

Democratic Peace Beyond Westphalia

Kang and Kant

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This is a draft.

Final published version at

at *Comparative Political Theory*.¹

¹ <https://brill.com/view/journals/cpt/aop/article-10.1163-18754112-25040005/article-10.1163-18754112-25040005.xml>

Is a broad and sustainable international peace possible and, if so, under what conditions? Could its prospects be enhanced by republican government, democracy, or liberalism? Might it emerge through the mutual alliance of autonomous states? Or would it require more robust forms of transnational integration – perhaps even something like a “world state”?

Immanuel Kant’s “Towards Perpetual Peace” (*zum Ewigen Frieden*) provides one very influential set of answers to questions such as these. Kant argues: that ending war is possible as well as morally necessary; that it would require a voluntary alliance of autonomous republican states; and that any attempted pacification by an international organization with independent coercive capacities – some kind of world state – would result in global tyranny and war, rather than peace.

“Perpetual Peace” continues to strongly influence scholarly debate on war and peace. Kant’s argument about the relative pacifism of republics has been updated by both empiricists and normative political theorists who endorse the so-called democratic peace theory (Doyle, 1983; Rawls, 2001).² His warnings that a world state would probably be despotic is echoed by almost all contemporary Kantian cosmopolitans (see the many references provided by Nili, 2015).

It would *prima facie* seem desirable to broaden the range of historical texts referred to in contemporary debates enduring peace and its requisites – in part because much of Kant’s theory now looks questionable, dated, or simply wrong. Some of Kant’s ideas about war and peace were always doubtful on their own terms, for instance his argument that a mere alliance could secure enduring peace (see Carson, 1988; Habermas, 1997). Others have apparently been disproven by history

² John Rawls denies that peace is possible *only* between liberal democracies but believes that peace becomes *more likely* as countries become more liberal democratic (Rawls, 2001§5, esp. p. 54).

(republics do in fact go to war) or now look less useful as guides to pacification (most notably: the Westphalian presumption that peace must be built amongst independent sovereign states).

The increasing pluralism of world politics makes it more urgent than ever for English-language scholars to explore philosophies of peace from beyond Europe and her erstwhile settler colonies. Attempts to craft a broad and enduring peace will not get very far without legitimate and effective transnational governance institutions and the development of a post-Westphalian public sphere capable of generating responsiveness from them (Dryzek, 2012). One laudable goal for the field of Comparative Political Theory (CPT) is to help articulate ideas and arguments that could serve as reference points in debate in this emerging transnational public sphere (Williams & Warren, 2014).³

Anglophone scholars should engage more seriously than they currently do with Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927).⁴ Though Kang is not read or discussed as often as he should be outside of East Asia, few modern thinkers can match “the Martin Luther of Confucianism”⁵ for philosophical significance and broad societal influence. His is a household name in contemporary China, where he is perhaps best known as a conservative supporter of the Qing dynasty who took part in the Hundred

³ Many scholars of CPT endorse this goal (see, for instance, the review by March, 2009).

⁴ There is no extended comparison in English of the two texts under consideration here. The leading study in English of Kang’s life and work Hsiao Kung-Chuan notes only that the *Great Unity* “reminds one somewhat” of “Perpetual Peace”, but that Kang’s “theoretical standpoint was widely different from that of the German philosopher” (Hsiao, 1975, p. 457).

⁵ Kang’s most influential student, Liang Qichao 梁启超, gave him this title in 1901 (Hsiao, 1975, p. 105).

Days' Reform movement in the 1890s (Wong, 1992). It is, however, Kang's very un-conservative theory of history as a progressive movement towards a state of "great unity" 大同 (*da tong*) that has most profoundly shaped Chinese thinking and public debate. Mao Zedong argued that "Kang Youwei [...] could not find a way of achieving" the state of great unity because he lacked a theory of working-class revolution (Mao, 2022)⁶ and the contemporary Communist Party continue to employ a recognizably Kangian framework for understanding historical progress (Smith, 2019). Kang's writings exert tremendous influence in contemporary scholarly debate in China, including on topics such as the future of the nation (Gan, 2019) and the possibility of a cosmopolitan democracy of "all under heaven" 天下 (*tianxia*, see e.g. Wang, 2017, Chapters 2, 4).

This paper argues Kang's magnum opus, the *Book of Great Unity* 大同书 presents an imaginative, philosophically sophisticated, and often persuasive theory of peace that should be read alongside Kant's work by all serious students of global politics. The *Book of Great Unity* articulates a bold vision of a world without war and embeds normative exhortations to peace and concrete institutional plans for establishing it within a strongly progressivist philosophy of history. Yet Kang's conclusions differ from those of "Perpetual Peace" in important respects, two of which pose potentially deep challenges to contemporary Kantians writing on international politics. Kang provides a recognizably "communitarian", but still robustly democratic, alternative to Kant's "liberal" theory of peace, developing an elaborate account of the kinds of ethical socialization necessary for developing popular cosmopolitanism and commitment to pacification in the long run. Moreover, he draws on a distinctive universalist yet popular conception of sovereignty to argue that enduring pacification would

⁶ My translation.

require a federal world state and that this would not necessarily be despotic. Scholars steeped in the liberal internationalist teachings of “Perpetual Peace” would do well to explore these arguments.

