

Utopia and Feminism: K'ang Yu-Wei and the *Ta Tung Shu*

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From antiquity, Chinese civilization developed technologies and advanced the *modus operandi* of warfare. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the Utopists, a new wave of philosophers, emerged as witnesses to the “death culture” that had begun to plunge the world into great chaos. Late Imperial China revealed remnants of the ancient past, as feuding clans and warrior states continued to facilitate a need for reform.

Warfare itself was pivotal in China's historical struggle for arbitration and compromise, which prepared the background for the Utopists. K'ang Yu-Wei, a nineteenth-century Confucian scholar, was an important figure in the Utopian movement. K'ang is important to late-Imperial Chinese history for his theoretical reforms of the nation and the family and how such endeavors were shaped to meet the challenges of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These reform strategies and written work on Utopian reform are embodied in his major work, the *Ta Tung Shu*, or “One World Philosophy.”

In *Ta Tung Shu*, K'ang discusses a series of reforms which presage the golden age of humanitarian enlightenment, where all people may be united under a single, unified government. K'ang's goals went far beyond the modernization of China. Equal footing with the other major powers was just the beginning of a campaign of a “world society” concerned with peace and equality for all.¹ A highly radical thinker, K'ang met with constant obstacles in the design of his attempted Chinese reform.

In his essay on “Compromise in Late Imperial China,” Kung-chuan Hsiao deals with disputes, riots and warfare between local clans, as well as between localized civilians and

representatives of the state. These often develop into overly heated issues if they remain unresolved by techniques of arbitration or compromise.² At the root of inter-clan and inter-state warfare lies the concern of boundaries. K'ang Yu-Wei drew a distinct correlation between the number of states and the concentration of warfare for the amalgamation of those states. He also inferred that due course of bloodshed could be averted by the elimination of national boundaries altogether.³

It is the natural progression of unity, according to K'ang, to tear down all national boundaries.⁴ To dismantle a state, one must first disarm and abolish national borders. In gathering [weaker] states from larger ones, K'ang praised the formula that America and Germany had undertaken as examples that lead to the one world: "They have caused all these weak states to forget that they have been destroyed [to form the United States]."⁵

K'ang, in 1898, described several ways in which the world was becoming more unified "through postal unions, international copyrights, and the tendencies of more conservative nations [Persia, Turkey, Siam] entering into international discourse, the spread of democracy, and the decline of autocracy."⁶ As he put it, "Democracies presage the one world unity because they are easier to unite than an autocracy."⁷ As he had a detailed methodology, he also understood that a constitutional monarchy was necessary to serve as a transition from autocracy and democracy to one-world government, and nationalism would act as a prelude to trans-nationalism.

As Hsiao points out, K'ang played the villain to both conservatives and radicals alike, because of his "incurable gradualism."⁸ "Constitutional monarchy, which he variously referred to as 'benevolent government under monarchial rule' (*chun-chu chih jen-cheng*), or 'joint rule of monarch and people' (*chun min hung chu*), was a less-perfect form, suitable for a country at a lower stage of political development. Autocracy was the lowest and worst possible form of

government, which only prevailed in a politically backward country.” At best, Autocracy would lead to social and intellectual stagnation.^{*9}

K’ang looked to western examples which revealed the success of “human progress” in democratic government. The implementation of K’ang’s three powers highlighted the shared power between deliberative [parliament], judicial, and executive officials.¹⁰ K’ang found inspiration to make use of the monarchy to effect political modernization in Chinese history as well as the histories of England, Russia and Japan.¹¹ He sought the interests of the Emperor, men of letters of different standing as well as officials in other nations.¹²

K’ang was wise enough to realize that the mass of the common people could not be expected simply to know how to receive the reality of democracy, but would need to learn to govern themselves at the grassroots level¹³ by first becoming acquainted with democracy’s principles. Village, district, prefecture, and provincial assemblies would all help them to understand the scope and importance of a national assembly.¹⁴ “The handful of men in China who knew something about Western political history and saw the urgent need for political modernization in their own country (K’ang and Sun Yat-sen) could not afford to wait for or count on the leisurely process of evolution.”¹⁵

