

A NEW CHINA IN MEXICO:
KANG YOUWEI AND HIS LANGUAGES OF COHESION-MAKING
ON THE TWO SIDES OF THE PACIFIC (1895–1911)*

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Several years ago, in an *Oriens Extremus* issue devoted to the use of conceptual history in East Asian Studies, Marc Matten wrote a thorough article on the emergence of the concept of nation in late imperial China. Focusing on the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, a period of increasing interaction between the Sino-Japanese and Euro-American political discourse, he showed that, although “nation” still was an unfamiliar concept in the late 1870s (to the extent that, in some cases, it was translated phonetically as *nashen* 納慎), by the late 1890s it had already become a key concept with a relatively stable vocabulary.¹ Matten’s article shed a light on how Chinese terms “influenced the conceptualization of nation and nationalism” in China, and how “Chinese intellectuals struggled to come to terms with the nation concept” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.² In the following, we aim to make a further contribution to Matten’s undertaking by exploring another dimension of this conceptual history: the relation between concept production and social experience. We intend to place the history of the “nation” at the level of those late nineteenth and early twentieth century minds who, on the basis of daily experience, gave this concept a situated meaning. If it is true, as Quentin Skinner has argued, that terms can be better understood in their own dialogic and referential context,³ then an analysis of the contextual uses of the nation concept, and especially the constellation of words that verbalized it, will enable us to gain access to deeper layers of meaning, and, to a certain extent, to the explicit or implicit referents in the imagined world of the speaker.

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1 Matten 2012.

2 Matten 2012, 68.

3 Skinner 2002, 103–127.

Such an enterprise is certainly a daunting task if we think of the multiple individual experiences – recorded and unrecorded – that contributed to shape the concept of nation in late imperial China. But when we reduce the scale of observation, and we focus on one single well-recorded individual experience, we come closer to the actual social contexts that made plausible in a particular case a limited number of conceptual uses. In other words, when we observe in more detail the intended meaning an individual actor gave to a concept in his different experiences, we come closer to the challenges, contingencies, and unexpected encounters that shaped that concept in the actor's mind. To this end, we will reduce our scale of observation to the last two decades of the empire, when reform-minded literati and scholar-officials started putting pressure on the Qing dynasty to make it adopt a constitution and a parliament. In fact, we will reduce the scale even further by focusing on a leading figure of these reformers, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), one of the main actors in the famous Hundred Days' Reform. These reforms, which took place between June 11 and September 28, 1898, were intended to turn the Qing empire into a Meiji-like constitutional monarchy. A palace coup brought the reforms to a brutal end, and many of the reformers who were able to escape execution, among them Kang Youwei, went into exile. Afterwards, Kang Youwei's interventions through press articles and written exhortations shaped to a certain extent the agenda of late Qing constitutionalism. Examining Kang Youwei's discourses about the nation, their multifaceted conceptual dimensions, their place in the rationalization of new experiences, and their role in formulating social and institutional projects, will therefore enable us to see the evolution of one of the individual mediations of a historical process which, by the end of the empire in 1912, led to the consolidation of the nation concept in the Chinese social and political vocabulary.⁴

As one of the key figures in the development of contemporary Chinese political languages and institutions,⁵ Kang Youwei's ideas have often been studied within a purely

4 I do not use the words “social” and “political” in a strong conceptual sense. I mostly use “social” in a very general way, that is, to designate human relations, contingent or stable (when stable, I use the concept of “institution”), and I use “political” to qualify any intervention designed to change institutions and power relations without explicit physical violence. However, since the domains covered by these concepts are themselves historically defined (see for example Vogelsang 2012b), I prefer using their present connotations only as entry points into the analysis of concrete historical situations which, as we will see, often go beyond the limits of their conceptual field.