These challenges possess a particular urgency in the present moment. As state sovereignty is increasingly overlaid by authoritative transnational law and governance, Kant’s statist commitments look increasingly unpromising as a basis for theorizing about peace. The fruitfulness of engaging with Kang’s universalistic conception of popular sovereignty becomes more evident. Moreover, Kang’s cosmopolitan-communitarian arguments speak clearly from his tumultuous time to our own, in which the fragility of popular political institutions is increasingly plain to see. This vulnerability is especially clear at the transnational level. The leaders of peace-promoting organizations such as the European Union know that their pacific capacity depends in part on how effectively they can promote and entrench non-statist identities amongst those they rule and claim to represent.

Whilst I do suggest some ways in which the views of Kang and Kant may be related to their wider historical and intellectual contexts, it is not my aim here to validate any novel claims about lines of influence between Kang and Kant. “Perpetual Peace” was certainly read and appreciated in the late-nineteenth century East Asia of Kang’s youth⁷ and Kant was a particular object of interest in the 1920s and 1930s, when he was seen a potential source for a sophisticated analysis and defense of the two gods of the May 4th Movement: “Mr.” Science and “Mr.” Democracy (Xu, 2016, pp. 30–33). As an omnivorous reader and thinker, Kang absorbed Japanese translations and summaries of a wealth of European thought and he appears to have been the first Chinese writer to mention Kant (though the

⁷ Kant’s text was read and embraced as far back as the 1860s by Japanese philosophers (for which see Piovesana, 2013, Chapter 3) and was discussed at length in the 1880s, for instance, in Nakae Chōmin’s profound and entertaining *Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government* (1992).

reference is to Kant’s cosmology, not his politics, and does not occur in *The Book of Great Unity*: see Xu, 2016, p. 26f). It is important, however, not to overemphasize European influence on Kang’s work, let alone that of Kant himself, which was at most slight and highly indirect. *Great Unity* makes passing reference to Socrates and Darwin but also recounts a Buddhist parable and discusses Hinduism and Islam (DTS 9-10).⁸ Moreover, as I note presently, Kang’s arguments about world peace were mostly developed before he encountered European philosophy and are best understood as a pointed intervention into the tradition of “Confucianism”, or Chinese classicism 儒家 (*rujia*)

Perpetual Peace

Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant took it upon himself to reconcile the stark intellectual antimonies that defined eighteenth century European intellectual life between more empirical and more introspective ways of knowing (i.e. “empiricism” and “rationalism”) and between Christian faith,

⁸ Kang discusses Socrates as an example of a decent person who enjoyed gay sex (DTS 8.14) and accuses Darwin of endorsing selfishness (DTS 12.15, see also the obscure reference at 2.2). Citations to the *Book of Great Unity* are indicated with “DTS” (*Da Tong Shu*) followed by the numbers of the relevant “part” and, when necessary, that of the “chapter” within that part (or a reference to its introduction). Not all parts of the work have chapter divisions or introductions. Quotations broadly follow the English translation by Laurence G. Thompson (1958). However, I have cleaned up Thompson’s numerous parentheses and made other small amendments with the help of a standard Chinese edition (Kang, 2012) and the German translation (Kang, 1974).

with its ideas of moral liberty and responsibility, and the supremely elegant but apparently Godless and deterministic mechanistic natural philosophy developed by figures like Isaac Newton (1647-1727).⁹ In his practical philosophy, Kant tried to reconcile a Rousseauian politics of equal freedom a Hobbesian politics of discipline, which imagines disputatious subjects brought to heel by an irresistible sovereign (see e.g. TP 8: 299-300).¹⁰ Politically, Kant was living through an age of revolutions – American, French, Haitian – with regard to which he adopted a characteristically ameliorative stance, decrying violence against the powers that be, yet raising a glass on Bastille day in celebration of the rationalizations and emancipations in postrevolutionary France.

“Perpetual Peace” was published in 1795, towards the end of Kant’s life, and, though it wears its learning lightly and takes the form of a popular essay, it reflects arguments and ideas articulated with outlandish systematicity in his weightier philosophical tomes. It is laid out in the form of a peace treaty, with six “preliminary” and three “definitive” articles outlining various requisites for enduring peace and then two “supplements” and appendices dedicated to consideration of related topics including the feasibility of peace and whether revolution could be justifiable. The “articles” take the form of prohibitions and injunctions. Kant’s preliminary articles prohibit states from interfering in

⁹ The best general biography of Kant is by Manfred Kuehn (2001).

