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From Sage to Confucian Religious Leader: Kang Youwei's Endeavor to Frame a Universalist Confucianism

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Abstract

Kang Youwei (1858–1927) reimagined Confucius as the founding religious leader of Confucianism, a conceptual framework underpinning his entire ideological system of Confucian thought. Yet existing scholarship has largely overlooked systematic analysis of this theoretical reconstruction. Influenced by the impact–response paradigm, many studies have also neglected Kang's core intention to pursue cross-civilizational dialogue and establish a universalist Confucianism through such interpretive innovation. Faced with the late-Qing predicament of the imbalance between a dominant Western world and a weakened China, Kang thoroughly redefined Confucius by shifting his image from a sage who transmitted rather than created ancient wisdom to a religious authority who reformed institutions through classical precedents. This paper argues that Kang's reinterpretation was neither a simplistic religious adaptation nor a conservative defence of traditional culture. His fundamental aim was to correct Western-centric bias, facilitate equal Sino-Western civilizational dialogue, critique inherent structural dilemmas of modern Western civilization, and propose the Confucian Way as a viable solution to these deep-rooted crises.

Keywords: Kang Youwei; Confucius; sage; Confucian religious leader; civilizational dialogue

1. Introduction

In the modern era, under the Western[1]-dominated international legal system, institutionalized religion as an essential component of Western Christian civilization has become a core criterion for judging whether a tradition qualifies as civilized. Since non-Western peoples lacked equivalent religious structures and concepts, they were deemed ineligible for the application of international law.[2] They were accordingly labeled semi-civilized or even barbaric and regarded as requiring cultural enlightenment. In the name of "civilizing the barbarians", Western powers carried out intervention and aggression. Missionaries advanced eastward, backed by gunboats and artillery.[3]

The Western powers inflicted an unprecedented cultural and civilizational crisis upon non-Western nations. Faced with this predicament, intellectuals from non-Western regions, especially in China, were inevitably confronted with a pivotal yet contentious question: Was Western Christian civilization the sole standard and model for the entire world? Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a preeminent intellectual leader and political reformer in modern China, turned to Confucianism to address this query. However, judged by the Western criteria of religion, Confucianism could not be recognized as a faith equivalent to Western Christianity. Consequently, Kang reimagined Confucius, transforming him from a sage who "transmitted but did not create" into a Confucian religious leader (*Rujiao Jiaozhu*,

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儒教教主), one who sought institutional reform by drawing on ancient precedents. By framing Confucianism as a religion in the Western sense, Kang aimed to secure equal standing for Chinese culture in its global civilizational dialogue with the West. Current scholarly discourse has mainly focused on the significance of Kang's consideration of Confucius as a religious leader yet lacks a systematic analysis of how he redefined Confucius from a traditional sage into a religious figure.[4] Influenced further by the impact–response paradigm[5], some studies interpret Kang's efforts as mere imitation and appropriation of Western civilization, arguing his core aim was to advance political reform for national salvation.[6] Other scholarship portrays Kang as a cultural conservative, suggesting his agenda was to resist Western cultural encroachment amid global competition and safeguard China's cultural autonomy.[7] While these perspectives deepen understanding of Kang's religious interpretation of Confucianism, they overlook his proactive endeavor to construct a universalist Confucianism[8] through his deliberate reimagining of Confucius.

This paper explores how Kang reimagined Confucius from a traditional sage into a religious leader. Moving beyond the impact–response paradigm, it demonstrates that Kang's reinterpretation aimed to secure legitimate standing for Confucianism as the core of Chinese civilization, enabling equal participation in the Western-dominated global dialogue of civilizations and laying the groundwork for a universalist Confucianism. Kang recognized that modern Western influence extended far beyond military power; it also encompassed the cultural dominance of institutionalized religion imposed on non-Western societies. He argued that non-Western nations could not merely emulate the West in material development; they needed equal footing within cross-civilizational discourse. By reframing Confucius as a universal religious figure transcending national boundaries and embracing global relevance, Kang sought to elevate Confucius to an enduring worldwide spiritual authority. In turn, he advanced an alternative framework rooted in the Confucian Way, one capable of critiquing and addressing the inherent predicaments of contemporary Western civilization.

This paper first examines the traditional Chinese conception of Confucius as a sage and clarifies how this identity was understood in premodern discourse. Taking this conventional portrayal as its starting point, the study then analyzes how Kang redefined Confucius from a cultural sage into a religious leader. Finally, it elaborates on how Kang deployed this creative reinterpretation to construct a universalist framework for Confucianism.

2. Sage and Confucius: Traditional Context

The concept of the sage is not static but has evolved throughout Chinese history, carrying rich and complex connotations. A comprehensive exploration of this notion, however, lies neither within the focus nor the scope of the present study. The following discussion will highlight three core characteristics of the sage in traditional contexts and illustrate how Confucius fully embodies these traits.

The first essential characteristic of the sage lies in the sage's capacity to mediate between the Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) and the Way of Man (*ren dao* 人道).[9] Within traditional Chinese thought, the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man form a crucial conceptual pair. The Way of Heaven generally denotes the inherent laws and principles governing the natural order of the cosmos, while the Way of Man refers to the order, morality, and norms that underpin human society's existence and development. The Way of Heaven serves as the ultimate reference for the Way of Man: only by aligning with the Way of Heaven can individuals establish their life foundations and secure their life purposes and can societies achieve harmony and stability.

