

Kang Youwei's Thoughts from The Book of the Great Unity

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Abstract: The Book of the Great Unity, written by Kang Youwei, expounds the idea of a 'cosmopolitan world' in which all people are equal, and its description of an ideal society is clear and profound. Kang Youwei's criticism of the existing social order and his aspiration for a world free of exploitation and oppression, as well as freedom and equality, fully reflected his careful consideration of the turbulent social reality at that time. His thoughts did not exist in isolation, but had their unique historical and cultural background and real-life context, including the background of the times, the experience and lessons of social reforms, as well as his personal life experiences, which profoundly influenced Kang Youwei's system of thought.

Keywords: Kang Youwei; Cosmopolitan World; Cosmopolitan Book

After the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, Kang Youwei went into exile in Japan, and then travelled to Europe and America, where he came into contact with the Western theories of idealistic socialism and social evolution. Between 1901 and 1902, he completed the writing of The Book of the Great Unity in India, but the book was not published in part until 1913 in the journal Intolerance, and the whole book was not finally published until 1930 by his student Qian Ding'an.

1. Philosophical Thoughts in The Book of the Great Unity

1.1. Cosmology and History

Kang Youwei made the Cosmos as a response to the changing situation of the national crisis in modern China, and his personal academic background of blending Confucianism, Buddhism, and Western learning also provided a solid foundation for the creation of the Cosmos. ^[1] In The Book of the Great Unity, Kang Youwei has a unique understanding of the origin of the universe. Kang Youwei summarised the traditional Chinese view of the universe, that is, there are three ancient speakers of the heavens: one is said to cover the heavens, two is said to declare the night, three is said to muddy the heavens, as well as the debate between these doctrines, arguing that 'China's ancient astronomy has not been refined by the making of a weapon has not been refined'. ^[2] Such a view is deeply influenced by Taoist thought, but also shows Kang Youwei's reform and innovation of traditional Confucianism. Kang Youwei's view of history is centred on the 'Three Worlds', which divides history into three stages, namely, the 'World of Chaos', the 'World of Peace' and the 'World of Peace'. 'This not only reveals the law of historical development, but also provides theoretical support for China's modernisation.

1.2. Ideology of Love and Compassion

Kang Youwei asserted that benevolence is the highest existence in the universe, and that all things in heaven and earth originate from benevolence. Thus, he declared: 'Benevolence is also electricity, ether, and all people have it as the sea of ten thousand transformations, the root of everything, and the source of everything.' ^[3] In The Book of the Great Unity, Kang Youwei elaborated on the idea of benevolence in depth. Benevolence is both the moral emotion between human beings and the care of human beings for all things in nature. According to Kang Youwei, benevolence is the fundamental principle of the harmonious coexistence of all things in the universe, and the moral cornerstone on which human society can be sustained. The connotations of benevolence include: the love of parent and child, the love of husband and wife, the love of brother, the love of friend, the love of ruler and subject, and the love of all things. ^[4] All of these loves are the embodiment of benevolence, which is the basic rule of human moral behaviour.

In The Book of the Great Unity, the idea of benevolence plays an extremely important role. The idea is not only the core of Kang Youwei's political philosophy, but also the theoretical foundation of his social reform.

2. Political Ideas in the Cosmos

2.1. Political Ideas

Kang Youwei also advocated the political concept of democracy in the Cosmos. He believed that democracy was an inevitable trend towards the modernisation of a country's political system. He advocated that the state should implement universal suffrage so that the people would have the right to choose their own representatives and participate in the decision-making of state affairs. This political philosophy was forward-looking in Chinese society at that time and played a positive role in later political development.

Kang Youwei was a thinker and practitioner who sought a balance between tradition and modern political change. Kang Youwei once said of himself, 'My servant has presided over the constitutional monarchy since the Hundred Days of the Past, and the republic of the Imaginary Monarch since the Hundred Days of the Past; in bright words, there has been no change.'^[5] He claimed that since the Hundred Days' Reform, he had been committed to promoting constitutional monarchy, and after the Xinhai Revolution, he changed his stance to supporting a republic of virtual monarchs, and his stance was always the same.

