationship between civilization and history, and constructing a narrative of civilization history is the most direct way to respond to these challenges. Of course, this is not without flaws or drawbacks, as Kang Youwei’s pursuit of an extreme and thorough approach turns it into a theory of historical evolution, with profound and far-reaching consequences.

In fact, the real legacy left by Kang Youwei is, in each concrete elaboration, the way he fully demonstrated his understanding of the modes of traditional Chinese civilization and modernity. He posed questions, expressed doubts, and attempted to provide answers that future generations can learn from. As we are still living in essentially the same world today and the task of carrying on the tradition of civilization is not yet complete, we need to continuously challenge each discussion and discourse raised by Kang Youwei. His significance has not yet come to an end.

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