Since the Way of Heaven is formed and conceived beforehand, the sage cannot create it but can only comprehend its principles. Based on his understanding of the Way of Heaven, the sage formulates the rituals, laws, institutions, and ethics that structure human society. The *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) describes this principle: "Thus, when the sage establishes norms, he must take Heaven and Earth as his foundation, Yin 陰 and Yang 陽 as his starting point, the four seasons as his handle, the sun and stars as his chronicle, the moon as his measure, spirits and deities as his references, the Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行) as his substance, ritual and righteousness (*liyi* 禮義) as his instruments, human sentiments as his fields, and the Four Spirits (*siling* 四灵: unicorn, phoenix, tortoise, and dragon in Confucian context) as his symbolic counterparts." (*Liji*, "Liyun"; X. Sun 1989, p. 612). Two key points emerge here. First, the sage's creation is grounded in his discovery of natural laws. Second, the sage does not mechanically apply the Way of Heaven but emulates Heaven (*xiangtian* 象天) by comprehending and transforming its principles into social norms (M. Sun 2023, p. 182). The *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易) further demonstrates such a mediating role, saying "Heaven generates spiritual beings, and the sage models himself on them; Heaven and Earth undergo changes, and the sage emulates them; Heaven hangs down signs to reveal good and ill fortune, and the sage takes these as prototypes." (*Zhouyi*, Xici shang 11). Thus, the sage can be understood as a discoverer, an articulator, and an emulator of the Way of Heaven.

We can observe numerous instances in which Confucius mediates between Heaven and man, a role revealed through his discovery, articulation, and emulation of the Way of Heaven. His discovery of the Way of Heaven is documented in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) in his statement: "At fifty, I understood the Decree of Heaven" (*Analects* 2:4). The "Decree of Heaven" here does not refer to an enigmatic mandate from a supernatural force, but rather denotes Confucius' comprehensive understanding of the Way of Heaven and the relationship between Heaven and humankind, forged through a lifetime of inquiry. Regarding his articulation of the Way of Heaven, Confucius remarks elsewhere in the *Analects*, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons proceed, and all things grow. Does Heaven speak" (*Analects* 17:19). For Confucius, the Way of Heaven reveals itself not through verbal pronouncements, but through the ordering principles that govern the cosmos. Confucius' emulation of Heaven is evident in his application of the Way of Heaven to human affairs. This form of emulation is described in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), "Zhongni (namely Confucius) followed the ways of Yao and Shun, and modeled himself on the institutions of Wen and Wu; he conformed to the celestial seasons above and complied with the laws of land and water below" (*The Doctrine of the Mean* 30; Chen and Xu 2011, p. 352). Thus, Confucius' sagehood is embodied in his harmonious alignment with the Way of Heaven and its actualization within the human realm.

The second essential characteristic of the sage is his ability to effectively uphold social order and promote the well-being of the people.[10] This capacity is embodied in the core Confucian ideal of "inner sageliness, outer kingship" (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王)[11], which signifies the organic unity of inner moral self-cultivation and external meritorious governance. As articulated in the ideal of *neisheng waiwang*, inner sageliness provides the indispensable moral foundation for outer kingship, while the latter actualizes benevolent order and collective well-being for society. Yet this lofty ideal has often faced profound challenges in practice. Virtuous individuals frequently lack positions of political authority, leaving them little opportunity to extend their moral integrity and wisdom to benefit society. Conversely, those who wield political power often rule without genuine virtue. History abounds with examples of rulers who abused their authority for selfish gain, acting tyrannically and inflicting suffering upon the people. Thus, the ultimate embodiment of the sage is the sage-king (*shengwang* 聖王), one who unites supreme virtue with legit-

imate political power. Exemplary sage-kings include Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen of Zhou, King Wu of Zhou, and the Duke of Zhou. As recorded in the *Mencius*, these sage-kings dedicated themselves to constant self-cultivation and governed through benevolent virtue, thereby bringing peace, order, and prosperity to the world (*Mencius* 4B:20).

Although Confucius never became a sage-king, he assumed the responsibility of upholding human order in the capacity of the "Uncrowned king" (*Su Wang* 素王). This mission was primarily manifested in Confucius' work of editing and compiling the Six Classics (*Liujing* 六經) and his engagement in education. Confucius famously described himself as "a transmitter, not a creator, believing in and loving the ancients" (*Analects* 7:1), making it clear that his role lay in transmitting the Way of the former kings rather than creating new doctrines. Through the compilation of the Six Classics, Confucius systematically edited and transmitted the political thought of the ancient sage-kings, preserving the social and moral norms they had established. In this sense, the Six Classics compiled by Confucius indeed constituted the cultural and educational foundation for reconstructing the ritual order during the Spring and Autumn period, when the ritual order had collapsed. Confucius' effort to reconstruct the ritual order is further reinforced by his revolutionary conception of teaching, namely "Teaching without discrimination" (*Analects* 15:39). This conception broke the aristocratic monopoly on education and extended the scope of knowledge instruction to ordinary people, thereby laying the foundation for reconstructing a social order. Confucius also focuses on the teaching of morality by saying that "Aspire to the Dao, base yourself on virtue, lean on benevolence, and dwell in the six arts" (*Analects* 7:6). The realization of social order depends heavily on cultivating the morality of individuals. For these reasons, Xunzi equated Confucius with the ancient sage-kings, "Confucius was benevolent, wise, and unclouded by prejudice; thus, having mastered the art of governing chaotic states, he was fully qualified to be a sage-king" (*Xunzi* 21:5). Although he never ascended the throne like the ancient sage-kings, Confucius played an equally vital role in restoring social order through his virtues and, above all, through his teaching.