5 My use of the term “language” has been inspired by Pocock 1985, 1–34. I employ it because it evokes both a set of utterances – a speech or discourse – and the lexical and grammatical dimensions of a particular language; since the conceptual transformations in the Chinese-speaking world convey these two linguistic dimensions, I thought that “language” was a suitable

“Chinese” context. He wrote in Chinese, addressed Chinese speakers, and pushed for reform in China. How, then, could his ideas be anything but “Chinese”? At the same time, however, these nation-oriented projects did not themselves have “national” roots. If we want to understand the circumstances in which Kang Youwei shaped his socio-political discourse, we have to take into account at least one crucial fact: His texts and speeches after 1898 were indeed written and given *outside* China – in some cases, as we will see below, as an attempt to come to terms with his personal experience in the United States and Mexico. To fully grasp all the implications of this fact, we will focus on the major projects he conceived between 1895 and 1911: On the one hand, his reform projects regarding the imperial institutions and the court; on the other, his projects in exile, especially the organization of his *Baohuang hui* 保皇會 (Society for the Protection of the Emperor) and the creation of what he called a “New China,” which he envisioned, and partially realized, in Mexico. These projects, as we will show, were the pillars upon which Kang Youwei, a degree-holder and scholar-official, conceived two different languages about the nation: one defined by territorial dimensions, the other defined by non-territorial, civilizational, and racial elements.

Some historical remarks are necessary before we delve into this conceptual history. The concept of “nation” in the late Qing, which was certainly inspired by the meaning that the words derived from the Latin *natio* adopted in nineteenth century Euro-American political discourse, was actually part of what we could call a “language of cohesion-making.” In other words, it was used with the explicit purpose of imagining and creating cohesion among different social groups, but also, by the same token, with the purpose of excluding groups that did not belong to an *a priori* defined human community. The nation was just one new element in a larger history of literati concepts of human cohesion. This new element certainly provided a major conceptual tool to late nineteenth-early twentieth century reform-minded literati like Kang Youwei. They could now express the idea that – much like the so-called “nations” in international law – “China” constituted a fundamental human unit; that this unit preceded, and eventually made possible, the existence of a “Chinese state”; that “China” represented the fundamental boundary of political rule; and that, since China was only one nation among others, the traditional fiction that the Qing emperors ruled over “all under Heaven” should be defini-

ble word to characterize my unit of analysis. Although this is not the place to make a methodological digression about the relation between concept and language, I would like to mention the way in which I conceive the difference between concept and verbal expression. A “concept” can be put into different forms, from images to sounds, from single words to whole texts. In this sense, language is only one particular means (certainly a fundamental one) of concept production. For these methodological discussions, see for example Vogelsang 2012a; Topalov 2010; and more generally Richter 1995.

tively discarded. In this sense, we might be tempted to subscribe to Joseph Levenson's view that the literati reformers adopted and – to use his term – “enlarged” Euro-American vocabularies.⁶ However, as we will show, this “enlargement” did not entail conceptual subordination or the abolition of previous languages. In fact, literati reformers, at least in these decades, only added national dimensions to a cohesion-making discourse which, in many respects, remained attached to the political concepts of their literati ancestors. The concept of nation, in the sense we mentioned above, was flexible enough to admit very different developments. These developments were related to the political projects where the reformers used this concept.

Thus, we expect neither to uncover a concept of nation which remains equal to itself under the disguise of different words, nor to reduce this conceptual history to a typologically defined transition from “empire” to “nation.” We propose instead to analyze how Kang Youwei adopted and framed the nation concept according to interlocutors, referents, and available conceptual and linguistic resources, both in China and in the Americas. In this way, we will show how the nation concept, far from being a natural product of modern history, was a floating signifier that responded to the practical contingencies of social life.⁷