In response to practical circumstances, K’ang modified his views regarding the form of democracy suitable for China to. Between 1898 and 1917, his views became “more progressive,” from a constitutional monarchy to republicanism under a titular government. These views were, perhaps, too progressive for the times.¹⁶

Between 1899 and 1905, the restoration of the Kuang Hsu emperor tempered K’ang’s hopes for a constitutional monarchy. Between 1906 and 1907, the *Kuo min hsien-cheng hui* (the

* Hsiao observes that the autocratic system (which did not materialize until centuries after Confucius’ death) was something alien to K’ang: “He stressed the moral importance of human relationships but did not regard allegiance to the sovereign or service the state an absolute moral duty.” (p. 134)

National Constitutional Society), with help from American party supporters, demanded that parliament convene on the constitutional government. This was precisely the root of the problem: The Ch'ing court was willing to adopt a constitution to forestall revolution, but not willing to grant support to the constitutional government. A constitutional government without support was just a piece of paper, or Confucian "pious phrase," without substance.¹⁷

From 1911 to 1912, exposure of the shortcomings of the new republican regime fell in vain. K'ang joined in a counterrevolutionary movement, which culminated in the 1917 monarchic restoration. In 1912, K'ang's objective of reform changed from "the faltering autocracy to the floundering republic," in order to adapt to altered circumstances. Although his position changed, his primary objective, "the political modernization of China by progressive democratization" remained steadfast.¹⁸

Nineteen-sixteen saw K'ang's last attempt to salvage what Hsiao called "the battered republic," by replacing it with monarchical restoration.¹⁹ Because other leaders of the restoration did not take seriously K'ang's endeavors as anything more than the ramblings of an "enemy of the Republic," K'ang's reconstruction did not become a reality. Hsien and the other leaders of the constitutional party, who had no knowledge of Western constitutional government and the affairs of the rest of the world, insisted on restoration of an absolute monarchy.²⁰ The 1917 venture was a rash and revolutionary move that served as the antithesis of K'ang's long developed stratagem of gradualism.²¹

Revolution put an end to autocracy without preparing for democracy. By 1948, the bulk of the people were still not ready for democracy. Convinced that the approach to Western modernization spelled failure, some young intellectuals felt that communism would serve as a working alternative.²²

Hsiao's *Compromise in Late Imperial China* provides an important foundation on which warfare was based. As a student of Confucianism, K'ang Yu-Wei understood the implications of war, and the threat that national boundaries posed to civilization as a whole. He praised the United States for their leap into the republic but had reservations about the adoption of any system for the Chinese government, out of autocracy, except for a constitutional monarchy. K'ang had moved from presenting a very pro-Western approach to, as Hsiao suggests, becoming highly disillusioned with the Western industrial cities that naturally led him to conclude that nothing of moral value could be found any more advanced in the west than in the east. The logical conclusion was that China could at least use the Western example of the industrialization of technology and science.²³ K'ang's opposition to republicanism was based both on China's ill-readiness and what K'ang imputed as republicanism's responsibility for "social and intellectual chaos brought about by indiscriminate Westernization."²⁴ China's embrace of a system of anarchy sprang, at least in part, from confusion over K'ang's specified order.

Analysis of K'ang Yu-Wei's views on the family, should first look to the boundaries of sex and the relationship between woman and man as a primary point, and then secondarily, to address the relationship between man, woman and their children. The relationship between women and men acts as a microcosm of the relations between weak and strong nations or states. As civilization is highly developed in the weaker states, the states known for strength and power are founded on warfare. Conversely, in the earliest societies, women were the progenitors and "originators of all of the arts and crafts of civilization."²⁵ This is perhaps why sex, family and nation are so inextricably linked with one another. Therefore, in the K'angian utopia, when sexual freedom occurs, it will inevitably lead to the destruction of the family structure [the microcosm of the nation], for women will no longer be "tied" to the household. As K'ang stated,

“families form the Great Obstacle”²⁶ to the Utopian vision which he called the one world [or “great community”].