The third essential characteristic of the sage is his attainment of a state of nearly perfect moral character.[12] As stated in the *Book of Changes*, "The sage is one who fully develops his inherent nature" (*Zhouyi*, Shuogua 1), a passage that affirms the sage as the ultimate culmination of moral cultivation. Furthermore, the *Family Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家語) portrays how the sage's flawless moral character exerts a transformative and nourishing influence upon all things under heaven (Song 2019, p. 40). In addition, the *Mencius* draws an illuminating analogy between the sage and the compass and set square (*Mencius* 4A:2) to illustrate the sage's ideal moral status. Just as the compass and set square constitute the ultimate standards for shaping perfect circles and squares, the sage embodies the supreme moral paradigm for all humankind. Confucius is widely regarded as the paradigmatic figure who fully embodied perfect moral character. His disciples offer vivid portrayals of his consummate moral state. Yan Yuan 顏淵 exclaimed, "The more I look up to it, the higher it appears; the more I delve into it, the harder it proves to be" (*Analects* 9:11). Zi Gong 子貢 used a metaphor to illustrate its vastness and profundity: "The wall of my master's virtue is several ren high; if one cannot find the gate to enter, it is impossible to behold the grandeur of the ancestral temple and the richness of the official chambers inside" (*Analects* 19:23). These testimonies from his closest disciples reveal that Confucius' moral character was not merely exceptional but virtually beyond full comprehension. Most notably, Mencius regarded Confucius as the most virtuous person in human history, declaring that "Since the birth of humankind, no one has ever matched Confucius in virtue" (*Mencius* 2A:2). With this assessment, Mencius places Confucius at the pinnacle of moral attainment, affirming that he not only fulfills but transcends the very standard of sagehood defined within the Confucian tradition.

Having examined how Confucius fully embodies the three defining characteristics of the sage, we can understand why later generations regarded him as the ultimate synthesizer of the sage lineage. As Rudolf Wagner succinctly articulates: "sages are rare world-class figures capable of altering the course of history and establishing peace and prosperity. The last recognized member of this exalted group was none other than Confucius." (Wagner 2002, p. 147). Nevertheless, the sagely characteristics embodied by Confucius all reside within the secular and human realm, distinguishing him fundamentally from religious leaders who embody sacred and transcendent qualities. Missionaries such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1717) similarly observed that Chinese veneration of Confucius and its associated rituals were secular in nature, lacking the elements of religious worship (Perkins 2004, pp. 28–9). Thus, Kang's project to reimagine Confucius as a religious leader requires the erasure of Confucius's human attributes and the investment of him with divine qualities.

3. Kang Youwei's Reshaping of Confucius as a Religious Leader

To invest Confucius with divine attributes, Kang elevated Confucius to a status equivalent to Heaven. He decomposed the Chinese character for Heaven into its constituent parts: "one" (*yi* 一) and "great" (*da* 大). "One" signifies uniqueness and exclusivity, while "great" denotes supremacy and authority. Kang stated: "Is there anyone worthy of being matched with Heaven but Confucius? Yet I contend: Heaven's preeminent status can be transferred to Confucius, and Confucius can ascend to become Heaven itself." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 5, first published in 1893). Here, Kang did not intend to replace Heaven with Confucius or place Confucius above Heaven; instead, through his arguments of being worthy of Heaven and advancing to attain the status of Heaven, he elevated Confucius to the supreme status of being equivalent and unified with Heaven.

Since Confucius was unified with Heaven, everything he established and articulated naturally became the manifestation of the Way of Heaven itself. As Kang declared: "Confucius' words are not his own words, but the words of Heaven. Confucius' institutions and righteousness are not his own, but the institutions and righteousness of Heaven." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 365, first published in 1895). In other words, the doctrine founded by Confucius became the all-encompassing Way of Heaven itself, possessing the absoluteness and universality inherent in the Way of Heaven. Through such arguments, Confucius possessed divine attributes analogous to the ultimate authority in Western religions.

We have previously argued that Confucius was regarded as the "Uncrowned king" not through engaging in creation (i.e., legislative and institutional creation) for society, but by compiling the classics of the sage-kings and conducting educational activities to preserve the ritual and musical system, a system that once existed but had been corrupted. In Kang's view, portraying Confucius merely as a guardian of tradition clearly failed to highlight his authority as the religious leader of Confucianism. Therefore, Kang needed to transform Confucius into a divine lawgiver and institutional founder. According to Kang, the authentic Confucius can be found in the subtle words and profound meanings of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) as interpreted by the *Gongyangzhuan* 公羊傳, a key text of the modern-text school (*jinwen jingxue* 今文經學). This school depicts Confucius as establishing institutions and enacting reforms for future generations. However, Liu Xin 劉歆, an authority in the late Western Han, elevated the ancient-text (*guwen* 古文) *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳over the *Gongyangzhuan*, thereby reducing Confucius to a mere transmitter. As Kang observed: "Since Liu Xin used the *Zuozhuan* to undermine the *Gongyangzhuan*, employed forged ancient-text classics to attack the oral teachings of the modern-text school, replaced Confucius with the Duke of Zhou周公, and substituted transmitting for creating, Confucius has since been reduced to no more than a man of erudition and virtue for later