¹⁰ References to Kant’s works follow the volume and page of the German Academy edition and are preceded by ZeF (“Perpetual Peace”), IaG (“Idea of a Universal History”), or TP (“On the Common Saying: That May be True in Theory, but it is of No Use in Practice”). Quotations from “Theory and Practice” follow *Kant’s Practical Philosophy* edited by Mary J. Gregor and Allen Wood (Kant, 1999); other quotations follow *Towards Perpetual Peace and Other Writings* edited by Pauline Kleingeld (Kant, 2008).

each other's domestic affairs or from writing peace treaties that include permission to fight again later. They are commanded to respect basic moral norms in war and are encouraged to try (perhaps at some point in the future) to give up standing armies entirely, to stop getting themselves in debt for the sake of war, and to stop treating states as possessions that can be sold or gifted to another with no regard for the inhabitants (in the course, for instance, of a royal marriage). Kant's three "definitive" articles argue that: (1) all that states should be republican, which will reduce conflict because kings view war as a kind of sport but for ordinary people, whose property and lives are at risk, it is a curse; (2) states must enter a global confederation devoted to maintaining peaceful relations between nations; and (3) rulers should recognize the cosmopolitan right of peaceful outsiders to visit them without being treated with hostility, which is necessary for ongoing communication and hopefully exchange that can facilitate peace. Finally, when it comes to matters of war and peace, rulers should listen to philosophers, whose lack of formal decision-making authority permits their reason to be impartial and uncorrupted by power. This final article is secret and compliance with it need not be admitted by kings because it implies some flaw in their dignity.¹¹

One particularly influential aspect of Kant's text is its proposal for what Kant calls a federation of distinct states (*Föderalität verschiedener Staaten*), an alliance whose members agree to co-operate to try to secure peace and mutual independence but do *not* create a binding system of international law backed by coercive capacities. Before "Perpetual Peace", Kant thought that pacification would something more: a *state of peoples* (a *Völkerstaat*), i.e. a transnational organization with legislative and executive authority that could create peace between different "peoples" with the help of international

¹¹ One further aspect of "Perpetual Peace" is, perhaps, indirectly relevant to the present discussion: a long footnote that speculates, on the basis of linguistic evidence, that European monotheism may have come from East Asia (Zef 8:359; for a discussion of Kant's view of China see Hsia, 2001).

law backed up by coercive force (Cavallar, 1994).¹² He argued that, just as it would take coercively-enforced laws to end a Hobbesian state of war between *individuals*, coercively enforced laws alone could end war between *nations*. By the time of “Perpetual Peace”, however, Kant appears to have changed his mind. After initially claiming, once again, that a global “state of peoples” would be necessary to end war, he then argues that, because states “do not [...] want the positive idea of a world republic at all (thus rejecting in *hypothesi* what is right in *thesi*),” humanity would have to make-do with “only the negative surrogate of a lasting and continually expanding federation that prevents war” (ZeF 8:357). This odd and unpersuasive argument about what states want¹³ is supplemented with a more coherent one: “laws increasingly lose their force as the borders of a government are extended” and hence that to maintain obedience to them a large state must become a “soulless despotism that, after having eliminated the seeds of good, ultimately declines into anarchy” (ZeF 8:357). A very extensive state could pacify only at the price of “the most horrible despotism” (TP 8: 311) – the peace of the graveyard (for which see ZeF 8:343). This conclusion that echoes a long-standing republican hostility to large polities that was given forceful expression in Kant’s time by Montesquieu and Rousseau.

Another notable aspect of “Perpetual Peace” is its tight focus on *legal rules*, rather than broader instruments of political socialization, for promoting peace. Kant didn’t think it was possible to reliably understand what is good for people and his legal and political philosophy is, accordingly, oriented around a conception of right (*Recht*) grounded in a theory of autonomy that supposedly brackets

¹² Kant also called this a *Weltrepublik*.

¹³ Not long before writing “Perpetual Peace” Kant had devoted an entire essay to refuting the idea that some things are true in theory but not practice. Namely, “Theory and Practice” (1793). I consider a possible esoteric interpretation of this passage, below.

substantive conceptions of the human good. While it may be anachronistic to call Kant a liberal (Bell, 2014), it is nonetheless useful shorthand for his idea that government should focus on securing a sphere of legally-protected negative liberty for individuals and avoid interventions designed to alter social norms to promote flourishing (on Kant’s “liberalism” and its relation to “communitarianism” see Sandel, 1984). Whilst Kant does expect citizens to have their moral capacities improved by living within republican institutions (see, for instance, IaG 8:26 and ZeF 8:366) he doesn’t think this can be achieved by conscious governmental planning: “A government established on the principle of benevolence toward the people,” Kant writes in his essay on “*Theory and Practice*” – “a *paternalistic government*” – would be “the greatest despotism thinkable” (TP 8:290). This idea lives on in the work of present day Kantians: John Rawls celebrates liberal state neutrality in relation to diverse religious and philosophical traditions *in part* for the contribution he thinks it can make to peaceful international relations (Rawls, 2001, sec. 4.1, 5.2).