2.2. The Construction of a Cosmopolitan Society

In *The Book of the Great Unity*, Kang Youwei put forward the idea of an ideal society without class divisions. He argued that the existence of classes led to social inequality and that true equality could only be realised when classes were eliminated. He advocated the gradual elimination of class differences through such measures as reforming education, upgrading the quality of nationals and implementing public ownership of wealth, with the ultimate goal of achieving a classless society. This conception was highly idealistic at that time and had a certain influence on later socialist thinking.

3. Economic Ideas in the Cosmos

3.1. Criticism of Traditional Economic Concepts

In his work *The Book of the Great Unity*, Kang Youwei made a profound criticism of the traditional economic concepts. He thoroughly criticised the feudal private ownership system and put forward the idea of public ownership system. Kang Youwei's cosmopolitan economic thought had several distinctive features: firstly, it emphasised public ownership as the basis of economic development, the integrated management of scattered and independent economic units, the consistency between local and global interests, and the organic combination of the thorough implementation of centralised enlightened centralisation and the hierarchical management of the local government, in order to realise the harmony and consistency of the entire socio-economic structure. Secondly, the idea of economic management was integrated with the idea of ruling the country and the people. Thirdly, it is emphasised that human nature is not inherently good or evil, and that it can be brought to goodness through indoctrination to achieve the unity of self-interest and altruism. The good indoctrination of labourers is the basic means of economic management.

4. Cultural Thoughts in the Cosmopolitan Book

4.1. Attitudes towards cultural integration and innovation

The Book of the Great Unity, an imaginative socialist work, was the culmination of Kang Youwei's work based on the traditional Chinese concepts of cosmopolitanism and the notion of historical evolution of the three worlds, combined with the Western concepts of utopian socialism, evolution, and other bourgeois political ideas. He regarded traditional culture as the core of the national spirit, and at the same time revealed many of its problems. Kang advocated the critical inheritance of traditional culture, absorbing its essence and discarding its dregs, with a view to revitalising it in the new era.

Kang firmly believed that the exchange and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures was the trend of historical development. He recognised the advantages of western culture in science and technology, politics and philosophy, and advocated that we should learn from and emulate them. Kang Youwei put forward the slogan of 'using the past for the present and the foreign for the Chinese', advocating the incor-

poration of modern elements into traditional culture to revitalise it.^[6] In practice, Kang advocated reforming the education system to cultivate innovative talents, improving literature and art to make them closer to reality, and promoting scientific and technological development to enhance the country's comprehensive strength. Through these measures, Kang Youwei hoped to realise the innovation and development of traditional culture, and thus promote the progress of our society.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Characteristics and Influence of Kang Youwei's Thought

Kang Youwei's thought has left a deep mark on modern Chinese history. It is characterised firstly by its epochal nature. As a leader of the Restoration and Reform Movement, his thought was formed against the background of China's national crisis, and thus had a strong practical concern and spirit. Secondly, Kang Youwei's thought presents comprehensiveness and inclusiveness. He not only integrated traditional Chinese Confucianism, but also absorbed Western knowledge in the fields of politics, economy and culture, and constructed his own unique system of thought.

5.2. Inspiration and reference significance to modern society

In *The Book of the Great Unity*, Kang Youwei combined two different kinds of idealistic socialist ideas from the East and the West, building a bridge of understanding that allowed the Chinese to quickly accept and develop socialism after it was introduced to them. His ideas also served as a bridge between Chinese tradition and Marxism. Kang's strategy of realising a moderately prosperous society before moving towards the Cosmos reflected his deep understanding of the current state of social development in China and was a transcendence based on traditional ideals. Although *The Book of the Great Unity* depicts a socialist economic system, which is anti-feudal and progressive, and inspires the people's aspiration for a better life, its worldview and methodology are based on historical idealism. It takes 'fraternity', 'happiness' and 'evolution' as its guiding ideology and opposes class struggle, which is contrary to the bourgeois revolution when it has become the mainstream. The book even describes the imperialist invasion as 'the forerunner of the commonwealth'. Nevertheless, its historical contribution should not be overlooked. *The Book of the Great Unity* is one of the most detailed utopian documents in Chinese history and an important document of modern Chinese economic thought, and its value should be recognised.

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