generations—not the Reformist Sage-King and religious leader who established institutions and laws." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 3, p. 101, first published in 1892–1898). For Kang, this was no mere scholarly dispute. The stakes were nothing less than the very identity of Confucius: The transmitter of Confucius as a compiler in ancient-text Confucianism clearly fell short of his need to present Confucius as a divine lawgiver and religious leader. Kang pointed out that "when Wang Mang usurped the throne, Liu Xin took the opportunity to revise and forge those Confucian classics in order to cater to Wang and provide a theoretical basis for the legitimacy of the new regime." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 1, p. 429, first published in 1891). This statement directly links Liu's act of falsifying Confucian classics to the timeline of Wang's usurpation of the Han Dynasty. By questioning the authenticity of the ancient-text classics, he rejected the image of Confucius as a mere "transmitter", paving the way for his own reconstruction of Confucius as the religious leader of Confucianism.

The Six Classics were traditionally regarded as the political doctrines of ancient kings, not Confucius' original creations. In Kang's view, if Confucius were merely a transmitter, his authority would be derivative, stemming from the ancient sage-kings. Such an image was wholly incompatible with the founders of Western religions (who possess original doctrines), and far from sufficient to establish Confucius' status as a religious leader. Thus, by arguing "All the Six Classics were authored by Confucius." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 143, first published in 1896), Kang attributed all political principles within the Six Classics to Confucius. Yet in this radical assertion existed a contradiction. Confucius' compilation and interpretation of the Six Classics stemmed from his profound admiration for, and desire to restore, the ritual and musical system established by ancient kings. The Six Classics naturally contain extensive admiration and imitation for these earlier rulers. But if Kang classified the Six Classics as Confucius' personal reformist ideology, why do they contain such extensive admiration for the sage-kings? Kang explained this as: "For a commoner, to propose institutional reforms is so extraordinary that would shock people; therefore, by attributing such reforms to the ancient kings, one avoids creating such shock and sidesteps calamity." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 3, p. 141, first published in 1892–1898). Such an argument by Kang is corroborated by Herbert Fingarette's insightful note: "Confucius spoke of reviving the harmonious vision of ancient society, yet the practical significance of his teachings lay in guiding people to seek new ways of interpreting and renewing a local tradition. The aim was to generate a fresh and universal order to replace the prevailing chaos and disorder." (Fingarette 1972, p. 60). In other words, Kang held that, to rectify the problems arising from the declining Zhou dynasty, Confucius invoked the authority of ancient kings to reform the contemporary institutions, thereby handing down a reformed system with universal laws for posterity (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 365, first published in 1893–1897). In so doing, Kang transformed Confucius into a lawgiver and institutional founder.

A crucial step in reimagining Confucius as a religious leader is to shift the origin of his morality from the worldly realm to the divine realm. However, within the Confucian tradition, the supreme moral character of the sage was attained through self-cultivation. As recorded in the *Analects*: "The gentleman seeks moral perfection within himself" (*Analects* 15:21) and "Cultivate oneself with reverence" (*Analects* 14:42). This implies that anyone who steadily engages in self-cultivation possesses the potential to achieve sagehood. This principle is illustrated through an anecdote in the *Mencius*. When Cao Jiao 曹交 asked Mencius whether ordinary people could become sages like Yao and Shun, Mencius responded affirmatively (*Mencius* 6B:2). The *Xunzi* 荀子 likewise advances a view consistent with the *Mencius*, stating that "An ordinary person by accumulating virtues to perfection can be called a sage" (*Xunzi* 8:14). Thus, to erase the secular foundation of Confucius's morality, Kang must reframe Confucius as a savior endowed with a divine mission.

He proclaimed: "Heaven, lamenting the great sufferings of humanity on earth, dispatched the Black Emperor (Heidi 黑帝) to descend with his divine essence to deliver the people from affliction. This figure—none other than Confucius—became a divine being, a sage-king, a teacher for all generations, a protector of all people, and the religious leader of the world." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 3, p. 3, first published in 1892–1898). In this account, Kang portrays Confucius as the incarnation of the divine Black Emperor, a conception analogous to the Christian doctrine that the Word became flesh (Xie 2023, p. 62).

In this way, Confucius's morality is portrayed as divinely bestowed rather than earned through self-cultivation. His divine morality is reflected in his roles as a teacher of all generations and protector of all people, echoing the salvific qualities shared by religious leaders. More importantly, by relocating the origin of Confucius's morality from the secular to the divine, Kang overturned the traditional Confucian belief that anyone can become a sage. For Kang, only a religious leader—a divine incarnation—can inherently possess such exalted moral status, thereby establishing the uniqueness and supremacy of Confucius as a sacred figure.

While Kang theoretically constructed Confucius from a sage to a religious leader, he recognized that this newly shaped religious leader required an institutional framework to actualize his authority. To this end, he proceeded to construct an institution tailored to the Confucian religion.