In support of his reform of the Chinese family, K’ang looked to western examples. He cited the 1891 Paris census to address the cases of divorce and children born from monogamous marriage to attempt to compel his countrymen to avoid the horror and boredom of arranged and forced matrimony. Also, K’ang warned that monogamy generated inequality of the sexes and acted as the genesis of the institution of concubinage.

Conversely, the census cited that 147, 872 men and women practiced free love, and 8.5% of the children in the census were recorded as having been born out of wedlock. This means that the other 91.5% of the children in the census were recorded as coming from traditional families. K’ang decried the relationships between Western parents and their children. According to K’ang, European couples had even less reason to rear their children, since they were even less likely to observe ancestor rites than the children of Chinese families, who, as K’ang had observed from the late nineteenth century, spent much of their time in devotion to their ancestors. By minimizing the importance of parenthood, children would be free from the duties of filial piety.²⁷

K’ang’s methodology to abolish the family structure of the late nineteenth century included the initiation of a cluster of state-sponsored care institutions. These began with removing the necessity to care for children by handing them over to the state, and ended in the state-sponsored care of the deceased. As far as K’ang’s theory was concerned, the state should raise, educate, support, heal and offer consolation to the children of the state. According to K’ang, the institutions would mimic the natural progression of life²⁸ in order to eliminate the concerns that might otherwise affect society’s ability to function as a single unit.²⁹

The abolition of familial boundaries was paramount in K'ang's attempts to reform the nation-state. In an effort to embrace a one-world philosophy, state reform of the family institution could not be overlooked. Abolition of the family reflected social change within the scope of the abolition of sex and gender boundaries, which, in turn, reflected back upon the reform of the Chinese family. Without the family, many of the social ills which K'ang had observed as transgressions over women could no longer gain support; for example, the dependence on one's husband, barbaric rites such as foot binding and waist cinching. Eliminating gender bias within the family structure, however, demanded a closer analysis of the relationships between men and women. This analysis is a critical step towards a free and open society, of which gender equality is an essential prerequisite.

The abolition of sex boundaries, in K'ang's mind, was integral to the abolition of both family boundaries and the boundaries of the state or nation. In the late nineteenth century, K'ang looked favorably upon Western nations for their first steps toward a greater allowance of freedoms among the mass of the populations of Europe and America. K'ang understood that such steps were integral, in order for China to present itself as a truly cosmopolitan nation on a par with Japan and the Western world.³⁰ Comparison of K'ang's theory of sex boundaries to the progress and ideas of the feminist movement of the early twentieth century in America may be instructive.

According to K'ang, there was no reason to justify gender inequalities in the education necessary to prepare young people for the workforce. This attitude ran counter to the prevailing mode of organization of many late nineteenth-century societies, where women were not allowed to perform a host of duties. These included education; service in government; political, social and economic independence; and citizenship on par with men. K'ang's asserts that women's

inability to become citizens and involve themselves in public affairs was partially their own fault, due to what he argued was their lack of involvement in and willingness to challenge the existing authority structures.³¹

Based on a statistical analysis on American women of the early twentieth century, Estelle Freedman asserted that the dearth of involvement by women had much to do with a lack of changes in American society.³² K'ang devised a multifaceted plan of reformation for the emancipation of women in late nineteenth century Chinese society. This included the creation of all-girls' schools, including colleges and professional schools, as well as the opening of teaching positions and office positions. Some of these positions included public office, state affairs, parliament, delegates and presidential offices. Finally, K'ang advocated the reformation of marriage, the promotion of travel (for the purpose of self-enrichment), and citizenship and independence.³³

In America, from the 1880s to the 1890s, at the beginning of what would become known as the "Gilded Age," many middle class "new women" chose not to marry, but rather to participate in social welfare, political reform, and other new venues not previously open to citizens of their sex. Many established "homo-social institutions" such as schools, colleges, and settlement houses.³⁴ The early twentieth century marked a new era in women's education, which led to middle class women entering the labor force as teachers, secretaries, social workers and nurses.³⁵ Sex education in America was not designed to change prevailing Victorian ideas about sexuality. The revolution did, however, lead to more open debates about sexuality, an idea that was considered completely taboo in the century before.³⁶