Nation and segmentation

To a large extent, the history of the nation in the late Qing is rooted in the political projects that the literati reformers formulated during the 1890s. These projects, designed to transform the empire into a constitutional monarchy, represented a critical reaction against the post-Taiping War (1850–1864) political situation. The literati reformers of the 1890s were, on the one hand, unhappy with the reforms made during the 1860s and 1870s. They acknowledged that these reforms had been beneficial, having led, among other things, to the development of the military and naval industry, the creation of institutions like the *Tongwen guan* 同文館, a school for the so-called *xixue* 西學 or “Western learning,” and the instauration of the *Zongli yamen* 總理衙門, a ministry of foreign relations. But they also thought that the possibilities that such measures had offered to new generations were very limited. On the other hand, these younger reformers observed with a mixture of fear and outrage the weak position of the emperor Guangxu 光緒 (1871–1908; r. 1875–1908) in his own court. They considered that the weakness of the emperor hampered the reforms they advocated and that, in those conditions, China could not be

6 Levenson 1968, Vol. 1, 157.

7 Within the limits of this article, we will not explore how Kang Youwei's ideas of nation in turn contributed to shape controversies within Chinese reform-minded circles and within imperial institutions. We leave that important historical dimension for further research.

protected from colonial powers. The opinions of this group of literati were certainly grounded in an analysis of the current situation, but they also represented the perspective of a particular social position. The literati reformers of the 1890s were, in some respects, like any other literati in the late Qing: They were trained to be scholar-officials, and many of them attempted (with different degrees of success) to pass the examinations and become part of the imperial administration. In this sense, they were deeply invested in the fate of the monarchy. But they were also close to, and shared some objectives with, the new elites that emerged in treaty ports and major urban areas. They not only thought that both commerce and industry should be developed, but also that the urban elites, from merchants to outcast literati, should participate more actively in political institutions. It was in this context that the “nation” became one of their major concepts. They claimed that their intent was to “protect” or “save” China. In their view, the previous generation of reformers had not made enough effort in this direction.⁸

This group started to be heard after the first Sino-Japanese war. When the Qing dynasty was defeated by Meiji Japan in 1895, it was clear that the previous reform efforts had not been effective.⁹ Kang Youwei, a reform-minded man of letters from a Cantonese village, started to play an important role precisely at this time.

Kang came from a family of scholar-officials and was trained from childhood to become one himself. He succeeded at all the levels of the imperial examinations and, in his late 30s, managed to become a second-level secretary at the Board of Works. It was therefore through the eyes of a degree-holder and scholar-official that he conceived his reform projects in the 1890s. His career, however, did not follow a smooth path. His indecisiveness and multiple failures in the imperial examinations sometimes took him away from imperial service. When he finally obtained the highest degree, he had trouble finding a proper position and realizing his political ambitions. Every time he made a reform proposal, his memorials and petitions were withheld or hidden by the inner circles of the court.¹⁰ In other words, Kang never became a prominent figure within the imperial institutions. He was closer to the lower-level literati than to the powerful ministers that controlled court politics. It was only when the rifts between the reform-minded and the anti-reform ministers came to a head that some sympathetic courtiers – such as Weng Tonghe 翁同龢 (1830–1904) and Zhang Yinhan 張蔭桓 (1837–1900) – helped Kang Youwei to gain the attention of the emperor.¹¹ As a result, in 1898, after a long struggle, he managed to get an audience with Guangxu. He was then immediately promoted to the posi-

8 See for example Wu 2010, 1–8.

9 Crossley 2005, 142–145.

10 All the details can be found in his autobiography from 1898. See *Kang Nanhai zibian nianpu*.

11 Lo 1967, 25–27; Kwong 1984, 135–139.

tion of secretary at the *Zongli yamen* and started to play a role in pushing forward the Hundred Days' Reforms.¹² This was also the time when his discourse about the nation found its first institutional reverberations. Indeed, he came to invoke the concept as the ultimate ground of the reforms he proposed.