Kang advocated an ecclesiastical organizational system for Confucianism akin to that of Western Christianity. His specific proposal is described as follows: "In every town and city, establish a Confucian Church. Elect scholars well-versed in the Six Classics and Four Books as lecturers. With a seven-day rest period, they shall expound the Confucian classics, with both men and women permitted to attend." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 4, p. 98, first published in 1898). Drawing upon the precedent that "all nations chronicle their years by their religious founder." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 9, p. 161, first published in 1910). Kang petitioned to replace imperial reign titles with a calendar based on Confucius' birth.

Kang also proposed the integration of Confucian religion into the state apparatus by conferring official titles and allocating state funds: "Scholars of exceptional talent and erudition in the Confucian Studies Program who seek to propagate Confucius' teachings abroad shall be expressly rewarded by imperial decree. They shall be granted titles from the Imperial College or the Hanlin Academy翰林院, supported by funds, and protected by local envoys and consuls who shall provide credentials enabling their travels." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 43, first published in 1895). Furthermore, to ensure a steady supply of qualified personnel for the Confucian religion, Kang sought to institutionalize its doctrines through the education system. He suggested that "it is now imperative to establish a special examination in Confucian scholarship. Those distinguished Confucian scholars who expound Confucius' teachings shall, irrespective of seniority, be granted additional honors and appointed to positions at the Imperial College or selected for educational administration." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 2, p. 43, first published in 1895).

Thus, Kang not just reshaped Confucius into a religious leader with divine attributes, legislative authority, and a sacred mission, but further designed a fully institutionalized Confucian religion modeled on Western Christianity. It is important to note that Kang's initiative appeared on the surface to be a mere superficial imitation of Western Christian civilization, but such imitation was in fact a careful choice to facilitate civilizational dialogue. As Lauren Pfister observes, "In the earliest years of the twentieth century, Kang had already begun to creatively envision what the earth and all nations might become if the world could learn something from the Chinese sage Confucius" (Pfister 2014, p. 244). While Pfister does not detail how Kang established Confucius as the religious leader, he

accurately discerns the core intent behind Kang's engagement in global civilizational dialogue: to explore Confucianism's potential contributions to the contemporary world.

4. Kang Youwei's Construction of a Universalist Confucianism

By reconstructing Confucius as the foundational figure of a formalized Confucian religious system, Kang strove to establish Confucianism's cross-cultural applicability. He identified profound structural flaws inherent to modern Western society and formulated a Confucian ideological framework to address such systemic maladies. Following the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (*Wuxu Bianfa* 戊戌變法), Kang spent sixteen years in exile overseas, gaining firsthand experience of the realities of Western society. During this period, he travelled through over thirty countries, conducting comprehensive investigations and analyses of the political systems, economic conditions, and social structures of European and American nations. While profoundly astonished by the West's achievements in science, technology, and material civilization, he also keenly observed the existence of problems such as power politics, extreme wealth disparity, and moral decay within Western societies.

Kang's criticism initially targeted the Western-dominated international order, rife with power politics logic and hypocrisy. Kang recognized that the Universal Law of Nations was merely the mask of the modern international order. While ostensibly proclaiming sovereign equality among nations, it was fundamentally underpinned by the logic of might making right—the law of the jungle. Even among Western nations themselves, states frequently plunged into unrestrained conflict and warfare in pursuit of maximizing their own interests. During his travels in Germany, Kang observed: "Now I understand that even the European powers are bullied by the mightiest of nations, enduring oppression much like our own country. This applies to major powers such as Britain, France, and Austria; as for smaller states like Holland, Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark, their submissive acceptance of humiliation scarcely merits mention. For the strong to oppress the weak is the natural order of heaven and the natural course of human affairs." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 454, first published in 1904). While travelling through Spain, Kang was appalled by how the West, leveraging technological revolution and military superiority, had carved up colonies across the globe. He remarked: "From that time forth, explorers of new lands arose in succession. Portugal and the Netherlands vied for dominance in the East, South, and West Oceans; Britain and France expanded their colonial territories. Thus, the entire globe became a tool for Europeans to dissect and divide, leaving scarcely a fragment untouched." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 8, p. 299, first published in 1907). Kang spoke bluntly of the persecution endured by colonial peoples, denouncing it as barbaric acts. He observed: "Wherever troops enter a nation, they often plunder women and occupy people's homes—acts of barbarism beyond compare, yet perpetrated by nations claiming to be civilized. When the armies of Britain, America, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, Italy, and Austria entered Shuntian (順天: Beijing area in the Qing Dynasty), this practice persisted, with Russia, France, and Germany being the worst offenders. These nations too remain savages." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 6, p. 283, first published in 1901).

Kang's critique of the West extended beyond its predatory conduct among nations. He turned his attention to the structural maladies festering within Western economic and social systems themselves, that is, the severe wealth polarization engendered by capitalist modes of production under Western industrial civilization. Observing how Western nations universally replaced manual labor with machinery and how large factories absorbed smaller ones, Kang lamented in his *Datongshu*: "Machinery in this present century is just in its infancy, yet the gulf between rich and poor has already become so vast." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 154, first published in 1902). Such economic inequality is also articu-

lated in another place: "one feasts on delicacies while another cannot afford the most humble fare; one dwells in palaces of dozens of stories and gardens stretching for miles while another finds no shelter; one adorns himself with jeweled robes and diamond-studded vests, yet another cannot even afford a rope belt." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 32, first published in 1902).

