A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei's Communism, Mao Zedong's Classicism and the "Accommodating Look" of the Marxist Li Zehou

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Abstract

In the *Datong Shu* the Confucianist philosopher Kang Youwei (1858–1927) attempted to describe in an utopian fashion the end of history, as consisting of the abolition of private property, the institution of a world government, the disruption of marriage and the eradication of social differences. With his book, Kang somehow anticipated Mao's use of the traditional ideal of *datong* as a revolutionary concept. In my paper, I will discuss a debate on the *Datong Shu* from the 1950's, when a young Li Zehou (1930–) defended Kang's utopianism from the accusations of 'conservatism' moved by orthodox Marxists. Li's "benevolent look" on Kang may serve as an interesting anticipation of his later efforts to synthesize Marxist and Confucianism.

Keywords: Kang Youwei, Li Zehou, Confucianism, Chinese Utopianism, Chinese Marxism

Zgodba dveh utopij: komunizem Kanga Youweija, klasicizem Maota Zedonga in »prilagodljiv pogled« marksista Lija Zehouja

Izvleček

V delu *Datong Shu* konfucijanski filozof Kang Youwei (1858–1927) poskuša na utopičen način opisati konec zgodovine, ki jo sestavljajo odprava zasebne lastnine, institucije svetovne vlade, razkol v zakonu in izkoreninjenost družbenih razlik. S svojo knjigo Kang nekako predvideva Maotovo uporabo tradicionalnega ideala *datong* kot revolucionarnega koncepta. V svojem članku avtor razpravlja o debati o *datong shuju* iz leta 1950, ko je mladi Li Zehou (1930–) zagovarjal Kangov utopizem pred obtožbami »konservativizma«, ki so ga začeli ortodoksni marksisti. Lijev »dobrohotni pogled« na Kanga lahko služi kot zanimivo pričakovanje in trud, da bi sintetiziral marksizem in konfucianizem.

Ključne besede: Kang Youwei, Li Zehou, konfucianizem, kitajski utopizem, kitajski marksizem

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Introduction

In 1955 an article by a gifted Marxist intellectual in his twenties appeared in the journal *Wenshizhe* 文史哲. The author, Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–)—still to become an influential and controversial thinker in contemporary China¹—intervened in a learned debate involving a prominent figure in the intellectual *milieu* of late imperial and early Republican China: Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927). A member of the New Text School, author of *Confucius as a Reformer* (1897), proponent of the failed 1898 Hundred Days' Reform, founder of the Baohuanghui—a political association devoted to the transformation of the Guangxu emperor into a constitutional monarch—and father of the Confucian National Church, defender of the imperial system against the Republicans and the Nationalists, even after 1911, Kang was unsuccessful enough to be exiled by the “conservatives” as a “progressive” and to be later dismissed by the revolutionaries as a “conservative” himself. In sum, he tried to transform Classicism (*ru*, generally translated as Confucianism)² into a progressive and evolutionary ideology capable of serving China in the search for her own “modernity”.³ The focus of Li's attention, then, was not on Kang's unsuccessful Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, his constitutional monarchism nor in his subsequent anti-Republican activities that aimed to restore the Manchu dynasty on the throne. Instead, the article—entitled “On Kang Youwei's Book of Great Concord” (论康有为的大同书)—in one of the most “personal”, esoteric and maybe unexpected pieces of Kang's production: the *Datongshu* 大同书, or *Book of Great Concord*, the product of a lifelong meditation, begun in the late 1880's, but published posthumously in 1935, being “too advanced for the times” in the author's own opinion.⁴

There, Kang's interpretation of human history as a march towards a brighter future—a linear and progressive trajectory, not cyclic, nor retrograde, which Kang

1 An interesting, although very short, summary of Li's thought can be found in Ding 2002.

2 The traditional translation of *ru* 儒 into “Confucianism” has transformed a philosophical approach to the study, preservation (and hopefully re-creation) of the Past—of which Confucius was with no doubt the founding father—into a sort of “religion” or “cult” of Confucius himself. The latter—which is termed in Chinese *Kongjiao* 孔教—will be attempted much later, in response to contact with Western religions such as Christianity (and Kang Youwei himself, incidentally, will play a role in the organization of a Confucian Church). For these reasons, I have opted for a more literal translation of *Ru* into “Classicism”, highlighting its philosophical, philological and historiographical perspective.

3 For a comprehensive survey of Kang's thought, see Hsiao 1975. A more recent analysis of his political agenda in the wider framework of late Qing and early Republican China is in Zarrow 2012.

4 This is what Kang explicitly says in an essay of 1917, *Gonghe Pingyi* 共和评议 (*Impartial Words on Republicanism*), in which he tries to solve the apparent contradiction between his views on democracy and Republicanism expressed in his “private” philosophical agenda (*Datongshu* included) on the one hand and on the public stage of Chinese political life on the other.

had inherited from the New Text School of Confucianism, and more specifically from the esoteric Classicism of the Gongyang Commentary to the *Chunqiu*—was presented in its fullness. In a nutshell, the *Datongshu* describes the long march of mankind from division to unity. Generally considered as a “utopia”, the book is rather a world history describing the past, present and future of humanity: as if moved by an inevitable mechanism, Kang claims, the world will evolve through the Three Ages (derived from the Confucian *Book of Rites*) from Chaos to Equality and Peace, finally attaining the state of Datong, or Great Concord.⁵ States will erase their borders and boundaries and a one-world government will grow to a global scale the ideal model of the Zhou. No races, no languages, no nations nor armies, no difference between men and women nor discrimination against homosexuals, no poverty nor exploitation. No private interest (*si* 私) nor private property: everything will be public and common (*gong* 公) again.