A final noteworthy feature of Kant’s account is its highly distinctive historiography, which implies that pacification *can* and (we are entitled to suppose) *will* occur *without anybody conscientiously aiming for it*. In his more systemic philosophical works Kant argues that, for the sake of something like cognitive coherence and moral motivation, we are entitled to operate on the basis of an unverifiable and merely “regulative” idea that nature and human instincts are set up in a way that tends to promote morally desirable outcomes over time – so long as there is no clear empirical evidence to the contrary.¹⁴

¹⁴ Kant’s mature critical philosophy has been criticized since its inception for enjoining us to adopt two starkly different perspectives on reality: as knowers we must operate on the premise that reality is a spatiotemporal matrix filled with material objects in lawlike causal relations, yet from a moral perspective we cannot help but view ourselves as standing outside of such deterministic causal relations, as possessing genuine freedom of choice that renders us responsible for our actions, even if

In *Perpetual Peace* Kant endeavors to show that human qualities that *prima facie* appear inimical to peace, such as self-interestedness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness – are, in fact, conducive to it. To this end he uses the “invisible hand” form of argument employed by thinkers including Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, which purports to show that private vices can lead to unexpected public benefits. Kant argues, for instance, that the naked self-interest often associated with economic profit-seeking is worthy of condemnation on an individual level but has nonetheless pushed humans into commercial relations with one another, tying together different parts of the globe together and make them dependent on continued interaction and ultimately establishing powerful economic interests opposed to war. Kant famously argues that a “nation of Devils” could live together in a state (ZeF 8:366) and he would also agree that if the whole world were populated by devils it could nonetheless sustain perpetual peace and – moreover – that it would be appropriate for us to imagine an “intention of nature” *compelling* it to do so (IaG 8:27, 8:29).¹⁵

this cannot be *empirically* verified. Kant recognized that adopting these two highly divergent perspectives on reality was likely to cause (what we now might call) profound cognitive dissonance. He was also concerned that our inability to receive empirical evidence of free moral action or its concrete consequences might sap our motivation to act rightly. Kant therefore suggested that we *imagine* a harmony between nature and morality that could never be empirically verified and that we reflectively judge that the world could in principle be organized so as to realize human happiness and freedom over time (for exegesis of these ideas see, for instance, Allison, 2001, Chapters 1, 9; Honneth, 2009).

¹⁵ See also the *Critique of Judgement*, especially §§83-84

Kant's religious context may help explain his progressivist and anti-paternalist commitments. The Lutheranism in which he was raised taught that sinners will always exist, that the need to restrain them with violence justifies secular political institutions, and – crucially – that rulers cannot hope *and should not try* to morally improve their subjects (Luther, 1991). Furthermore, the idea that gradual pacification is a regulative idea, rather than a substantive prediction, may resonate with Christian notions of salvation as matter of faith rather than reason (for an extended discussion of the theological aspects of “Perpetual Peace” see Molloy, 2019).

Great Unity

Kang Youwei reports that he was born, auspiciously, in the eleventh month of his mothers' pregnancy. This was, however, in the distinctly inauspicious year of 1858, “when China was torn asunder by the Taiping Rebellion and when foreign armies were at the gates of Peking” (Lo, 1967, p. 9; see also Kang, 1967, p. 21). By his early twenties a period of meditation appears to have helped persuade Kang to serve humanity as a kind of prophet, sage, or savior.¹⁶ He set up a school, campaigned for diverse kinds of social and political change, and won the ear of the Guangxu Emperor 光緒帝, who pushed through many of his policy proposals during the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898. Forced to flee to

¹⁶ “A light dawned on me, and believing that I was a sage, I would be happy and laugh; then, thinking of the suffering of the people in the world, I would be sad and cry [...] I believed that heaven had endowed me with intelligence and ability to save them [...] and made it my mission to take part in worldly affairs” (Kang, 1967, pp. 33–35).

Japan and then dozens of other countries when Dowager-Empress Cixi 慈禧太后 ended the reforms with a palace coup against her son, Kang didn't return to China until the Qing empire had fallen. He continued to lobby for change in the new Republic and famously still supported the idea of Empire, albeit as a kind of constitutional monarchy with figurehead emperor. By his death in 1927 China had fractured into civil war, education in coastal provinces was now heavily weighted towards foreign texts (Hsiao, 1975, p. 394), and participants in the New Culture movement had launched excoriating critiques of the traditional culture and learning celebrated by Kang.

Kang's *Book of Great Unity* 大同书 was published in its entirety only posthumously, in 1935, though the main draft of the work was prepared during Kang's exile in India in 1902.¹⁷ He withheld it from circulation or publication in the belief that his society was not yet ready to receive its radical ideas, which helps explain why Kang is remembered in China as a conservative advocate of monarchy and Confucianism rather than a visionary radical.¹⁸ Some of the central arguments of the *Great Unity*, including the proposals for world government and free love, are already expressed in his *Substantial Truths and Universal Laws* 實理公法 (*shili gongfa*), composed in the mid-1880s (Hsiao, 1975, pp. 418–435). Their final form was decisively influenced, however, by Kang's growing interest, after 1888, in

¹⁷ The first two (of ten) chapters were published in 1911. Kang hinted that he had completed the work as early as 1884–85, when he was in his late twenties, but a range of evidence supports the idea that drafting happened in 1902 on the basis of earlier ideas (Hsiao, 1975, pp. 46–57). Some small changes were made after the time in India (Thompson, 1958, p. 34, n. 4).

¹⁸ Hsiao (1975 esp. part 3) discusses the relationship between Kang's gradualism and his radical long-term vision at some length.

the “New Text” school of classical scholarship, which serves as the basis of his important works of the 1890s and 1900s, such as *Confucius as Reformer* 孔子改制考 (*kongzi gaizhi kao*), that find a progressivist historiography and reformist agenda in the classics.¹⁹ In the 1910s Kang devoted himself to more practical writings, such as memorials to the republican government. In his final years, he explored cosmological speculations mentioned in the closing pages of *Great Unity* and collected in *Roaming the Heavens* 诸天讲 (*zhu tian jiang*).