By the beginning of the twentieth century, changing sexual attitudes and social beliefs redefined the "new woman". Because men in the fields of sexology still dictated power through

language, the basis of what it meant to be a woman shifted to “heterosexuality.”³⁷ Rury suggests that some women who preferred the company of other women were beginning to emerge as these “new women”. Based on the language that men used to define “women,” some of the new women who did not meet these criteria were not considered “feminine.” American women were adopting more independent roles, which challenged the domination by men in many areas.³⁸ Despite the roles middle class women played from the late nineteenth century through World War I,³⁹ very few women could attain the status of the “new woman” at the turn of the century.⁴⁰

The major media bias of the Leftists in the 1930s was slanted in favor of men on the issue of feminism, by both male and female commentators.⁴¹ Despite the opposition of the left-leaning media, radical feminism gained success from their alliance with the American Communist Party (CP-USA) in the early twentieth century. “Most 1930s women’s literary radicalism was quite closely linked to the line and practice of the communist Party.” In the merging of the American feminists and the CP-USA, they came to a consensus and focused on organizing women, in much the same way that Marxism organized the proletariat class.⁴² The organization of the women was often termed the proletariat women’s class or the working women’s party. Through the Communist Party, feminists worked towards reforms such as “the abolition of prostitution, an institution of unregistered marriage, the availability of birth control, instituting workplace day care, entry of women into previously sex-segregated jobs” and, until 1936, abortion.⁴³

In China in 1922, a women’s rights league was organized in Peking. In 1923, a group of college students advocated “family democracy” and “full freedom” in marriage. Hsiao observes that “Equality of the sexes and freedom in choosing one’s mate found expression in government legislation.”⁴⁴ The American feminist movement in the early twentieth century made similar changes, although no such reforms to the family or marriage happened at that time. In their first

decade of organized efforts, the early twentieth-century feminists campaigned for child welfare and self-education for voters, wielded great influence over efforts to establish an international structure that would guarantee world peace, and advocated for equal legal status for women.⁴⁵

American women, however, were more concerned with individualism than with a consistent feminist ideology.⁴⁶ American historians' emphasis on the domesticity of women rather than on their non-domestic careers may have perpetuated the cultural stereotypes that have aided in the weakening of feminism since 1920.⁴⁷

Foley wrote that "Revolution entails not just seizing and collectivizing the means of production but dramatically altering social relations."⁴⁸ Women gained slight increases in office holding and non-professional jobs, as well as greater sexual freedom.⁴⁹ While women gained incredible victories through power, education and social freedoms, there were also societal consequences to their actions to society.

Women's emancipation also meant a decline in the authority of fathers, an increase in defiant and divorce-prone women, and a greater demand for unconditional equal opportunity "in every sphere of an equal rights amendment."⁵⁰ It is evident that the potential for earning an independent living did create "a feeling of comparative economic independence in women" which threatened husbandly and parental authority. K'ang's conception of independence for women would, in theory, destroy the format of woman's obeisance towards her husband. In practice, the American reforms for women's rights in education, social freedoms, and worker's rights did just that, and led many women to choose a life without a husband. While this practice strengthened the social need to recognize women on a more equal footing with men, the crucial lack of a system of goals on the part of the feminists and the focus of American historians on the study of domesticism to the exclusion of American feminism contributed to its downfall.

K'ang's marital reforms and female independence placed precedence on education. Women could not attain the freedoms of citizenship unless they completed education by the age of twenty. Likewise, marriage was not an option for women unless they were educated and at least twenty.⁵¹ At that age, a woman could enter a valid, binding contract, including a disposable limit. K'ang believed that because the natures of each individual differs so much, the contract would thus prevent any two people from becoming locked into a situation which would embitter them throughout their lives.⁵² However, a couple would have the option to file to renew the marital contract.⁵³ While feminist reformers in America did much to win new opportunities to women, and challenged the authority of the husband and father in the family, they did not push for reforms of the institution of marriage as K'ang had.

Changing attitudes towards women, of which feminists in American society were responsible, created new problems and opened up new areas of repression. Although women in American society were making progress, their male counterparts still maintained much control through their use of language in defining what exactly a "woman" was. Women who preferred independence and the workforce to the dependence of domesticity were labeled as the anti-heterosexual. This major change to how women were viewed by their male contemporaries could only widen the schism between the sexes.