Generally labeled as a “Chinese utopia”, Kang’s work actually defies any strict categorization. Defining its literary genre is also a more complex task than one may expect: besides the fascinating and indeed “utopian” descriptions of the “world of tomorrow”, which make up a large part of the book, it also includes significant pieces of historical, political, religious and scientific literature. In fact, if we wish to adopt Michel Foucault’s definition of Utopias as “sites with no real place”, “sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society”, which “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case are fundamentally unreal spaces”, (Foucault 1984) then the *Datongshu* transcends this category. The world prophesied by Kang is in fact our own world, not another, nor an allegoric realm to be used as a philosophical model. And the Age of Concord is not presented as an ideal stage of development placed *outside* of history, but as the natural conclusion of the very same historical dynamics which are at work in the present. In Kang’s book there is no break between the survey of the past and the anticipation of the future. In fact, there is no description of another space, but only of another time in this same space as ours. Indeed, its utopian components notwithstanding, we could paradoxically describe the main feature of the *Datongshu* as that of being a “global history of the future”.

However, what Li Zehou intended to point out in his article was less the nature of Kang’s prophecy than its social and economic aspects, mainly illustrated in Part Six of the *Datongshu*. The reason is in the self-evident Marxist flavour of Kang’s ideal of “commonality”, by which no private property will be allowed in the world of Supreme Equality: a Confucianist imagining a sort of Communist paradise

⁵ For a general summary of the *Datongshu*, see Thompson 1958 and Hsiao 1975, 419–513. On the origins of the term *datong* and on its political significance through the imperial era, see Pines 2012.

was clearly an interesting intellectual challenge for the Chinese *intelligentsia* of the 1950's, as will be argued later. First, Kang's Utopia will be presented in more detail, before proceeding with its interpretation by Li in the first years of the PRC.

Kang's Utopianism: All Public Under Heaven

As noted above, the trajectory of human development is clear enough, to Kang's eyes. By transforming an esoteric reading of Classicism into an almost Marxist progressive grid, the author acknowledges that in order to reach the "end of history" inequality must be eradicated. An ambitious task—in which the Confucian ideal of social balance is mixed with Buddhist aspirations, and imbued by some clear Western influences as well—which seems to be challenging even in the "modern" world:

People rely on farming, crafting, trading, but the ingenuity in earning money has been progressively refined, and now the reliance on industry has almost doubled. Until recently, each activity has been increasing its productivity and refining its techniques: common farmers, craftsmen and traders have been able to attend schools and farmers have been able to use new tools and fertilizers. Construction techniques, for example, have become remarkable: dirigibles sail the skies, railways shrink the distances, wireless communications cross the seas; in comparison with the "old" world, this is a "new" one indeed. The flow of trade is bigger, steamboats are spreading, goods are transported everywhere across the five continents and new enterprises which have never been achieved for centuries are now flourishing everywhere. Culture evolves day by day, and the past is left behind. As remarkable as these new techniques can be, they are just a superficial aspect of this new world, and they cannot prevent the deprivations suffered by common people, nor the lack of public mindedness. (Kang, *Datongshu*, 262).

This "lack of public mindedness" (a concern derived from the Confucian, and especially Mencian, ideal of *gong*) is identified by Kang as a massive obstacle to the evolutionary step towards the Great Concord. In an interesting reflection on the Confucian ideological sources of egalitarian views, scholar Gao Ruiquan 高瑞泉 has pointed out that Chinese Classicism—albeit moving in a social context that "cannot be defined as egalitarian" (Gao 2009, 120)—still provided some interesting examples of egalitarian concerns. Whereas the existence of a public examination system offered a striking difference with European feudalism, the traditional Confucian system of values, unquestionably based on agrarianism and on the