Kang Youwei's languages about the nation did not come out of nowhere: they were part of a collective process of language production that began earlier on, in the 1870s at the latest, and that assumed more definite form in the 1890s.¹³ The literati reformers, like other nationalists in China, actively shaped discourses to accurately verbalize the nation concept. In their writings, terms such as *guo* 國, "kingdom" (which we explore in more detail later on), *min* 民, "people," *guomin* 國民, "people of the kingdom," or *minzu* 民族, "lineage of the people,"¹⁴ which resulted from a redefinition or combination of older words, were imbued with clear national connotations.¹⁵ However, the history of the nation concept remained widely open in China. It is true that, by the 1890s, a nation-oriented vocabulary was already available to these reformers: they could indeed benefit from implicit or explicit references to essays on "Western learning," as well as to Chinese and Japanese translations of Euro-American works (made by local scholars or by European and American missionaries).¹⁶ But two facts show that a high degree of semantic flexibility remained constitutive of the nation concept. First, the reformers had to struggle to make their political vocabulary evoke national connotations in the minds of their interlocutors. Second, even when their words managed to do this, this "nationalized" vocabulary could designate very different institutional and social realities, e.g. the imperial territory, the lands of the emperor, the shared land of the Chinese, the population inhabiting the empire, a unified political body, the different bodies that constituted the imperial society, passive subjects, active citizens, an ethnic group, or a historical lineage defined in racial and

12 Kang seems to have had one single audience with the emperor, but he was influential enough to have a say in the subsequent reforms that would be pushed forward by the throne. The role of Kang Youwei and his group in these reforms has nevertheless been overestimated or misrepresented. See Kwong 1984, 175–200; and, more generally, Mao Haijian 2014.

13 Matten 2012, 67–74.

14 Zarrow 2005, 53–74; see also Duara 1995. See Pamela Crossley's remarks on these terms in Crossley 1999, 359. The whole postscript to this book (p. 337–361), like Crossley 2005, addresses the hesitations between the language of race and the language of nation in the last decades of the Qing; she also analyses the combinations of these languages among what she calls "transformationalist" nationalists – especially Liang Qichao, but also Kang Youwei – who did not use these terms in an essentialist way.

15 For similar patterns of lexical creation in modern Chinese, but in the domain of scientific language, see Métaillé 2005.

16 For the history of the Chinese lexicon before 1898, see Masini 1993.

civilizational terms. From our point of view as historians, the existence of semantic ambiguities is not in itself historically or regionally specific; the term “nation” in the different European languages contains these ambiguities as well. What is important is to understand the particular features of these ambiguities. Among the Chinese reformers, these ambiguities not only derived from the intrinsic floating dimensions of the modern concept of nation or from the old connotations of the Chinese vocabulary, but also from the constant changes in the social and institutional world that constituted the context and referent of national discourse. As is usually the case, due to a changing world, old words could signify realities that their former users had never even imagined.¹⁷

The reformer’s focus on language should not be taken as an anecdotic curiosity in the history of modern Chinese nationalism. It was actually a central feature of the institutional and social conditions the reformers had to face in their struggle for institutional change and, by extension, for nation-building. Leading figures among these reformers, such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898), or Kang Youwei himself, were well aware that, if they wanted to be understood by fellow literati, a major object of reform needed to be language itself. They realized that language, as the most important tool of social communication, had to be transformed if they wanted to present their projects to other scholar-officials or to the imperial court.¹⁸ How could they otherwise explain the new institutions they had in mind? Many of their fellow literati, officials, and ministers had not read what they had read. Some had not even seen what they had seen. For this reason, not only their ideas, but also many of their words were unfamiliar to their interlocutors. This led them to develop verbal strategies in order to overcome practical communication problems, and, in so doing, they contributed to deepening an ongoing process of “synchronization” of political language – that is, to strengthening the semantic flows between their familiar vocabulary and the political discourse in Japan, Europe, and the Americas. In this regard, the reformers played an important role in setting the foundations of twentieth century Chinese political discourse.