China also saw reforms for the emancipation of women. There is a possibility that American feminists could have taken the philosophy of Radical thinkers in China and Japan as a guiding influence. However, it is highly unlikely that the feminists and the American Communists were directly influenced by the writings of K'ang Yu Wei, since the *Ta Tung Shu* did not reach publication until after 1930.

In the dawning of a new era, K'ang Yu Wei learned from his Western studies that China

was in dire need of reform, if it was to survive. The Western world presented both positive opportunities of change, and negative examples of a direction that should not be reproduced. K'ang saw a means to preserve the Confucian tradition if it endured slight reform in addition to intellectual and institutional reforms. He wrote, "Anything which is amalgamated from foreign cultures should be used to enrich and supplement the valid elements of Confucianism."⁵⁴

K'ang's philosophy made use of Western and Buddhist ideas, which attributed a cosmopolitan meaning to Confucianism, thus launching a fourth stage of development. Sadly, K'ang's vision failed to attract supporters.⁵⁵ What he did attract, however, was opposition from both the conservatives, "who defended the traditional, political and ideological systems against any change," and the radical reformers, "who sought to adapt tradition to the altered conditions of the empire."⁵⁶ One could say that the radical contempt the reform movement exhibited towards tradition was fueled by an overwhelming amount of misinformation about the Western ideologies that K'ang sought to incorporate into his reforms.

Although K'ang sought to make changes to the traditional aspects of Confucianism and Chinese society, he did not seek the immediate elimination of the Chinese people. On the contrary, he believed that China should be central to any system of cosmopolitanism. As Hsiao observes, for K'ang, "Maintaining national identity was but a necessary step to 'universal peace.'⁵⁷

In repudiating his previous interest in the West by saying, as Hsiao puts it, "Westerners were not as civilized as their Chinese admirers imagined,"⁵⁸ K'ang presented to scholars a major contradiction. Not only had he previously claimed that China could learn industrialization from the West, but his citation of the 1891 Paris Census helped to defend his theory that the institution of marriage was a burden to any truly free society, and must be reformed.

K'ang took his ideal of the "Great Community" seriously. By staying intent on a practical plan of social transformation, he demanded careful production by appropriate means at a proper time. The historian Ch'ien-mu succinctly identifies as one reason why K'ang did not wholly succeed, China's failure to provide objective conditions for the materialization of Ta-tung.⁵⁹

Despite K'ang's efforts, the Chinese family did not disappear, but experienced republican-period changes which were virtually revolutionary. Although not directly the handiwork of K'ang Yu-Wei, a women's rights league, family democracy, and marriage reform made appearances on the social stage of the early 1920s in China. This leads to the provocative question: How is it that China was able to develop a form of democracy in the family and not the nation?

According to Hsiao, the developments made in the 1920s in China did not arise from K'ang's influence. The intellectuals of the time had not seen K'ang's book on the Great Community, and only regarded him as a reactionary who fought against the rise of the "new culture." If we look at K'ang's reforms from a radical and revolutionary perspective, he appears to have failed miserably in his task. However, he was "the first to seize the currents already present in society and to chart a precise course of social transformation." In this respect, K'ang's Great Community was "an effective utopia."⁶⁰

K'ang's personal efforts contributed less to the emancipation of women in Chinese society than the efforts of American feminists of the early twentieth century contributed to the achievement of the gains American women achieved in that period. A common theme running through the histories of both movements is that of pre-Leninist, or "pure Marxist" Communism. Communism was an avenue that K'ang's contemporaries thought would function very well as an

alternative to K'ang's own recommendations for government; American feminism gained more reforms for women's rights by working with the major proponents of Communism in the American political system of the 1930s.

What does this tell us about Communism, national reform and women's rights? The far-reaching effects of American feminism's alliance with the American Communist Party faced the inhibiting influence of the vigorous anti-Communist political attitude of the mass of the American population, until American society could no longer function without accepting some social reforms as inherent to a climate of societal change.