reduction of differences between rich and poor, with a consequent bias against an excess of private wealth, is not too distant from modern socialist blueprints. Gao himself widely quotes the *Datongshu* as a significant example of this link between the two apparently distant cultural constructs of *ru* and Communism (and he is just one among many scholars who have devoted their studies to these issues). For sure, Chinese Classicism does indeed appear more hierarchically structured than the fully-egalitarian Christianity—as argued by Jacques Gernet, among the others—and the “ritualist veneration” prescribed by the Classics is a clear manifestation of such a hierarchical vision of society, fully elaborated by Xunzi 荀子, Gao explains (Gao 2009, 122). We know that many of the most prominent figures in the history of Chinese Classicism, starting from the Master himself, albeit holding to the traditional “ritualistic” view of society, have underlined the importance of “balance” (and therefore, equality) in order to stabilize social order. Mencius, in particular, produced the well-known *minben* 民本 theory, by which the people have to be considered by the ruler as the bedrock of his power and the centre of his concerns. This care for the people’s needs (often undertaken for reasons of political stability, more than humanitarian concern), spurred the famous Classicist criticism of the fact that “rich people own pieces of land one after another, while the poor have land just enough to stick an awl into it, 富者地連阡陌, 貧者無立錐之地” (ibid., 12). So, the paradox underlined by Gao (and by many scholars investigating the Confucian echoes in Chinese socialism) is that Western liberalism, focusing on individual freedom and on the “equality of opportunities”, has generated an economic system in which the difference between rich and poor is acceptable, while Confucianists (both ancient and modern), although preaching “ritual hierarchies” have come to criticize the emergence of economic disparities. Even an adversary of Kang like Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1868–1936) used to state that the Chinese imperial system’s social structure was closer to any concept of equality than Western or Japanese constitutional states.⁶ It can be said that the binary opposition between hierarchism and egalitarianism is therefore mitigated by Confucian ethics into a complementary relationship. In other words, in the Confucian worldview, the “status inequality” prescribed through the ideal of *li* 禮 is balanced by the importance of *ren* 仁 and by the praise of a compassionate rule: the famous—and often overestimated—Confucian aversion to merchants’ profits is thus rooted in such a philosophical construction. And Kang’s utopia, preaching the abolition of private interests in any human field drawing on Confucian ideals, perfectly fits in this framework, as the next excerpt demonstrates. Here, more specifically, Kang straightforwardly addresses the possibility of selling and owning land as one of the major causes of inequality:

6 See Zhang Taiyan’s *Daiyi ranfou lun* 代議然否論, quoted in Gao 2009, 122.

Now, we shall talk about agriculture. In China people can buy and sell land. Since everyone can obtain a small piece of land, it is difficult to use machinery to farm. Not to mention the fact that there are no farming schools yet, there is no knowledge on how to improve production, the landlords usually do not farm themselves because many of them are tenants, the leasing rates are expensive, floods and droughts may occur; even if they work the entire year with callused hands and feet while the whole family double their efforts, farmers can't raise their livestock; (...) their suffering is hard to describe. If schools for farmers were established, if the species of crops were better known, if fertilizers were perfected and machines were used more diffusely, as in Europe or in America, yet the fields would still be too small making it difficult to attain a complete uniformity: large fields would go uncultivated while small ones would still cause fruitless efforts, and those who own no piece of land would still be used as farmers, suffering cold, wandering and ravenous like beggars. This is not characteristic of China: except for America, where a newly opened land provides large fields, almost every country cannot avoid such a situation. Confucius was worried about this, therefore elaborating the well-field system, but those who came after him did not care about people suffering cold and hunger. (...) As Confucius said, "Through equality there is no poverty": this is the highest principle. Later Confucians constantly developed the theory of equalizing the fields and developed the methods to divide each field (...) The theories on livelihood by the foreigner Mr. Fourier,⁷ prescribe that a big field of ten *li*—arranged as a well-field—may sustain one thousand people: his ideas are moved by universal empathy (*ren*), but they cannot be implemented. Then, when people start to sell and buy properties, having their own private properties, the distance between rich and poor is far from levelled, ultimately resulting in the lack of equality. (Kang, *Datongshu*, 262–3)

In the following section, Kang moves to enumerate in more detail some of the "evil" fruits of private property in different economic activities. As far as agriculture is concerned, Kang underlines that "in a private mode of production there

7 In the original text, Kang mentions "Mr. Fu, the Englishman"; however this is a clear reference to Charles Fourier (1772–1837), the French philosopher who inspired the creation of utopian socialist communities in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. Fourier's thought has many common points with Kang's: the evolutionary view of history, moving from Chaos to Harmony; the struggle for the abolition of private property; an egalitarian view of women, with a consequent denunciation of the traditional family and praise for sexual freedom. Among modern European thinkers, Fourier seems to be the closest to Kang's vision of social and historical development. For a survey of Fourier's utopianism, see Fourier 1971.

are those who cultivate a lot and those who cultivate less, so their productivity is uneven, as is their labor”, and “in addition to that, market fluctuations are variable, so it is difficult to predict sales and farmers cannot decide in advance what crop is more convenient to cultivate, consequently wasting their surplus”. If farmers cannot predict what will be needed, they cannot plan their production: “therefore, for the minority of them it is a matter of lack of planning and missed opportunities; for the majority, though, it means a reckless waste of products and labor”. Globalization, Kang anticipates, will make things even worse if it is not governed:

if we sum up all the farmers of the world, their numbers will grow a thousand times; if we sum up the missed opportunities of each single farmer, the waste of production and of labor of each single farmer, the result will be millions of wasted products, of missed opportunities and useless hours of labor, and hundreds of thousands of unused products and devalued tools. The solution lies in the “global planning” of any human activity, Kang prescribes, and in the will to stand firm into the ideal of *datong* (本於大同). (Kang, *Datongshu*, 265)

Commercial activities present the same problems (and solutions):

Since individuals run their own businesses, free to open their activity and to choose their employees, they cannot merge their activities, because it would be impossible to plan and foresee the needs of an entire population. If planning were possible, though, each shop would strengthen its profits, overcoming the incapacity to store a wide arrange of goods in advance to anticipate people’s requests, which now causes stored goods not to be requested, or requested goods not to be stored, with the result of over-capacity in some shops and under-capacity in others, as now happens to many people.