Kang Youwei played an important part in this synchronization process. He helped shape the Chinese political vocabulary in general, and the concept of nation in particular. In his case, as with many other reformers, the national question was related to what he perceived as an urgent problem: How could the emperor prevent the Chinese territory from being colonized and divided by the world’s colonial powers? Whether this risk actually existed for China is a subject that deserves further inquiry. The fact remains, however, that the discussions on how to preserve territorial integrity pervaded the writings of the

17 Ginzburg 2012.

18 Lackner et al. 2001, 1–12.

reformers.¹⁹ Kang Youwei's answer to this question can be found in a famous memorial he submitted to the emperor Guangxu in August 1898, the last month of the Hundred Days' Reforms. In his opinion, the roots of the problem were the ethnic barriers between the subjects and the political exclusion of the lower strata of the population. The name of the memorial was

《請君民合治，滿漢不分折》

"A Request for Co-rulership (*hezhi*) between the Emperor and the People and for a Non-distinction between Manchus and Han"²⁰

One of the keywords of this text is *guo*, "kingdom." *Guo* did not just mean the imperial lands, where different groups of tax-payers – separated by linguistic, institutional, or other regional or status barriers – led disconnected lives. In contrast to this traditional usage, *guo* was presented here as the ultimate expression of a human community which, in a dangerous world of nations competing for hegemony, should not allow for distinctions among its own members:

吾國人主，撫有其國，僅與數大臣共治之，或十數疆臣分治之，雖有多民，僅供租稅，不得預政事焉。其視國家國土，若秦越人相視之肥瘠也。[...]

The lords of our empire, in possession of the whole *guo* ("kingdom," "nation," "country"), only rule it with the aid of some high ministers or of some ten and more governors-general and provincial governors who separately rule the territory; and even though the population is huge, it only pays land taxes and tributes, but it doesn't participate in political matters. The way they see their *guojia* ("state"/"dynasty"/"kingdom-house," or "house of the kingdom") and their *guotu* ("territory of the *guo*") is like the way in which the Qin and the Yue saw each other's fertility or infertility [that is, with indifference]. [...]

甚且民既不預國事，惟知身家親族而已，余皆外視。故其至者，姓與姓分，鄉與鄉分，縣與縣分，省與省分。國朝龍興東土，奄有中夏，兼定蒙古、準回、衛藏，為大一統，皆因其舊俗而治之。[...]

Worse: the people not only do not participate in the affairs of the empire, they actually only know their own families and clans, and they do not care about anything beyond. So the most serious thing is that there is a strict separation between families, between districts and between provinces. Our dynasty has its origins in the (North-)East, it possesses the central plain (*zhongxia*) and has pacified the Mongols, the Dzungar and Hui populations, and the Ü-Tsang [in Tibet], and has built a great unified polity (*da yi tong*), all by ruling them according to their traditional customs. [...]

19 For the geopolitical reasons of this emphasis on territory, see Matten 2016.

20 "Qing junmin hezhi, Man Han bufen zhe," 425.

方今絕海棣通，列強鄰迫，宜合舉國之民心，以為對外之政策；不宜於一國民之內，示有異同。

But now that distant seas are all connected and the Powers oppress us nearby, we should unify the minds of the people of the whole *guo* (kingdom/country/nation) as a policy to face the foreign situation, and we should not show that there are distinctions within this single *guomin* (“people of the *guo*”).²¹

