Federico Brusadelli

“POISONING CHINA”: KANG YOUWEI’S SAVING THE COUNTRY (1911) AND HIS STANCE AGAINST ANTI-MANCHUISM

ABSTRACT

In 1911, only a few weeks after the Wuchang Uprising, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) claimed a stop to the Revolution, crying against the “poisonous” ideology of ethnic nationalism that was “smashing ten thousand 間 of land to pieces”, sacrificing a whole country to establish a system “unfit for China” such as the Republic. The 53-year-old philosopher from Guangdong - thirteen years after the dramatic failure of the so-called ‘Hundred Days’ Reform’, the energetic attempt to heal the Empire from the inside in which he had played a major role - expressed his stance against Revolution through ten essays, collected under the title Jiuxianglun 救亡論 (‘Saving the Country’) and published later in 1913.

This article discusses some extracts of essays no. 5 and no. 6, together with sections of Kang’s last major work (Datongsu 大行書, “The Book of Great Concord”), all related to the issue of ethnic nationalism. The author of Confucius as a Reformer 孔子改制考, who in the 1890s denounced the ‘forgery’ of the Ancient Texts to reveal the true and reformist nature of Master Kong’s teachings, in these texts points the finger at another ‘forgery’ – Han nationalism. Adopting a classical ‘culturalist-universalist’ approach, he argues that the preservation of a country is not linked to the race of its rulers, but to the transmission of its cultural heritage: “Isn’t the British king of Saxon descent?” he asks in Jiuxianglun, using a Western example to demonstrate how national identities are artificial constructions, even in ‘modern’ and ‘nationalist’ Europe.

The desegregation of a multiethnic empire such as the Great Qing in the name of racial/ethnic identities is, according to Kang’s metaphysical interpretation of history,
Federico Brusadelli

a step backwards in the Way towards Unity. Therefore, he says, the solution for China, in 1911 as it was in 1898, is the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

Kang’s stance against nationalist revolution, albeit considered minority among his contemporaries - and partly defeated by history - is still useful to shed light over the deep ideological fractures that opened among Chinese intellectuals at the turning point of 1911. In addition, Kang’s criticism of ethnic nationalism is also interestingly similar to the most recent studies on the artificial nature of ‘collective identities’.

Introduction

After the coup d’etat of September 1898, Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908) unleashed her power to crush the reforms promulgated by her nephew Emperor Guangxu 光緒 (1871-1908). During the summer, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), the philologist, philosopher and calligrapher from Guangdong who had been for a decade (since the publication of The Forgery of the Xin Classics 新學偽經考 in 1891 and Confucius as a Reformer in 1897) the avant-garde of Chinese reformism, ultimately orchestrating the failed attempt of the Hundred Days’ Reform (Wuxu bianfa 戊戌變法), was exiled to Japan. His fight against the conservative wing of the Court was not in vain, though. In a decade, after the foundation of the “Society for the Protection of Emperor” (also known as Baohuanghui 保皇會) in Victoria, Canada, in 1899, he traveled around the world, visiting dozens of countries on three continents, collecting funds from overseas Chinese communities and writing a considerable amount of essays, articles and letters through which he took part, even from the ‘outer world’, to his country’s intellectual and political debate. The transformation of Chinese traditional autocracy into a constitutional monarchy, on the British (or Japanese) model, remained his political aim throughout all his life. More radical ideas, such as republicanism and ethnic nationalism, however, were rapidly spreading among Chinese intellectuals. When the Xinhai Revolution broke out in 1911, Kang denounced its limits and its dangers in a series of ten essays, written a few weeks after the Wuchang Uprising and published in 1913 under the title of Jiuwanglun 救亡論 (Saving the Country). Even

---

1 On Kang’s re-interpretation of Meiji reforms, see Zarrow 2012: 41-45.