With over-supply on one side and under-capacity on the other, the same good’s price fluctuates: under-supply makes its price higher, while over-supply makes it cheaper: there may be clever individuals who get rich because of this, but more and more families lose their business. So people lose their money, productivity is uneven and human dignity is unequal. When people lose their business they bring poverty and suffering to their family, to the extent that they may even die and cause unhappiness to the world. But when there is over-supply of any kind of goods, their prolonged accumulation produces corruption: merchants have interest in keeping them and do not give them away lightheartedly, instead producing falsifications and selling them to people; there are laws

prohibiting this practice, yet they manage to escape any control. When this kind of corruption involves food and medicines it harms people's health and well-being; when it involves machinery, the dimensions of its destructive consequences are indescribable. Also those selling any other good, besides food, medicines and machinery, may be corrupted, cheating and harming people: aren't they like worms corroding the world and the attainment of the Supreme Equality? Even if governments could exert their control, avoiding the accumulation of surpluses, corrupt traders could simply discard their goods, causing, again, a reckless waste.

In the world of the Supreme Peace, all continents will be linked, the population will grow enormously, and the need for goods and tools will be vast. Uncountable human beings on one side, limited natural resources on the other; what we calculate today as the daily needs of an individual (for example: flour, meat and sugar daily consumption, or the quantity of iron, cotton, silk, leather, wood, bamboo, metal, stone, feathers, herbs, bones, drugs, colors and tools needed, and all the thousand life necessities) will exceed the capacity of the world to generate them and the capacity of men to produce them. So everything will have to be fixed in advance, corrupted people will have to be cast aside, the land will not be distributed to privates and the global rule, based on statistics, will consider making profit on other individuals as a mistaken policy, a stupid error! Describing the *Datong*, Confucius said: "It is hateful to waste accumulated goods, they must not be stored for oneself". (This is a quotation from the *Liji*) So, if traders all over the world started distributing the goods they have been accumulating for a long time, and if each one of them decided to give them back and make them available, according to the needs of people, would this not increase the health of citizens a thousand times? What could be more efficient than this, in fighting poverty? But it is impossible, unless we don't rule the market according to the way of the Great Concord. (Kang, *Datongshu*, 266–7)

Finally, Kang's prescription for equality emerges in the following section: in short, it involves global planning, centralization, redistribution, technocracy, and the abolition of any form of private property. Such a blueprint, and the vocabulary used to articulate it, might have indeed sounded familiar in the early years of Maoist rule over China:

Now, if we want to attain the Great Concord, first we have to overcome any form of private production. That's why agriculture, commerce and

industry must return to the public sphere. If all the fields of the world are managed as public property it will be impossible for anybody to own or purchase them. The central government will establish a Ministry of Agriculture in charge of all the cultivable pieces of land around the world, and each administrative level will establish its Department for Agriculture and supervise their division; its offices and branches will be established for every fixed amount of li. Each of these levels will install its officials. Students of agriculture will be examined by those offices and if they pass the exam they will be given a piece of land to be cultivated. The amount of cultivated land will vary according to the machinery developed at the time. They will be used for any kind of grains and plants and livestock and fishery. They will work and study in the same place; those who can't stand both activities will be substituted by someone else, because as the number of employees will increase, a new grade of perfection will be needed. So, as the population increases, the farming activity will flourish, more new territories will be opened up and techniques will be perfected. Every small administrative unit will routinely call a meeting of its agriculture officials to examine gains and losses; every year, it will communicate its revenues to the Central Ministry of Agricultural Affairs, which in turn will pass them to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. The Ministry will calculate the amount of daily supplies needed by the world population, in addition to those needed to repair the damage due to natural calamities; it will also consider the most suitable sites of production (among hills and swamps, coastal areas and deserts, fertile plains and dry zones) for any kind of crops, fruits, livestock and fishery; the Ministry will then compare the yearly data on land production provided by every administrative subdivision's rural bureau, providing a general estimate and communicating it back to the Ministry of Agriculture. The latter will check and ratify the decision; then, it will give to every subdivision its production quotas, passing down to the smallest unit's agricultural bureau the information on which plants, crops and animals must be grown or bred according to the geographical features of the place. Jiangnan is suitable for paddy rice, Hebei for wheat, Jiangsu and Zhejiang for mulberry, Sichuan for herbs, Guangdong for flowers and fruits, Siam and Annam and Myanmar for husked rice, northern Kouwai is good for animal farming, the coast for fishing, Shanxi for salt and coal, India for the five cereals, the islands of Nanyang for sugarcane, gems and pepper. Similarly, we can describe the most suitable products for any country of the world. (...) Any administrative unit will have an autonomous government and will establish a rural unit, under which rural bureaus will be established every ten