This memorial was certainly not the first time Kang Youwei redefined the word *guo* in nation-oriented terms. He was even more explicit earlier in April of 1898, when he organized the *Baoguo hui* 保國會, the Society for the Protection of the *Guo*. According to its rules, the mission of the society was *baoguo* 保國, “to protect the *guo*,” *baozhong* 保種, “to protect the *zhong* 種 (‘race’ or ‘type’),” and *baojiao* 保教, “to protect the *jiao* 教 (the ‘doctrine’ or ‘teachings’ of the ancient sages).” The rules carefully explained these three constitutive tasks. “Protect the *guo*” was the ultimate aim. The first task, called “protect the *guo*” like the name of the society, referred to a more specific aim: protect the *guodi* 國地, or “territory of the *guo*,” and the *zhengquan* 政權, or “political power” (which did not refer to an impersonal institution such as a “state,” but to the personal prerogatives of the emperor over the territory under his jurisdiction). The second element of the *guo*, the *zhong* or “race,” was explained as *renmin zhonglei* 人民種類 or the “type of people,” and was associated with the Social-Darwinist vocabulary of race. Kang Youwei, as we will see, ascribed this word increasing significance in the years that followed. As for *jiao*, it was expanded as *shengjiao* 聖教 or “doctrine of the sages;” it especially referred to the doctrines of Confucius, whom Kang Youwei had depicted as a reformer. Kang Youwei’s idea of “civilization,” which would also play an ever-more important role in the years to follow, was intimately related to the “doctrine.”²² To summarize: the meaning of *guo*, an ancient term full of imperial connotations, came to resemble what we nowadays call the “nation-state.” It consisted, on the one hand, of a “state” conceived as an institution with a monopoly on power (although the power was conceived in personal terms); on the other, it indicated a “nation” conceived as a “race” with its own “civilization” (the doctrine of the sages). The territory was the geographical container of the two.

21 “Qing junmin hezhi, Man Han bufen zhe,” 425. For the difference between *guojia* and *guomin*, see Murata 1997, 120–121. For a brief discussion on the nuances of the different translations of “nation” in Chinese, see, for example, Kurtz 2012, 154. On the increasing association between *guojia* and the “state” as an administrative entity, especially during the New Policies period, see Ly 2014, 113–143.

22 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 156–157; “Baoguo hui zhangcheng,” 233. For the idea Kang Youwei had of the “doctrine,” see Kuo 2013, 235–264. Kang had written in 1897 a book called “Study of Confucius as institutional reformer,” *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考.

For a reform-minded degree-holder in 1898, this concept of *guo* clearly related to the languages of international law and Euro-American political theory. As keen readers of missionary publications in Chinese, Kang Youwei and his group of reformers were familiar with both. They undoubtedly read an important book published in 1886, namely, John Fryer's (Fu Lanya 傅蘭雅, 1839–1928) *Zuozhi chuyan* 佐治芻言 or *Humble Words as an Aid for Rule* – a translation of the Chambers brothers' *Political Economy for Use in Schools and Private Instruction*. Kang Youwei probably used it as teaching material along with other translations.²³ This text, though certainly idiosyncratic, already presented the imperial *guo* in nation-oriented terms. The coincidences between Kang's ideas and this book are not purely generic, for they both specifically stressed the fundamental role of the territory for the existence of a nation. In Fryer's Chinese translation, the territorial question seems to be even more prominent than in the original English text. For example, paragraph 56 in the original starts with the phrase

Each state or nation, with its colonies or other dependencies, if it has any, must in a great measure depend on its own strength for preserving itself.²⁴

Fryer's translation merged “state” and “nation” into the single word *guo* and stressed the territorial dimensions of the original:

各國所有土地，並其屬地，俱靠本國力量，以為維持。

The territory (*tudi*) of each *guo*, like its dependent territories (*shudi*), rely on the strength of this same *guo* for self-preservation.²⁵

The addition of “territory” was not just an explanatory device: Whatever the intention of John Fryer and his team may have been, the passage in Chinese gives the impression that the self-preservation of a *guo* mainly consists of the preservation of the territory.²⁶ Kang Youwei shared the same assumptions. Although he mentioned race and doctrine as well, the fundamental problem as he presented it to the emperor seemed to be territorial integrity. If the Qing dynasty did not want to become a colony or a dependent state, if it rather sought to turn its *guo* into an equal member of the society of nations, it needed to transform its relationship to its territory and to create cohesion-making devices to preserve it.

This emphasis on territoriality, which was understood as the logical complement of the abolition of ethnic, regional, linguistic, and status distinctions, actually represented an

23 Kang Youwei *xiansheng nianpu*, 68.

24 Chambers 1852, 18.

25 *Zuozhi chuyan*, 27a.

