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### **The Society of Great Unity**

One of the many Chinese reformists who appeared during the second half of the 19th Century was **K a n g Y o u w e i** (1858–1927). He belonged to the privileged Confucian elite and had received a strictly orthodox education. **K a n g Y o u w e i** realized that China must carry out thorough reforms of its institutions in order to withstand the heavy attacks which the Western powers directed against it. While earlier attempts to reform the traditional Chinese society had been kept within the framework of Confucian ideology **K a n g Y o u w e i** boldly asserted that what China needed were thorough reforms of the kind that had been carried out in Japan during the Meiji-restoration and in Russia under Peter the Great. In order to disseminate knowledge of his ideas **K a n g Y o u w e i** founded private schools and academies which attracted many young men who later were to play important roles in the reform movement.

In the mid 1890s **K a n g Y o u w e i** succeeded in gaining several influential supporters in circles close to the Imperial Court, in spite of heavy opposition from conservative antagonists. Through these intermediaries **K a n g Y o u w e i** was enabled to present his views to the young Emperor during personal audiences. The reform movement culminated during a few hectic summer months in 1898 (The Hundred Days' Reforms). In the first hand the proposed reforms aimed at modernizing the old-fashioned educational system and the structure of the civil service.

The opposition of the conservative politicians was actively supported by the Empress Dowager, Yehonala, who rightly feared that the reforms would undermine her own positions of power. The situation was soon brought to a head: the reform decrees which the Emperor had promulgated were annulled and six of the leading young men in the reform movement were arrested and executed, among them a younger brother of **K a n g Y o u w e i**. **Kang Youwei** himself managed to escape to Hong Kong.

**K a n g Y o u w e i** remained a royalist and a Confucian throughout his life. In order to gain Confucian sanction for a radical reformation of the Chinese society

he applied rather questionable philological methods of textual criticism in an attempt to prove that large portions of the canonical literature of Confucianism were forgeries from the beginning of our era. In his work *Kong Zi gai zhi kao* (Confucius as a reformer) he tried to prove that Confucius rather than striving to re-establish the society of the ancient Holy Kings had preached the dogma of a gradual progress towards an ideal society.

In his youth *Kang Youwei* had authored a Utopian work which he entitled *Datong shu* (The Book of Great Unity.) An extensive draft of the book was finished already in 1884. According to the notes of the author the book was completed in 1902. It was not published in its entirety until 1935, eight years after the death of the author.

*Kang Youwei's* utopian description of a future World State contains a great many highly radical ideas which strongly contrast with his rather moderate reform program and with the attempts in later ages to create a Marxist ideal state in China.

To *Kang Youwei* selfishness appeared as the root of all evil. In *the Book of Great Unity* he tears down all barriers which selfish man has built to protect himself and his property. The Society of Great Unity is a World State, governed by an elected parliament. All national borders have been eliminated. In their stead *Kang Youwei* divided the surface of the earth into a great many numbered squares, each with a certain degree of autonomy. In order to prevent the inhabitants of a given square from forming an attachment to it and creating local organizations to serve their private interests, the population is constantly shifted from one square to another.

As racial characteristics according to *Kang Youwei* are determined by climatic conditions these population shifts will eventually result in a complete leveling of these distinctions. In order to further promote this development the citizens of the World State are encouraged to marry across racial borders.

According to *Kang Youwei*, marriage is the institution which to a higher degree than all others have been instrumental in creating and consolidating the inequities in society. He therefore advocates absolute equality between the sexes. Only by eradicating marriage as an institution, and the family system, will it be possible to reach the goal which all utopian dreamers are striving for, namely the elimination of private ownership and private enterprise. Instead of marriage *Kang Youwei* proposes cohabitation contracts which should be valid for one year but which may be prolonged for as long as the partners may wish.

State institutions, from nurseries to universities, guarantee that each child starts life with the same prospects and that equal opportunities of education are offered to each citizen. During the final school years the young are prepared for their future careers. As all means of production are owned by the State, education can be easily geared to the needs of Society.

*Kang Youwei* foresaw that advanced mechanization of labour eventually would lead to a shortening of the working week. It will therefore be necessary for the

State to provide the citizens with excellent opportunities for enriching their spare time. The citizens will spend a great deal of their spare time on travel. Wagons driven by electricity or some other motive power will make it possible for each and every citizen to travel wherever he or she wishes, by land, by sea and through the air.

The Society of Great Unity will not be created overnight. In one part of his book *Kang Youwei* gives a detailed description of the inevitable development of society into a World State. He particularly stresses the important role which will be played by the United Nations, before the World Parliament has been established.

*Kang Youwei* did not master any foreign language. Before 1898 he had a rather limited knowledge of the Western world, which he had gained through reading Western literature in translation. There are no indications whatever that he had studied the writings of *Marx* before he authored his *Book of Great Unity*. A comparison between *Kang Youwei's* book and *The Communist Manifesto* yields certain common tenets. It should in this context be noted that excerpts of *The Communist Manifesto* was translated into Chinese in 1906. A translation of the complete text of *The Manifesto* did not appear until 1920.