For the root cause and consequences of such extreme wealth disparity in Western societies, Kang suggested that "by permitting the people to buy and sell private property, each possessing their own private holdings, wealth inevitably becomes unequal, and there remains no means to achieve equilibrium." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 154, first published in 1902). The consequences of this inequality even extended beyond economic grievances into deeper social unrest. He continued to remark that "The recent conflicts between labor unions and employers, which were gaining momentum in Europe and America, represented merely a beginning; they were destined to intensify." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 154, first published in 1902).

It should be noted that while Kang exposed the political and economic problems of the West, he remained deeply admiring of its material development. Kang described Western material progress in effusive terms: "soaring and flourishing, originating decades before my birth and reaching its zenith decades after. It surpassed all antiquity, spread across the six directions, engulfed all like a torrent, surged like a mighty flood, and drowned everything in its path." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 8, p. 63, first published in 1904). As Hsiao Kung-ch'üan notes: "Close observation dispelled his reverence for Western politics and society, yet heightened his admiration for its material civilization." (Hsiao 1975, p. 417). Kang maintained that with China facing imminent national subjugation, absorbing Western material civilization was vital for national survival, stating: "Power is strength; strength lies in the abundance of material resources. Thus, in this age of relentless innovation, those who master material studies shall live, while those who neglect them shall perish." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 8, p. 63, first published in 1904).

Notably, a more insidious crisis beyond economic inequality also drew Kang's attention: the erosion of moral and spiritual life under extreme materialism. Kang keenly observed that Western nations' extreme worship of material wealth had spawned grave moral decay, noting: "Their custom reveres wealth, hence they scorn poverty and crave profit; any means to acquire gold is deemed acceptable. Yet while such nations may indeed be wealthy and powerful, as for moral transformation and social edification I know not. Their so-called civilization is judged by the outward display of material wealth; but in terms of moral character and customs, loyalty and trustworthiness have been diluted, virtue and integrity have been eroded—what civilization is there to speak of?" (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 8, p. 67, first published in 1904).

To offer his Confucian framework as a solution to these crises, Kang repeatedly argued that the Confucian Way embraces all humanity rather than being confined solely to China, thereby underscoring the universal nature of Confucianism. He stressed: "The subtle teachings of Confucius are the true transmission, the supreme treasure of all nations, and the divine formula to revive all living beings under heaven." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 545, first published in 1901–1902).

In response to the conflict-ridden reality of Western power politics, Kang turned to the Confucian concept of benevolence to envision an alternative international order, one distinct from and capable of correcting the logic of "might makes right". Kang first established benevolence as a universal principle, going beyond Chinese tradition and belonging to all humanity, stating that "Benevolence is the universal and generative basis for existence; where one fully embodies this principle, it may be practiced everywhere." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 6, p. 484, first published in c.1902). Kang also gave the core con-

notation of benevolence: "Though Confucius spoke of benevolence in myriad forms, this expression of benevolence through loving others truly captures its fundamental meaning." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 6, p. 478, first published in c.1902). Based on the premise that the essence of benevolence lies in loving others, Kang derived a vision of human relations fundamentally different from the Western discourse of equal rights, "If we examine this from the perspective of ordinary people, benevolence means loving others. If one does not love others, others will not love oneself in return; without love, one will be violated to the extreme, and thus cannot even protect one's own body." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 439, first published in 1901). Here, Kang offered a Confucian alternative to the adversarial individualism underpinning Western political thought. Furthermore, Kang argued that benevolence can govern relations among states just as it governs personal relations, saying that "Those who cultivate trust and harmony, whether nations interacting with nations or individuals engaging with individuals, shall all stand equal and self-reliant, refraining from mutual encroachment. They shall establish mutual treaties and faithfully observe them, upholding righteousness in their time, fostering peaceful kinship and harmonious relations. This requires only the absence of deceit and apprehension, the avoidance of strife and slaughter—no myriad laws need be enacted. This is the universal principle of trust among friends." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 547, first published in 1901–1902).

To address the wealth disparity prevalent in Western society, Kang advocated restraining selfishness with equity. He contended that a society's healthy development cannot be achieved solely through unrestrained commercial competition and private property without ethical constraints. Drawing upon the Confucian ideal of the world as a commonwealth, he constructed a blueprint for an equitable society, which manifested in three key aspects.

Kang initially advocated replacing private property with communal ownership to prevent excessive concentration of productive resources in private or corporate hands. For example, in the *Datongshu*, he proposed: "To achieve universal harmony today, one must first abolish private property. All agricultural, industrial, and commercial enterprises must be returned to the public domain." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 7, p. 156, first published in 1902). Then, Kang emphasized society's responsibility for citizens' survival and development, advocating the establishment of comprehensive social welfare systems, that is, "in a communal society, all shall share the resources necessary for sustenance and livelihood as public property, to support the aged, nurture the young, alleviate poverty, and treat the sick. When only the able-bodied are employed, no one shall suffer the anxieties of old age, illness, orphanhood, or destitution." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 547, first published in 1901–1902). Last, Kang suggested that every member of society should replace self-interest with a public-minded spirit of altruism. He argues that only this shift could eradicate human greed. This characteristic is reflected in his utopia, "In the age of Great Harmony, all shall regard the public good as their household; private interests shall cease to exist. Hearts shall be fair and impartial, and greed shall vanish. Thus, people may freely pursue their leisure and enjoyment." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 453, first published in 1901). In Kang's envisioned ideal state, every individual endeavors to promote the collective welfare of all, rather than the gratification of selfish or personal desires. The property belongs to the commonwealth. The wellbeing of every member of society is properly safeguarded. (A. H. Y. Chen 2013, p. 97).