26 Zarrow 2012, 55–57. As the title of the translation shows, the term “political economy” would have been unable to evoke anything at all in the mind of a learned scholar-official of the late Qing. On this, see *infra*.

attack on another major symbolic foundation of imperial rule: the fiction that the emperor, the Son of Heaven, ruled over the whole world or “all under Heaven.” This question has been widely explored.²⁷ The traditional fiction of universal emperorship clearly began to erode from the time of the Taiping War in the 1850s and 1860s and had to disappear if the way was to be paved for a more realistic representation of the world order. In a globe divided into consecutive sovereign polities – *wanguo* 萬國, the “ten thousand countries” (each of which acted in the world society just like individuals acted within national societies) – it was clear that the emperor only exerted his rule over the population inhabiting the territory under his jurisdiction. If he did not want the colonial powers to divide his territory, he could not be distracted by dreams of universal rule. Rather, he needed to strengthen the territorial borders of his empire. Within this framework, the main enemy in Kang Youwei’s memorial was another constitutive feature of imperial institutions: segmentation.²⁸ Since the conquest of the Chinese territory in the seventeenth century, and especially under Qianlong’s rule in the eighteenth century, the Qing had built their empire as a segmented society. They had differentiated status groups according to ethnic, political, and social standards, and allotted special rights and prerogatives on the basis of this differentiation. In other words, they had created a web of asymmetrical, strictly differentiated, and at the same time interdependent social bodies.²⁹ This segmentation, in Kang Youwei’s view, led to the multiplication of boundaries that divided the *guo*. While territorial borders should be the natural limits of political jurisdiction, the boundaries among the different constituencies of the empire, especially among Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Uyghurs, and Tibetans, endangered the empire’s territorial integrity and, accordingly, the very existence of the nation. Therefore, to avoid losing any part of the national territory, the emperor needed to immediately abandon intermediary status-oriented boundaries and strengthen the territorial ones. Territorial borders should be taken as the single legitimate boundaries of imperial, or actually “national” jurisdiction. In this sense, the political vocabulary of the empire, imbricated with the vocabulary of segmentation, was now turned against segmentation itself. The “great unified polity” (*da yi tong*), the “kingdom-house” (*guojia*), the “Chinese” (*zhongxia*) – all the keywords which were inherited from canonical and authori-

27 For this conceptual process, see Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng 2006. For the particular features of universal emperorship during the Qing, especially after Qianlong, see Crossley 1999, 221–336.

28 The term “segmentation” has a long history in sociology and anthropology. Here I take the term from Ernest Gellner, who uses it in *Nations and Nationalism* to describe complex pre-national societies. See Gellner 2006, 13–18.

29 For the segmented society of the Qing dynasty, see Rawski 1998, 59–95; Crossley 2005, 138–147. For the conceptual foundations of the late imperial organization, see Zarrow 2012, 130–146. For the incompatibilities of these conceptual foundations with the idea of nation, see Murata 1997, 113–116.

tative texts and which the Qing had used to describe their segmented polity – were now put into the service of a nation-building project.³⁰

The two casualties of this nation-oriented language, segmented rule and universal emperorship, were actually two sides of the same coin.³¹ The fiction of universal rule, which was much older than the segmented institutions of the Qing, had been used to rationalize segmentation.³² The Qing emperor was not supposed to rule over a single nationally defined population, a single people who shared the same traditions, worship practices, language, or regional belonging. In other words, he did not rule on the basis of some sort of resemblance between subjects and ruler – this would have meant that his rule was no longer potentially universal, for it would have been limited only to those who resembled him in one way or another. The emperor ruled on the basis of universal difference. It was because he could rule over any subject, and any population, no matter whether they resembled him or not, that he could aspire to universal rule. In fact, the idea that the emperor ruled his subjects because they had something in common with him, because they belonged to the same “nation,” would not have made sense before the second half of the nineteenth century. The emperor could rule precisely because he was different from his subjects. As the Son of Heaven, he was unique, superior, and different from any other person in the realm. His subjects owed him loyalty on this basis. In this sense, any group “under Heaven,” no matter its language or customs, could be included among the imperial polity without losing its traditional institutions. The territorial expansion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was informed by this non-national and universal conception of imperial rule.