The *Book of Great Unity* begins with a discussion of the evils of human suffering that has strikingly Buddhist overtones.²⁰ Kang argues that suffering is ultimately caused by various kinds of boundaries between groups, including those of caste, gender, and race, as well as state borders. He

¹⁹ The New Text school, which discovered proposals for political reform in esoteric readings of texts such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, lost ground between Han and Tang to the more literalist and arguably less egalitarian Old Text tradition (which commented on some newly discovered “old texts” written in archaic characters). New Text scholarship was then revived in the Qing by scholars such as Liu Fenglu 刘逢禄 (for an analysis of this rediscovery see Cheng, 1997).

²⁰ The text as a whole resonates with the Huayan (Flower Garland) school 华严宗 (*huayang zong*), which envisions a this-worldly unification of all beings. Kang once told Liang Qichao that “the teaching of Confucius was the hua-yen sect of Buddhism” because both direct people to seek dharma in *this* world, rather than another (quoted Hsiao, *A Modern China*, 110). Hsiao (1975, pp. 108–111) argues that Kang’s knowledge of Buddhism was ultimately that of a dilettante (for a longer and more recent discussion of the notable but diffuse Buddhist influence on the work see Brusadelli, 2020, Chapter 2).

presents a host of specific arguments about the problems caused by each of these kinds of boundary between social groups. When discussing the topic of class boundaries, for instance, Kang draws on Japanese and European history to make the case that dividing societies into classes of free people and slaves or serfs causes generates cultural and military stagnation that leads to generalized social suffering. On the topic of boundaries between the sexes Kang waxes at length on the sufferings caused to women by their exclusion from education, from various pastimes and pleasures that men enjoy, and from the fact that man have “bound their waists, veiled their faces, compressed their feet” – “the most appalling, unjust, and unequal thing, the most inexplicable theory under heaven” (DTS 5.1). People can best respond to these and other forms of suffering, Kang argues, if they work to break down group boundaries by extending their humanity or benevolence 仁 (*ren*) beyond their immediate families, classes, sexes, and states to every human being and, ultimately, even other species.²¹

Kang couples his social critique and recommendation to extend benevolence with a portrait of a progressive ascent through three ages, the last of which is described using the language of “great unity” 大同. He is here drawing together multiple conceptual resources in the commentarial traditions of Chinese classicism. The theory of three ages – of Disorder 据乱世 (*ju luanshi*), Increasing Peace 升平世 (*shenping shi*) and Highest Peace 太平世 (*taiping shi*) – was developed in debates about the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋 (*Chunqiu*) and the interpretation of it provided by the *Gongyang Commentary* 公

²¹ Kang’s friend and fellow hundred days reformer Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 also argued at length that boundaries between people are obstacles to extended benevolence and a basis of suffering (see references at pp. 597-98 of Yao, 2003).

羊传 (*Gongyang Zhuan*), both of which are central foci of New Text scholarship.²² The idea of an age of Great Unity 大同 appears most notably in the *Book of Rites* 礼经 (*Liji*), in a passage where Confucius 孔子 (*Kongzi*) discusses an ideal society in which people's humanity is extended beyond their own family and peace reigns as a result. Whilst the classical text imagines Great Unity in a distant past, Kant conflates it with the era Highest Peace discussed by reformist New Text scholarship, projecting it into the future instead.

Whilst this creative blending and reworking of classical tropes are not entirely unique to Kang, the *Book of Great Unity* articulates a classicist progressivist vision in a particularly forceful and influential way.²³ What is perhaps most new and interesting is the way Kang turns a classicist historiography in

²² The *Gongyang Commentary*, as is typical of the New Text tradition, undertakes an esoteric reading of the Annals to discover Confucius' practical recommendations for rule. Han dynasty scholars reading the commentary such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 argued that the History of Lu described in the text could be divided into three strata, from the most distant to the most recent, according to the kinds of sources its author relied on in compiling it (third-hand records, second-hand accounts, and first-hand experience). He Xiu 何休 then discovered in this source-based division of the text a more far-reaching historiographic theory of three epochs, each correlated with distinctive moral virtues and sociopolitical forms (Cheng, 1985, pp. 207–240).

²³ The Taiping leaders and Sun Yat Sen 孙中山 (*Sun Zhongshan*), amongst others, imagined a future progress towards Great Unity (Dessein, 2017) and Qing New Text scholars such as Gong Zizhen 龚

such an *unambiguously* progressivist direction and then uses it to ground a meticulous planning of global institutions conducive to extensive benevolence.