Common to *Marx* and *Kang Youwei* are the demands for the elimination of private ownership, the dissolving of the family system, the introduction of State education, the emancipation of women, the demolishing of national borders and a concentration of all means of production in the hands of the State. But the two thinkers' points of departure, motives and modes of procedure are totally different. *Marx's* point of departure is industrialized Europe, while *Kang Youwei*, with his Confucian background, attacks the problems from a universal angle. *Marx* predicts a proletarian revolution which will result in a centralization of all means of production and thus effectively eradicate the causes of class contradictions. *Kang Youwei* predicts that the new society will develop gradually, by peaceful means, and as a natural result of the fact that the selfish family system and other social barriers have been replaced by an extensive system of State institutions. *Marx* abstains from establishing moral and ethical criteria for the Communist society and maintains that all religious, philosophical, moral and other ideological convictions are determined by the economic class identity of the individual. *Kang Youwei* build his Utopia on the Confucian conviction that man's innate yearning for the good makes him feel compassion with his fellow men. It is this firm faith in man's social conscience which above all characterizes *Kang Youwei's* utopian thinking. *Marx* considers all human suffering as a direct result of economic exploitation. *Kang Youwei*, who in his youth had studied Buddhist philosophy, gives a thorough analysis of the various factors which cause suffering.

All utopian works contain common traits. It is therefore not difficult to find parallels in *Kang Youwei's* work and *Edward Bellamy's* (1850-98) *Looking Backward 2000-1887* which appeared in 1888. *Bellamy's* utopian novel, which tells of a young Bostonian who falls asleep in 1887 and wakes up in a totally different world in the year 2000, rapidly became a bestseller and played an important role for the spreading of socialist ideas throughout the world. The tremendous social

and economic changes which had taken place during the long sleep of the young Bostonian had not been brought about by revolution. What had happened was that public opinion had come to realize that the monopolies had grown so strong that they instead of serving the interests of a minority would have to serve the whole people, by being incorporated into the State. The economic transformation of society had thus been brought about by peaceful means. The State is administered with military efficiency, but the State apparatus has solely civil functions. War and international disputes do not occur, since all countries have undergone the same development. While Bellamy's utopian society builds on strong feelings of patriotism—the ideology of the new regime is indeed called Nationalism—the New World is characterized by free trade and open borders.

The American scholar Martin Bernal suggests in his work *Chinese Socialism to 1907* (Cornell University Press, 1976) that Kang Youwei has been influenced by Bellamy's book. A careful reading of the two works has failed to persuade me of the validity of this suggestion. The common traits which we find in Kang Youwei's and Bellamy's works—elimination of private ownership, State education, the emancipation of women, and sexual and economic equality—are found in most utopian works.

Temporal considerations do not preclude that Kang Youwei was influenced by Bellamy. A Chinese translation, or rather paraphrase, of *Looking Backward* was serialized in the journal "Wanguo Gongbao" (The Review of the Times) between December 1891 and April 1892. This journal, which was edited by two missionaries, the American Young J. Allen and Timothy Richard, who came from Wales, began publication in 1889 and was financed by a group of missionary societies, called Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge among the Chinese. Apart from the journal the Society published books and pamphlets, which treated Western culture and technology, and Christian literature. Allen and Richard gained great influence among the leaders of the Chinese reform movement, especially after 1895. Their publications were issued in large editions, sometimes counting as many as 100,000 copies, and were read by many high officials and even by the young Emperor himself.

In his paraphrase of the first chapter of Bellamy's book the anonymous translator uses the term *Datong*, Great Unity, to designate Bellamy's utopian society. Martin Bernal suggests that this is the origin of Kang Youwei's *Datong*. Kang Youwei never mentions Bellamy or his utopian novel in his own writing. It is known that two of Kang Youwei's closest associates, Tan Sitong (1865–1898) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929), in the year 1896 read a Chinese book edition of Bellamy's work. It is therefore possible that also Kang Youwei had read the work.

The term *Datong* is found as a designation of an ancient ideal society in a short text, *Liyun* (The Evolution of Rites), which quite early, possibly in the 2nd Century before our era, was incorporated into one of the canonical scriptures of Confucia-

nism. The text, which cannot be exactly dated, contains tenets which pertain to the Daoist school of thought.

In the first section of the text we read the following: "When the Grand Course was pursued, and common Spirit ruled all under the sky, they chose men of talents, virtue and ability, their words were sincere and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged until their death, employment for the able bodied, and means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans and childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper worth and females had their homes. [They accumulated] articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. [They laboured] with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it [only] with a view to their own advantage. In this way [selfish] schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers and filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open and were not shut. This was [the period] of what we call the Grand Union (*da-tong*). (Translated by James Legge, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXVII, Li Ki, Books I-IX, Oxford 1885, 366).

The Classical Chinese language abstains from marking tempora. It would therefore be possible—and so has also been done—to translate the verbs of this text into future tense: "When the Grand Course will be pursued...". But there are clear indications that the passage translated above expresses faith in the primitive collectivism of a distant past, a faith which characterizes early Daoism.

Immediately after this passage from the *Liyun* follows a description of the society which eventually replaced by Society of Great Unity. This society is called *Xiaokang* (The Small Tranquillity), and is characterized by a certain degree of order and harmony. But at the same time selfishness has raised its ugly head and everyone protects himself and his family. A hereditary nobility guards its property with the aid of walls and moats. Ritual acts and the principles of righteousness regulate the relations between lord and subject, father and son, old and young, and between man and wife. This strict regulation of human relations leads to selfish intrigues and armed conflicts. It was during this period of gradual societal decline that several of the rulers appeared whom Confucius later praised as great paragons of virtue.

The political leaders in China have on several occasions after 1949 ordained re-evaluations of ideological factors which have played important roles in the long history of the nation. One example of this is the short-lived "anti-Confucius Campaign" which was inaugurated towards the end of the Cultural Revolution. Kang Youwei's views on The Society of Great Unity have not been debated since 1949, as far as I know. Plans have apparently been made to publish the complete works of Kang Youwei. If these plans materialize his *Book of Great Unity* will no doubt shock many orthodox Confucians among the Marxist leaders of China.