NOTES

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- ¹ Kung-chuan Hsiao, A Modern China and a New World: K'ang Yu-Wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858-1927. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 194.
- ² Kung-chuan Hsiao, "Compromise in Imperial China." *Parerga: Occasional Papers in China*, 6. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 3-64.
- ³ K'ang, Yu-Wei. Ta Tung Shu: The One World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-Wei. Trans. Laurence G Thompson. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958), 82.
- ⁴ K'ang, 79. "[t]he progression from dispersion to union among men, and the principle [whereby] the world [is gradually] proceeding from being partitioned off to being opened up, is a [spontaneous] working of the Way of Heaven (or Nature) and human affairs."
- ⁵ K'ang, 85.
- ⁶ K'ang, 91.
- ⁷ K'ang, 86.
- ⁸ Hsiao, Modern China, 195.
- ⁹ Hsiao, 198.
- ¹⁰ Hsiao, 201.
- ¹¹ Hsiao, 207.
- ¹² Hsiao, 211-2.
- ¹³ Hsiao, 214-5.
- ¹⁴ Hsiao, 215.
- ¹⁵ Hsiao, 230.
- ¹⁶ Hsiao, 248.
- ¹⁷ Hsiao, 242-4; 235.
- ¹⁸ Hsiao, 235.
- ¹⁹ Hsiao, 254.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Hsiao, 257.
- ²² Hsiao, 232-3.
- ²³ Hsiao, 542.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ K'ang, 155. He writes, "This is because men were hunters and had no time to sit at home, thinking and finding new methods of doing things. So it must have been women who stayed at home, who originated such technologies as cooking, agriculture, house-building, weaving, silk-making, cloth-weaving – and including the fine arts, music and writing – while men were still brutes who spent all their time and energies in the hunt."
- ²⁶ K'ang, 184.
- ²⁷ Hsiao, Modern China, 428.
- ²⁸ K'ang, 186. K'ang urged state support for the individual's rights "to be born, to be nurtured, to be educated, to be supported and [to encounter] old age, suffering, sickness, and death."
- ²⁹ K'ang, 187-201.
- ³⁰ Hsiao, Modern China, 483. Hsiao asserts that true democracy could materialize in no other way than by "distribution of political power to all people, including women."
- ³¹ K'ang, 151-4.
- ³² Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 61(2) (September 1977), 376.
- ³³ K'ang, 160-1.
- ³⁴ Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15 (1989), 392-3.
- ³⁵ John L. Rury, "We Teach the Girl Repression, the Boy Expression: Sexuality, Sex Equity and Education in Historical Perspective." *Peabody Journal of Education* (Summer 1987), 52.
- ³⁶ Rury, 53-4.
- ³⁷ Laslett and Brenner, 393.
- ³⁸ Laslett and Brenner, 394.
- ³⁹ Laslett and Brenner, 397.
- ⁴⁰ Laslett and Brenner, 395.

⁴¹ Barbara Foley, "Women and the Left in the 1930s." *American Literary History*, Vol. 2(1) (Spring, 1990), 155. Foley observes that "The left's inadequate treatment of gender issues was by no means restricted to men: women writers also glossed over problems and even adopted a male gaze themselves."

⁴² Foley, 160.

⁴³ Foley, 161.

⁴⁴ Hsiao, 480-1.

⁴⁵ Freedman, 379.

⁴⁶ Freedman, 388. Freedman notes that "A strong ideological stand would enable feminists to recognize their goals consistently and continuously."

⁴⁷ Freedman, 393.

⁴⁸ Foley, 162.

⁴⁹ Freedman, 377-8.

⁵⁰ Freedman, 378.

⁵¹ K'ang, 160-1.

⁵² K'ang, 162-4.

⁵³ K'ang, 166.

⁵⁴ Hsiao, 104. Hsiao observes that, in K'ang's scheme, institutional reforms were meant to be enacted within Confucian frameworks.

⁵⁵ Hsiao, 125.

⁵⁶ Hsiao, 132.

⁵⁷ Hsiao, 518.

⁵⁸ Hsiao, 539.

⁵⁹ Hsiao, 478.

⁶⁰ Hsiao, 481.