Although I will focus here primarily on Kang's arguments about national boundaries, it was not only narrowly "political" boundaries that Kang thought were ripe for abolition. Kang's vision of industrial and especially of *familial* reform are some of the most revolutionary and challenging aspects of the *Book of Great Unity*. Like Socrates in the *Republic*, he argues that private families and private industry breed competitiveness and partiality (for an exceptionally comprehensive and illuminating comparison of Kang and Plato see Pfister, 1989). As obstacles to fully developed virtue, he hopes that they might one day be overcome and sketches in some detail a set of institutions to replace them: a series of nurseries, schools, medical facilities and retirement homes for providing cradle to grave care and cultivation, as well as collectivized agriculture, industry, and commerce with federated democratic decision-making. Kang imagines a world not of social equalization in all respects, but of just hierarchy, in which knowledge, humanity, and hard work are incentivized and social contributions are rewarded with badges of honor (including literal badges). For instance, those who invent new technologies might win a more luxurious retirement for their efforts, and perhaps a memorial after their death.

自珍 and Wei Yuan 魏源 combined theories of the three ages with calls for political reform, though Luke Kwong (2001) argues they were more inclined to express a traditional cyclical historiography than the progressive one articulated by Kang. Finally, Wang Tao 王韜 – a journalist, translator, and editor – combined the language of Da Tong with the Gongyang theory of the three ages (see De Bary & Lufrano, 2001, pp. 251–254, 260–273).

One “boundary” that the *Book of Great Unity* seeks to overcome in a particularly horrifying way is that of race. Drawing on an eclectic mix of East Asian and European racist tropes, Kang develops a plan for racial homogenization and for the gradual elimination of anyone unable or unwilling to take part.²⁴ He proposes a global “smelting” of “the white race, the yellow race, the brown race, and the black race” for the sake of their physical and mental improvement (DTS 4). Ultimately, this means a global *whitening* that requires changing the diets of the three lesser races, encouraging them to have children with white partners, and moving people nearer the equator toward the poles, and thereby changing people’s skin, bodies, and souls. Kang’s presents his vision for the global assimilation or extermination of non-white races in humanitarian terms, as an effort at racial improvement, whilst also implying that most or even all of the population of Africa, India, and the Pacific were liable to be murdered in interstate war unless they managed to rapidly eugenically alter themselves.²⁵ With regard to its position on race, Kang’s work, like Kant’s, exhibits a deep tension or contradiction between explicit commitments both to universal human equality and to racial hierarchy.²⁶

²⁴ For a historical survey of Chinese race-thinking and of the reception of European racism in the late nineteenth century, including by Kang, see Frank Dikötter’s *Discourse of Race in Modern China* (2015).

²⁵ “Powers will fight with each other [and...] all the peoples of the black and brown races [...] will be decimated [and ...] will not be able to transmit their kind to the new Era of Great Unity; or, should some remain of these races, the survivors will not be many” (DTS 4).

²⁶ Kant was an influential early contributor to the emerging European pseudoscience of race, for which see his *Of the Different Races of Human Beings* (in Kant, 2007). While it has been argued that Kant had “second thoughts” on race (Kleingeld, 2007), he never publicly renounced his expressions of white supremacy (Larrimore, 2008). Kang’s contradictions on race are noted by Hsiao (1975, p. 445).

Kang's plans for the destruction of *state* boundaries, the first part of the text to be written and the only one to be published within his lifetime, is grounded in a long description of the suffering caused by war. Kang argues that communities inevitably try to expand their influence beyond their existing membership and to seek autonomy from each other, which throughout history has led to partiality, competition, and war. To illustrate the bitter suffering caused by war, he focuses on the worry, work, and care parents undergo to nurture just one child. They bear the risk of miscarriage and the dangers of birth, forego sleep and food to look after the newborn baby, and so on. All this love is, in a sense, rendered null by war, which kills countless numbers of these children in one fell swoop. Not only this, but it corrupts the soul, persuading people that selfishness, aggression, and destruction can be virtues and that humanity and understanding are of only limited use. The bitterness of war is, historically, as great a source of suffering as anything else, with perhaps only the oppression of women coming close.²⁷ Its elimination is a momentous step towards human flourishing and would secure one of the most basic negative conditions for people to devote themselves fully to the pursuit of understanding, humanity, honor, and spiritual endeavor (DTS 10).

Peace cannot be achieved by a federation of distinct and legally autonomous states. Kang sees the movement towards more republicanism, democracy, and civil rights as the general tendency of the times and, like Kant, believes that increasing responsiveness to public opinion will have a pacifying

These aspects of their work should guard us against drawing over-enthusiastically on their work as a resource for contemporary scholarship.

²⁷ Kang, in sharp contrast with Kant, was an active and campaigning lifelong feminist. Nonetheless, the *Book of Great Unity* presents women as more naturally caring than men and was subjected to insightful feminist critique within Kang's lifetime by He Ying Zhen 何殷震 (Liu et al., 2013).

effect, because ordinary people benefit from peace more than monarchs. Ultimately, however, “so long as the boundaries of states are not abolished, and the strong and the weak, the large and the small are mixed in together, wishing to plan for disarmament is like ordering tigers and wolves to be vegetarians – it must fail” (DTS 2.2). The general progress of interactions between bounded communities is one of “the swallowing up by the strong and large and the extermination of the weak and small” (Ibid). The suffering caused by state boundaries can therefore finally be overcome only by the creation of a single state and legal order encompassing the earth.