kilometers and, below these, farms will be established within every kilometer. They will distribute rice, wheat, cereal crops, fruits and vegetables, fisheries and cattle, and the work will be organized through directors, elders, vice-directors, members of the brigade, administrators, secretaries, officials and apprentices. Directors will supervise general activities, elders will manage the division of work, vice-directors will be their assistants, brigades will carry out their group activities, administrators will collect and store up goods, and secretaries will collect data and record them. Single farms will be charged with tilling and planting. Their extension will not be fixed in advance: as their techniques become more and more refined, as they open new roads and as the strength of their members increases, the communes will become larger. Rural units at each level will have an office supervising the quality of the soil, arranging human settlements according to a careful analysis of the distribution of mountains, plains, marshes, rivers, in order to avoid disparities in soil's fertility or in meteorological conditions. (Kang, *Datongshu*, 269–71)

In sum: no private property, but instead labor units, rural communes, central planning and redistribution. Kang's own agenda was not Communism at all, and he mentions it just once, but only to criticize Marx's "divisive" vision of history as moved by class struggle.⁸ As already pointed out, the philosophical background of Kang's utopianism is fully Confucian: the well-field system, the ideal of *gong* and the criticism of interests and capital accumulation, all seem to belong to the orthodox Classicism). And yet, is it so easy to dismiss such a grand dream of equality as a reactionary piece of writing? That's what some Communist critics had had to say about the *Datongshu* in the early 1950's and that's why Li Zehou decided to have his say on the issue.

Li Zehou: a Benevolent Look at Kang's Confucian Dream

Li's article was first of all an attempt to defend the utopianism of the *Datongshu* from the harshest critiques brought against Kang's thought by the PRC *intelligentsia*. Basing his argument on a careful reading of the aforementioned sections of the book, Li concludes that, all its limitations notwithstanding, the *Book of*

8 There is another interesting similarity between Kang and Li Zehou here. Even though "Li's philosophy is Marxist historical materialism through and through", he nevertheless "emphatically repudiates the Marxist social theory of class struggle, arguing that it has been proven wrong by the practice of many Marxist states and political parties", thus preferring "to style his philosophy 'post-Marxist', to highlight differences from the official Chinese version of Marxism" (Chan 2003, 109).

Great Concord is a generous attempt to overcome the social boundaries and inequalities of traditional and feudal China. At the beginning, though, Li provides the readers with a short survey on Chinese utopianism.

Before the diffusion of Marxism modern China had witnessed three main currents of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal thought. Accordingly, modern China had also witnessed and experienced three forms of socialist utopianism: the agrarian-socialist utopia of the Taiping Kingdom, Kang Youwei's bourgeois and liberal progressive utopia of *Datongshu*, and the Universal Welfare utopia of Sun Yatsen's petty-bourgeois revolutionary party. These three socialist idealisms appeared in succession and represent a historical phenomenon that is particularly significant in social terms. They appeared under different circumstances, in different situations and at different stages, each of them strongly expressing, through their unique aspects, the hatred of the Chinese people against an exploitative system and their aspiration for a better life, as well as depicting the objective challenges faced by Chinese society at the time and the actual trends of its economic development. A thorough research in modern Chinese socialist utopianism is therefore highly significant for the understanding of modern Chinese political and intellectual history, being also a magnificent page in the history of the contribution of the modern Chinese nation to the global advance of socialism. (Li 1955, 127)

After these introductory remarks, Li gets to one of the key points of his discourse, Kang's utopianism was "misread" in an erroneous understanding of the author's thought's chronological evolution. Surely, the presence of contradictory aspects in Kang's philosophy is undeniable, and his biography, fractured by his post-1898 exile, has proved to be an easy scheme for telling the story of a two-part life: the reformer and utopian, the conservative and socialist. And yet mentioning the complexity of the *Datongshu*'s creative process (begun in the late 1880's, almost completed in 1902, partially published in the 1910's, but then revised and published posthumously in 1935)⁹ is sufficient to understand how fragile such a clear-cut distinction may appear: Kang's production does not fit into a "before" and "after" 1898 pattern; rather, it looks like as a complex fabric constantly redefining Chinese identity as it faces "modernity".

Instead of dividing it chronologically, some scholars have elaborated a thematic separation in Kang's production. Such is the case with the contemporary scholar Bai Rui 白瑞, for example: in order to bypass Kang's apparent contradictions,

9 For a survey of the debate on the *Datongshu*'s composition, see Du 2002.

Bai has interpreted his philosophy as a sort of “two-level building” (Bai 2010). A “compromising” reformism—the actual effort to strengthen China—on the one hand, and an “utopistic” view of mankind’s future on the other. Hsiao’s approach (Hsiao 1975) is similar, and Kang himself hints at the distinction to be made between his public thoughts and most private beliefs. Anyway, these two spheres cannot be considered as two worlds apart, since they form a unique structure, unified by a global vision of historical evolution. Each stage sheds light on the other, with Kang somehow shifting from one level to the other over the decades without ever abandoning the comprehensive structure of his thought. Li Zehou’s analysis of Kang’s philosophy belongs to this interpretive direction:

Kang Youwei’s socialist utopia is well displayed and summarized in his *Datongshu*, which is therefore one of his most significant works. At the same time, though, the *Datongshu* is one of his most misread and misinterpreted works, and such a misunderstanding is clear throughout some of the essays which have recently dealt with this book. For example, someone has argued that the *Book of Great Concord* is a “utopian ideal of agrarian socialism” (Li Rui 李锐, “Comrade Mao Zedong’s early revolutionary movement” 毛泽东同志的初期革命活动 in 中国青年 1953); others have described Kang’s theory as “drifting away from the fundamentals of socialism” (Ji Wenfu 嵇文甫, “Drifting Theories” 游离了的学说 in 新史学通讯 June 1953); while some have credited Kang Youwei for trying to “give Chinese bourgeoisie a way of escape” (Fan Wenlan 范文澜, 中国近代史), and someone else has even described the purpose of Kang’s book as an attempt to “deceive and anesthetize the masses, in order to mitigate the revolutionary tide” (Mao Jianxun 毛健予, “Problems and solutions” 问题解答 in 新史学通讯 May 1953: p. 19). All these different views have generated a confused perception. Actually, the *Datongshu*, through the format of a utopia, expresses Kang’s early anti-feudal progressive and bourgeois ideal in its naked aspect: this is the book’s content and its specificity. So, if we say that Kang’s Hundred Days’ manifesto was the last effort to summarize the whole political program of the 19th century reformers, we can affirm that his *Datongshu* was the first attempt to provide reformism with a utopian aspiration. These two “faces” present a great distance and many contradictions (and this fact has puzzled many observers); however, at the same time they form a single unity. (Li 1955, 128)

Kang’s utopianism was a “generous” effort witnessing the limits of an “unripe class”: this strenuous jump into a “dreamed world”, consciously kept apart from

any public political agenda, somehow served as an indirect self-denunciation of the limits of a “national bourgeoisie” striving to reform its country (Li 1955, 135–6). In fact, reading the *Datongshu*’s chapters dealing with economics, production and society one can hardly deny an affinity with some Marxist concerns, except for their Confucian pedigree. And that is exactly what Li does: Kang expresses a materialistic view of human history, albeit drawing it from Classicism—the author argues, trying to intertwine the Mencian threads of the *Datongshu* with Marxism. This is made evident by the fact that Kang’s ideal of *datong* implies the full realization of *material* necessities, which are in his view inseparable from the *spiritual* importance of global equality. And his materialist approach to human progress was more Marxist than Kang would have ever admitted. Li notes this, as follows:

In his vehement attack against the sufferings caused by the old society, Kang unfolds his optimistic social project of Great Concord. The philosophical foundation of his blueprint is the bourgeois theory of human nature (“people desire to eliminate evil”): “The meaning of life is to avoid suffering and to attain happiness, there is no other way than this.” The *Datongshu* gets rid of the hypocritical exteriority of the feudalistic values, waving the banner of a simple and natural humanism, pointing at the righteousness and rationality of mankind’s “pursuit of happiness” and opposing the reactionary theory of asceticism and frugality, sponsored by the feudalistic landlords throughout the centuries.

Li defines Kang’s dream of Great Concord as “the highest grade of perfection of a material culture, where scientific progress is described as extremely developed and human life is described as extremely satisfactory and people have fulfilled their material (clothes, food, houses, transports) and spiritual (culture, education, entertainment) needs”. (Li 1955, 132) The implications are clear enough:

One cannot easily dismiss all this as a “capitalistic degeneration;” this wonderful image produced by a utopian illusion is—from an objective point of view—the beautiful and powerful ode sung by a new bourgeois class to a capitalistic society which was at that time attaining a high grade of industrialization. (...) Kang’s dream of a “leisure park world” and his belief in the inevitability of social progress resonates with the actual social aspirations of his time, and reflects the pursuit of happiness of wide popular masses, demonstrating how the structure of the world of *datong* lies on a material development: this is undoubtedly something that we can define as “correct” and “advanced”. And it also marks a fundamental

difference between Kang's *Datongshu* and the "System of Imperial Fields". Kang provides further evidence of his utopia's fundamentals when he recognizes that the public ownership of work and capital is at the basis of the Great Concord. And in the *Datongshu*, workers enjoy a high social position. (...) In the world of Great Concord, as Kang points out, there is no exploiting nor oppression, there are no "private interests" and "damaging the public good through personal interests is prohibited" (to cite the commentary to the *Liyun*). In his utopia, the power deriving from property (財產的所有權) is entirely owned by a public government (公政府). As Kang writes: "Every activity, agriculture, industry and commerce, will return to the public sphere;" "every piece of land in the world will be public;" "the infrastructure built by hundreds of workers will return to them: they cannot be private property of any individual;" "there cannot be private enterprises: every economic activity in the world will be controlled by the ministry of industry of the public government." Production and distribution will be planned: "There will be no surplus of products, no corruption nor waste." In Kang's words: "In the Age of Concord, the world will be public, there will be no classes, everybody will be equal." Clearly, this is a grand socialist utopia, which exceeds by far the structural constraints of the "feudalistic" oppressing class and clearly demonstrates the courage of the emerging bourgeoisie in its search for the truth and in its challenge to transcend its own interests. It is a mighty philosophical expression of the Chinese people's aversion to exploitation and its desire to break free from any form of oppression. Therefore, the *Datongshu* is endowed with a rich popular content. (ibid., 132–5)

It follows that, according to Li, Kang's utopianism "certainly does not 'corrupt the democratic consciousness of the masses, concealing a new form of oppression under the glittering veil of the pursuit of selfish desires', to use Lenin's words" nor does "the *Datongshu* contain such political implications, as demonstrated by the fact that Kang decided not to make it public." Rather, "the book marks an important step in the history of modern Chinese socialist idealism and it is far more advanced than the naive agrarian socialist utopianism of the Taiping rebellion" (ibid., 148–9).