To counter the excesses of Western materialism, Kang advocated the principle of restraining desires through ritual. On the one hand, he maintained that human desires stem from nature, and that material goods associated with such desires as dwellings, clothing, and utensils are indispensable to human survival and development. On the other hand, desires for material objects ought not to be immoderate and must be tempered and gov-

erned (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 1, p. 107, first published in 1886). The instrument employed to regulate desires is ritual; more precisely, ritual permits the fulfillment of desires within legitimate limits while prohibiting overindulgence (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, p. 561, first published in 1901–1902).

Beyond this, modern materialism frequently gives rise to fierce competition for material resources, which often results in brutal oppression and animosity. Kang held that competition is inherent in human nature and thus cannot be fully eradicated, yet it can be appropriately constrained. Rituals, especially those centered on yielding and deference, set proper limits on competitive behavior (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 5, pp. 560–61, first published in 1901–1902; Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 6, p. 396, first published in c.1902). To illustrate how inherent tensions in competitive life may be mediated, Kang cites the Archery Rites, a specific ritual that integrates martial skill and virtuous conduct. "When victory is won in a contest, the victor must not abuse power or act tyrannically. Instead, he should show compassion toward the defeated by offering wine—not to command or humiliate, but to extend sympathy. Rites are meant to ward off insult and preserve existence, to uphold dignity and strive for success." (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 6, p. 396, first published in c.1902). Ritual thus serves as a highly effective mechanism for fostering social harmony in the modern competitive world.

Overall, by diagnosing the deep-rooted moral and social predicaments within modern Western civilization and offering Confucianism as an alternative to address these crises, Kang not only positioned China on an equal footing for cross-cultural dialogue with Western powers. More importantly, he demonstrated that Confucianism carries substantial relevance for the contemporary world at large.

5. Conclusions

Under the impact of Western Christian civilization, Kang reimagined Confucius not merely as a sage but as the foundational religious leader of Confucianism. This framework was neither a superficial religious parallel nor a conservative attempt to safeguard traditional Confucian thought. Instead, it formed his core strategic move to build a universalist version of Confucianism, one capable of diagnosing and resolving the deep crises within modern Western civilization.

By attributing divine authority to Confucius and elevating him to the status of a religious founder and moral lawgiver, Kang transformed Confucianism from a secular ethical system into a universal institutionally structured faith. Even so, his efforts to institutionalize Confucianism ultimately ended in failure. Domestically, his proposal to establish Confucianism as China's state religion met firm rejection among his contemporaries, while his plans to construct Confucian temples and schools yielded little practical progress. His Confucian religious movement also encountered setbacks abroad. Fundamentally, Kang's vision relied excessively on political backing and lacked the grassroots social foundation essential for an authentic world religion. Furthermore, his radical reinterpretation of classical Confucian texts drew strong opposition from other leading Confucian scholars of his time.

Nevertheless, Kang's intellectual contributions remain substantial and fall into three core dimensions. First, he upheld the cultural subjectivity and autonomy of Chinese tradition against Western dominance. Second, he restructured Confucianism's foundational authority by granting it a transcendent spiritual footing comparable to that of Christianity. Third, he articulated a constructive Confucian alternative rooted in benevolence, ritual propriety, and the ideal of the Great Harmony.

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Notes

1 The concept of "the Western powers" employed herein is not a purely geographical category, but rather denotes the industrial and military nations of the 19th and early 20th centuries that took Christianity, particularly Protestantism and Catholicism, as the marker of their civilizational identity.

2 James Lorimer employed Christian civilization as his yardstick, categorizing nations into civilized, barbarous, and savage states, while emphasizing that barbarous and savage nations would not be accorded full political recognition (Lorimer 1883, p. 101). Lassa Oppenheim explicitly defined international law as the legally binding customs and conventions governing relations among civilized nations (Oppenheim 1920, p. 1). Henry Wheaton asserted that public law applied only to Christian civilization, and that no public law existed applicable to all peoples and nations (Wheaton 1936, p. 15).

3 Such a fact is recognized by both Chinese and Western intellectuals at that time. As Kang Youwei observed, the West uses military power to back both trade and religious propagation, with its missionary activities evolving from converting the people to vying for the nation (Kang [1884] 2020, vol. 4, p. 92, first published in 1898). Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) similarly noted that the spread of a religion depends on a nation's military strength (Zhang 1998, p. 50). Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) stated that Westerners come to China with three objectives—war, profit, and missionary work—all of which are coercive in nature and aim to compel the world to embrace Western culture (Russell 1922, p. 196). Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932) observed that the West believes its religion is the only true one and feels obligated to impose it on other nations by force if necessary (Dickinson 1911, p. 11).

4 Li Zehou 李澤厚 elaborated in detail how Kang Youwei employed Confucius as a Confucian religious figurehead to construct his ideology of institutional reform, yet he did not elucidate how Kang reimagined Confucius as this "Confucian religious figurehead." (Li 1958, pp. 152–53). Kung-ch'üan Hsiao systematically contrasted Confucianism with Christianity, yet failed to demonstrate how Kang reshaped "Confucius the Confucian religious Leader." (Hsiao 1975, pp. 105–22).