This is likely to happen. Kang (like Wendt, 2003) predicts that we will see the continuation of the historical trend according to which smaller polities merge or are subsumed into larger ones. Within two or three hundred years from the time he was writing – Kang is prepared to put a number on it – he foresees a world dominated by large continental federations in a fragile global military alliance. This loose alliance of polities will pursue goals that are clearly in the benefit of each member, such as tariff-free trade and its associated regulatory harmony. Over time, however, Kang sees the emergence of something more like a large deliberative-democratic republic with the traditional accoutrements of a state, in which decisions are made by “universal public discussion” and ultimately “decided by public vote [...] by telephone” (DTS 8.4).²⁸ People’s social and political identities, he speculates, are likely to become increasingly cosmopolitan as political deliberation becomes oriented around decision-making at the planetary level. The world government is likely to grow in power over time at the expense of any particular state or region and to promote thicker forms of cooperation – economic, administrative, military, cultural – for the sake of harmony and human flourishing. The current age of disorder will

²⁸ Kang views the process of democratization as a gradual and reversible one (as argued by Hsiao, 1975, Chapter 6) that can and should occur within particular polities, to some extent, before the world state emerges.

give way to one of moderate prosperity when a sovereign world parliament with access to independent coercive capacities enacts legislation designed to gradually demilitarize the other states. We can consider the world of Great Unity to be achieved, at least with regard to international peace, when the original names and boundaries of the constituent states are abolished. By this time, Kang predicts, localized rebellions and civil war will be effectively mitigated, and it may be possible to get rid of the world army. People will eventually lack the last remnants of affective ties to regional communities that might trump those to world society. They will then keep the peace by virtue of spontaneous loyalty to the global community in the absence of geographical bias.²⁹

Towards Dialogue

One disagreement between Kant and Kang whose interrogation could help enrich contemporary debate relates to their respective *liberalism* and *communitarianism*. Pace Kant and neo-Kantians (such as Rawls), Kang argues that international peace can be grounded only in a substantive sense of shared political identity resulting from a shared an *ethical community* dedicated to understanding and promoting human flourishing together. A sustainable global peace would require continuous cultural attention and institutional support to reduce competitiveness and generate intergroup understanding and sympathy in the domestic and economic spheres as well as the (narrowly) political. This is a

²⁹ Kang appears to see both democracy and world peace as emerging through conscious deliberation and planning by elites, rather than as an unanticipated or bottom-up process. In his practical politics he believed in generalizing education and acclimatizing people to freedom over the medium run whilst gradually reducing political inequality (Hsiao, 1975, pt. 4).

communitarian idea in the sense that it recognizes the political import of the socially- and culturally-constituted aspects of our characters and therefore avoids imagining legitimate rule in terms of the neutrality between citizens competing conceptions of the good (Mulhall & Swift, 1992).

Kang's communitarianism does not mean that he had no interest in personal freedom. Far from it. He argues: that everyone should participate in political decision-making (DTS 8.3) and be free to choose and regularly change their sexual partners (DTS 2.5); that men should be free to have gay relationships (DTS 8.14); and that industrial workers should only do three or four hours of enjoyable labor per day (DTS 7.8), whilst farmers should control their working time, within limits (DTS 7.7).

But Kang puts less faith than Kant does in the power of law alone to reshape behavior in the ways enduring peace would require. Aligning individual desire, thought, and action with peace would, he believes, require the development of a thick ethical culture that celebrates cosmopolitanism and social co-operation. This culture must be reproduced by various non-legal forms of social pressure because public honor and shame are crucial incentives to virtue. Kang argues, for instance, that schools for teenagers should be very big, to generate substantial peer pressure and hence ethical homogeneity.³⁰

Kang's communitarianism is genuinely challenging to liberal-individualist sensibilities – but the challenge is a timely one. We are living through a moment of democratic backsliding in which the fragility of formal political institutions that are insufficiently supported by appropriate civic attitudes has become much clearer than before (Graham & Svobik, 2020, for instance, provide alarming

³⁰ “The more people there are, the greater the seeing and emulating. The greater the group gathered together, the deeper the incitement. Morality will easily be made uniform” (DTS 6.5).

evidence for the fragility of healthy electoral practices in the United States). Transnational institutions conducive to peace are also unlikely to survive unless buttressed by supportive ideas, attitudes, and identities – a crucial reality for European leaders facing resurgent nationalisms on the Bloc’s eastern and western flanks. Kang’s challenge is therefore an important one: might attempts at liberal neutrality ultimately make it impossible to generate the motivational energies necessary for enduring peace?

Kang’s work also poses a challenge to contemporary Kantians committed to Westphalian visions of international peace as a relation between autonomous sovereign states. Some prominent Kantians do still affirm a Westphalian vision of peace emerging from free agreement between autonomous political units (Rawls, 2001). But this idea looks increasingly less relevant today, as states become enmeshed in complex processes of multilevel networked governance in which authority is shared, or pluralistic and contested. The internal logic of Kant’s idea that a non-coercive organization could keep the peace was always suspect by its own lights and looks, if anything, less plausible with more than two hundred years of hindsight (Carson, 1988; Habermas, 1997). Kang’s hypothesis looks far more promising: perpetual peace would have to be backed up by a trans-continental political organization with its own military forces (even if in the very long run, once all trace of earlier states has disappeared, those forces may become redundant and be gradually eliminated).