Undeniably presenting itself as a socialist and people-oriented prophecy, the *Book of Great Concord* deserves more than a snubbing look by Marxist intellectuals, as Li argues in his concluding remarks:

In conclusion, the economic assumptions and basic principles of Kang's utopia can be described through the words used by Engels speaking of

Saint-Simon: “here we can see the far-reaching look of a man of talent”. Addressing the economic issues of *datong*, Kang acknowledged that the fulfillment of Great Concord can only be realized on the basis of a highly-developed material culture, in which the forces of production have been greatly empowered: only then, people will be able to get rid of poverty and enjoy happiness. He predicted that politics would soon start to gravitate around an economic issue: the regulation of production; and he expressed in a simple way the great principle that everyone ought to work. Of course, Kang is not as farsighted as Saint-Simon, who detected precisely the class struggle between work and capital in a capitalistic society, as well as the conflict of interests lying behind the existence of a private mode of production. Kang’s reformist utopia is, in this sense, more limited. (ibid., 136)

Li Zehou’s interest into Kang Youwei was not exhausted in 1955. Two years later, he produced another essay as a direct response to an article by Tang Zhidiao 汤志钧, an orthodox Marxist and scholar of Kang’s thought. Tang had dismissed the *Datongshu* as a reactionary work, and he also had linked it almost exclusively to Kang’s second life as an active anti-Republican, in order to attack the work. The dating of the *Book of Great Concord* thus became an important point in the discussion (as already hinted by the aforementioned reference by Li to the question of how to organize chronologically Kang’s production): Li, correctly, points out that Kang had drafted the first versions of the *Datongshu* in the 1880’s, and that his utopianism is inseparable from the rest of his political and philosophical production. Moreover, and this leads us to the bigger issue behind these comments on the *Datongshu*, Li criticizes Tang’s stern look at Kang and late Qing reformism as a whole as insubstantial. Again, a translation of Li’s very clear words on this point is provided here:

Mr. Tang Zhidiao’s paper *On Kang Youwei’s Book of Great Concord* (published this year on the first issue of *Philosophy of Cultural History*) moves some criticism on my previous essay *Discussion on Kang Youwei’s Book of Great Concord*, touching fundamental questions with regard to the evaluation of the *Datongshu*. In other words: is the *Datongshu* a fundamentally progressive or reactionary book? The point of divergence is that for Tang Zhidiao the philosophical foundation of Kang’s book is reactionary, serving as the theoretical basis for his late years’ activity of “lulling the masses”, “contrasting the revolution” and “defending monarchy to restore the Empire” (these are quotations from Tang’s article). I cannot agree with this view, since I am convinced that in its main content the *Datongshu*

basically expresses the progressive thought of young Kang, advocating for bourgeois democracy and liberalism. Now, I will briefly address some of Mr. Tang's remarks.

First of all, I consider Mr. Tang's methodology of research as absolutely inappropriate. He does not rely on any analysis of the *Datongshu*'s actual content, rather using a purely chronological examination of its dating as the point of departure for his discussion. The *Datongshu*—Tang argues—was “completed” in 1901–1902, during Kang's exile following the failure of the Hundred Days reform, a time when the emergence of revolutionaries spurred Kang's “reactionary” attitude: “He supported Guangxu, feared a popular uprising and wished to draw an ideal boundary: that's why he wrote the *Datongshu*”, Tang writes, and *consequently* the *Datongshu* is defined as reactionary. In the article there is no reference to the *Datongshu*'s contents, there are no observations nor concrete responses to my own analysis of those contents. There is no substantial research on the philosophical content of Kang's text nor of its specific connections to his contemporary social and historical situation: the author simply uses the philological examination of the *Datongshu*'s writing process as the only element in shaping his own judgment on the book's value. Honestly, any theory built on these premises is quite dangerous. (Li 1957, 149–50)

The debate on the composition of Kang's book's, then, is understood by Li as involving a more complex question than a simple issue of chronology: it indirectly requests a judgment on the whole of Kang's production and on the intentions behind his political action after the failure of the Hundred Days. Tang's version of the facts (the *Datongshu* was completed while Kang was already a “reactionary” fighting against the Republic) is used to discredit the entire purpose behind the author's utopianism, and he is thus unacceptable in Li's eyes.

Confucius and Marx: Meeting in the Land of Utopia?