5 The "impact–response" research paradigm, proposed by American historian John K. Fairbank, offers a significant perspective for studying modern Chinese history. It defines the period from 1839 to 1923 as an interactive process of "Western impact" and "Chinese response". During this era, China's response to Western influence manifested in two fundamental orientations: actively learning from the West or steadfastly upholding its own civilization (Teng and Fairbank 1979, pp. 1–21).

6 Wakeman, Frederic, Jr. focused on analyzing how Kang employed Western religious forms and Western learning concepts to reshape the traditional content of Confucianism (Wakeman 1975, pp. 201–4). Liang Qichao 梁啟超 noted that Kang Youwei erroneously believed that the general prosperity and power of Western nations stemmed from their Christian civilization, thus concluding that China must also learn Western Christian civilization to become powerful. Kang's elevation of Confucius to the status of a Confucian religious Leader was merely an imitation of Western religious forms (Liang 2016, p. 120).

7 Joseph R. Levenson regarded Kang Youwei as a representative of nationalism, arguing that he attributed all Western values to the inherent principles of Confucius (Levenson 1966, p. 81). Kung-ch'üan Hsiao similarly contends that Kang regarded Confucianism as the most fundamental value, resolutely guarding it against being subsumed by Western learning (Hsiao 1975, pp. 103–4). Gan Chunsong 干春松 contends that Kang did not seek to establish universal values, but rather focused on preserving Confucianism and building the nation (Gan 2015, p. 148).

8 Universalist Confucianism denotes the universal values and principles of Confucianism applicable across diverse regions, eras, and cultures. Chen Lai 陳來 contends that the Confucian maxim "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" constitutes the golden rule of world ethics and the fundamental principle of global ethics (L. Chen 2022, p. 30). Tang Yijie 湯一介 distinguishes between Universalist Confucianism and the meaning of universal values in Confucianism, arguing that a certain intrinsic unity of universal values exists across different cultures, including Confucianism (Tang 2012, pp. 1–2). Ren Jiantao 任劍濤 contends that modern China's chronic poverty and weakness led Confucianism from universalism towards particularism. Nevertheless, the Confucian doctrine of Ren (benevolence), formed upon the universal concept of "humanity", represents the most distinct manifestation of traditional Confucianism's universalist stance (Ren 2011, p. 7).

[9] From the perspective of the relationship between Heaven and Man, it is a widely accepted consensus in relevant research that the traditional Chinese sage is regarded as an intermediary bridging the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man. For instance, Tang Lin 唐琳 and Jinjin Qiao 喬金金 demonstrate through an analysis of the *Zhouyi* 周易 (I Ching) that participating in the transformation and nurturing of all things to fulfill the principles of life and destiny constitutes the profound essence of the sage's generative virtue. Its specific manifestations include delving deeply into subtle cosmic principles to adapt to changing times, teaching the people divination to pursue good fortune and avoid misfortune, and observing celestial phenomena to create tools for the benefit of the people (Tang and Qiao 2024, p. 71). In another study, Shi Kaiwen 施凱文 and Tao Liang 梁濤 examine the origin of the term "Sheng" (the Confucian sage). Starting from its earliest connotation of serving divine beings, they argue that the sage acts in accordance with Heaven and guides their actions by the principles of the Way of Heaven (Shi and Liang 2021, p. 82).

[10] For instance, Zhu Hanmin 朱汉民 believes that the primary mission of the sage was to carry out social activities such as forming clan alliances, managing economic production, providing disaster relief, conducting social governance, and maintaining human ethical order (Zhu 2023, p. 72). Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall contend that only those who attain sagehood through utmost sincerity (*zhicheng* 至誠)—a core Confucian virtue—can, through their own creativity, establish the world's foundation and comprehend the principles of transformation (Ames and Hall 2001, pp. 33–5).

[11] The term "inner sage, outer king" first appeared in *Zhuangzi* 庄子. Originally, it was used by the author to lament that the ideal ancient Daoist approach—which embodied both inner moral cultivation and outer worldly achievement—had been obscured in later generations (Fang 2015, p. 568). However, given that its connotation is highly consistent with the Confucian ideals of self-cultivation to bring peace to others and perfecting oneself to fulfill external things, this term was widely accepted, elaborated on, and applied by Confucian scholars of subsequent ages, eventually becoming a core concept encapsulating the ultimate ideal of Confucianism. For instance, Xiong Shili 熊十力 argued that The Great Learning—a classic Confucian text—establishes the fundamental principle of Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingship (Xiong 2019, p. 5). Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 maintained that the personality of the traditional Chinese sage is precisely one of Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingship, and he summarized the essence of Chinese philosophy as the way of Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingship as expounded by Chinese philosophers (Feng 2007, p. 5).

[12] A significant consensus holds that the traditional Chinese sage—a core symbol of Confucian ethics—embodies moral and personal perfection. As Herbert Fingarette contends, the sage's commitment to ideal personhood and the practice of the Dao remains steadfast and unshaken, unaffected by the uncertainties and risks inherent in the process (Fingarette 1972, pp. 46–7). Feng Bing 馮兵 and Dandan Bai 白丹丹 argue that the sage serves as a synonym for virtue and ideal personhood, representing the object of faith relentlessly pursued by Confucians. In this sense, the sage constitutes a symbolic existence—a moral ideal (Feng and Bai 2024, p. 121).

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