A contemporary Kangian can respond in a principled way to the predictable Kantian response that such a large political organization would inevitably be despotic. They could draw on resources in the *Book of Great Unity* to defend the idea that the era of small sovereign states is already over and that the most realistic alternative to extensive tyranny is global democracy, defended by a cosmopolitan-democratic populace united both practically and imaginatively by increasingly powerful distance-shrinking transportation and communication technologies.

In any case, the idea that large states are despotic, so prominent in ancient and early modern European thought, now looks dated. Politics have grown and grown since Kant's time and it would be hard to argue that they have tended to become more despotic in the process; there is no clear evidence that participation rights are better protected in smaller countries than larger ones (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, Chapter 15). The republican opponents of despotism did not foresee the effects of a mass mediated public sphere in which civil society groups proved able to push for the better protection of individual rights and greater influence over political decisions. It is not impossible to imagine a global civil society similar to the one envisioned by Kang, in which routine long-distance communication and travel helps citizens co-operate to resist oppressive government. Transnational democratic theorists who are skeptical of the idea of global "governance without government" (Scheuermann, 2008) could potentially find useful resources for analyzing this situation using Kang's universal and post-imperial but nonetheless *popular* conception of sovereignty.³¹

It is worth considering one important objection the reading of Kant offered here. Some interpreters argue that the Prussian did in fact continue to hold out hope for the "global state of peoples" (*Völkerstaat*) celebrated in his earlier work (see, e.g., Kleingeld, 2004). This interpretation is tendentious, given his clear commitment to the idea that attempts to create very large states will inevitably end in despotism or anarchy. However, let us assume for the sake of argument that "Perpetual Peace" esoterically communicates the necessity of a state of peoples: a law-making and law-enforcing entity that stands in relation to constituent *states*, not a direct relation to individual *citizens*, and whose job is simply to keep the peace between those states.

³¹ One influential critic of the neo-Kantian democratic peace theory argues that democracies have avoided war with one another because of an *imperial peace* led by the United States (Rosato, 2003).

This interpretation of “Perpetual Peace” brings it closer to *The Great Unity* – but perhaps not close enough. Would a state of peoples be viable? Kang gives us an important, though not compelling, reason to doubt it. He argues that any persistence of states as people’s primary political identity would promote forms of partiality that would get in the way of the kind of cosmopolitan ethical life necessary for sustaining world peace. This poses an important challenge to “Perpetual Peace” even when read between the lines to reconstruct it in the most charitable way possible.

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Reading Kang and Kant alongside one another promises to be an enlightening and timely endeavor for contemporary scholars of global politics. Kang provides an elaborate theory of world peace that offers challenges both to Kant’s liberalism and his commitment to pacification via a free federation of autonomous states. In the wake of Brexit and resurgent nationalisms elsewhere, it is worth engaging with Kang’s elaborately illustrated hypothesis that enduring peace will be impossible unless political leaders promote substantive forms of mass ethical education to cosmopolitanism. We also have increasing reason to grapple with Kang’s universalist conception of popular sovereignty. Kant’s Westphalian assumptions are increasingly unmoored from a political reality in which state sovereignty is blurred and eroded by transnational governance. His aversion to large polities is less persuasive as we enter in which new communication and transportation technologies shrink distances and permit robust contestation of movements towards despotism even within larger polities. The *Book of Great Unity* should shape our understanding of how a peaceful democratic order could be built in world that does not resemble an assemblage of sovereign states and that cannot afford liberal neutrality vis-à-vis

the conflict between cosmopolitan and nationalist identities. Reading Kang Youwei alongside Kant can therefore help us understand how to promote enduring peace in our world, here and now.

Bringing Kang and Kant into conversation might be valuable for broadly political reasons, as well as scholarly ones. This attempt to open a dialogue between the leading modern European and Chinese cosmopolitans has been inspired by the optimistic and ambitious neo-Kangian project of providing reference points capable of orienting political and philosophical discussion in a transnational deliberative democratic order. If I have pushed slightly harder on Kant's basic assumptions than on Kang's, this is in response to the bias towards the former's work in English-language political theory. Kant's excoriating criticisms of European colonial adventures (ZeF 8:358-59, see Muthu, 2009, Chapters 4–5), read in light of his universalist moral philosophy, has inspired contemporary efforts to imagine an egalitarian world politics free from domination, (neo-)racism, and (neo-)imperialism (see, for instance, McCarthy, 2009). There is something concerning, however, about western academic cosmopolitans drawing exclusively European texts and thinkers when theorizing about global peace or justice – an enterprise that risks reinforcing the idea of Europe as a privileged site for the creation of modern cultural forms and sociopolitical institutions that can and should then be extended across the world without too much modification.³² The rising field of Comparative Political Theory must combat such false universalisms and – a reader of Kang might add – articulate reference points that could help orient deliberation in an emerging post-Westphalian pacific-democratic public sphere.

³² Scholarship embodying the logic of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” has is not only epistemically limited, but has also famously also been used (e.g. by John Stuart Mill) to legitimize colonial rule and other forms of unjust treatment of foreign “others” (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 8).

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