Beneath the surface of this learned confrontation, then, a big question was looming: how immune was Maoism from China's Confucian heritage? Indeed, if the debate on the ideological roots of Maoism was *taboo* at that time, it is now far from closed, even in mainland China. Was Maoism pervaded by “unconscious Classicism”, as recently stated by some Chinese scholars (Xia and Du 2010)? Li seems to agree, while also suggesting that Kang Youwei might have been an unwitting Communist, given his materialist approach to the philosophy of history. More

easily, instead of using the excuse of “unconsciousness”, Kang’s and Mao’s utopias might be considered as being connected by some common concerns emerging at a time in which China was abandoning its old values without any new certainties at hand, and expressed through some common cultural tools. It may be easier to define the two utopias (Kang’s philosophical dream and Mao’s actual political experiment) as two responses to the very same challenges—blending the need for a strong and stable form of government on the one hand, and the search for a new set of universal values on the other—coming from two men who were influenced by the same Chinese cultural context. With all their self-evident differences, Mao and Kang’s roads seem unsurprisingly connected when moving towards utopianism. And Li’s eagerness in following them suggests much about his own philosophical trajectory.

In his studies of Kang’s *Datongshu*, as discussed in this paper, Li Zehou not only provides some interesting clues about the internal debate among Communist intellectuals on the relationship between “tradition” and “modernity,” but also anticipates the revival of interest in late Qing reformers that he and some of his fellow intellectuals would encourage in the decade stretching from the end of Maoism to the Tian’anmen protests in 1989, while bidding “farewell to revolution” (*gaobie geming* 告别革命).¹⁰

As far as Li’s own system of thought is concerned, the 1955 and 1957 essays supply a significant example of the author’s formative development. Although “Li’s philosophy was first developed in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and bears the hallmark of the intense intellectual ferment of that time” (Chan 2003, 110), the direction to which he eventually moved was already clear in the 1950’s.

Defined as a “post-Marxist anthropological ontology”, Li’s view tries to “combine the most important aspects of traditional Chinese philosophy with those of Western philosophy and to establish a methodology for the study of philosophy that embraces both Chinese and Western thought”, as recently summarized by a scholar of contemporary Chinese philosophy (Ding 2002). Li’s early interest in Kang’s elaborations on the concept of *datong* will certainly resonate in his more mature elaboration on the “philosophy of the future” which, to use John Ding’s words, aims at “overcoming tragic conflicts and dissensions between human beings and nature, society and individuals, emotion and reason, history and psychology, and ideal and reality” through an “analysis of the objective history of social development” (Ding 2002, 252). We could say that Kang’s philosophical “road map”—examining the global history of mankind, from chaos to concord—is not far from Li’s own philosophical purpose.

10 On Li’s intervention in the debate on *gaobie geming*, see Li and Liu 1999.

In fact, in Li's attempts at demolishing some of the fences erected by the supporters of Maoism (or Marxism in general) on one side and Chinese Classicism on the other, we can detect a sort of "accommodative" attitude. It is the same that, according to Jing Wang's definition of Li Zehou's general approach to tradition, is the pivot of the philosopher's intellectual production:

Li Zehou's double call for "constructing two civilizations" (the material and spiritual civilization) is symptomatic of his accommodative streak that always seeks to merge materialism and idealism in a continuum reminiscent of middle-of-the-road Confucian eclecticism. Therefore, instead of valuing Li Zehou's philosophy as a site of contestation, I suggest that we examine it as a site of conciliation where an ongoing process of ideological negotiation among historical materialism, idealism, and Confucian rationalism takes shape. Bearing in mind his penchant for the philosophy of the unity of Heaven and (hu)man, we should anticipate that Li Zehou's theoretical practice faithfully enacts the Confucianist instinct for reconciliation. The meeting of classical Marxist with reformist Confucian ideology thus sets the moral tenor of his philosophy of modernity. (Wang 1996, 94)

Such an attitude received harsh criticism from both the left and right; the former criticized "what they consider to be his pseudo-Marxism", while the latter condemned him "for degenerating into the dogmatism of outworn Marxism", with other less politicized critics considered "his theoretical frameworks to be a 'mixed stew of Marx, Kant and other philosophers or, at most, a 'creative imitation' of those figures" (Ding 2002, 257).

More importantly, we could say that these two pieces of Li's early production sound like a prologue to his later evolution towards a reconciliation between Marxism and *Ru*, with the collateral aspiration to demonstrate that the real roots of Maoism were in fact in the Classical tradition more than in Marx's thought (De Giorgi and Samarani 2005, 49). In this sense, Li's attention to the *Datongshu* as a (maybe unwitting) harmonization of Classicism and Marxism was not coincidental. In other words, Kang's utopianism might be considered to be in Li's mind as a proxy for his own attempt at keeping together the legacy of the Chinese past with the revolutionary aspirations of the twentieth century.

Not surprisingly, once the revolutionary frenzy was over Li Zehou was the first thinker to explicitly praise the Master in mainland China after 1949. In this sense, his earlier analysis of Kang's utopia as "unconsciously permeated" by Communism may be considered as an example of his youthful attempt at reconciling two universalisms (Confucian Classicism and Marxism), at least in the land of Utopia.

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