Kang Youwei did not reject segmentation and universal emperorship *per se*. He merely thought, as he indicated in the memorial quoted above, that in the new world order this institutional framework was deeply incompatible with the vital issue of territorial integrity. Segmentation and universal emperorship endangered the territory, for while the former introduced barriers among the subjects and made them see their neighbors as strangers, the latter eroded the significance of the actual territorial borders of the empire. Loyalty towards the same emperor was not enough to create mutual solidarity among his subjects. If each imperial constituency – as Kang reminded in his memorial – was ruled according to its own institutions and customs, and each group of subjects felt that the affairs of other groups were not their affairs, why then would they mind if China were divided? As the metaphor went, if the Powers cut the “melon” into pieces, nothing would change for them: since the lost piece of land had nothing to do with them, their daily activities would continue as if nothing had been stolen. This is why Kang did not see the

30 See Crossley 2005, 146.

31 See, for example, Rawski 2015, 220–222.

32 Crossley 1999, 221–336.

intermediate constituencies and the “all under Heaven” as legitimate bases of imperial rule: the former were dangerously narrow, the latter excessively broad. In the end, the territory was the only single valid political unity. Kang Youwei’s territorial *guo* therefore inevitably broke with the intimate solidarity between rule through segmentation – which had enabled the Qing empire to include different sorts of subjects within its dominion – and the principle of universal rule – which saw no limits to the inclusion of new “culturally” different groups within the imperial polity.

Thus, once the extendibility of borders was practically rejected and segmentation was depicted as the main obstacle for territorial integrity, the “unification of the minds of the people” was the only plausible framework for devising cohesion-making institutional tools and thereby preserve the *guo*-nation. But which institutional tools? The memorial from 1898 proposed a *guohui* 國會, “assembly of the *guo*,” a kind of parliament. Here, both the people and the emperor would meet and exert *hezhi* 合治, “co-rulership,” so that

[...]以定國是而一人心、強中國。

[...] the affairs of the empire are put in order, the minds of the people unified and China strengthened.³³

Popular participation was not presented as a value in itself. The idea of “co-rulership” meant shared sovereignty and therefore only a *partial* yield of sovereignty to the “four hundred million Chinese” – as Kang Youwei put it.³⁴ The creation of a parliament had the specific purpose of producing cohesion and preserving territorial integrity. The people, Kang claimed, were indifferent to the affairs of the empire because they had no participation in sovereign decisions. A parliament would give the subjects some decision power on the empire as a whole and thus make them feel as if they all had to take care of the same territory together. As he had explained in a previous memorial, the sage kings of antiquity had already employed this institution.³⁵ The emperor only needed to restore it. A partial yield of sovereignty to the people was necessary to save the *guo* and hence imperial sovereignty itself. It was presented as an institutional technique of imperial cohesion, not – as one might be tempted to think – as an expression of democratic values.

The second cohesion-making device – the one that would allow for the abolition of segmentation, especially between the Han and Manchus – was the extension of *huafeng* 華風, “Chinese customs,” to all the subjects of the empire. *Hua* 華, “Chinese,” was an ethnonym for the Han population. It was the abbreviated form of *hua ren* 華人 or “people of Huaxia 華夏,” which was the name for the “historical” population of China, that is, for the

33 “Qing junmin hezhi, Man Han bufen zhe,” 425.

34 It is the expression he used at a lecture he gave in his Society for the Protection of the Nation. See “Jingshi Baoguo hui di yi ji yanshuo,” 237.

35 “Qing ding lixian kai guohui zhe,” 424

segment that ruled China right before the Qing conquered it; it was the people that had once given birth to a Confucius and had now given birth to Kang Youwei. For Kang Youwei, there could be no political cohesion within the *guo* if there were no homogeneity of customs. Since there needed to be a basis for homogenization, he proposed using the Han Chinese language and lifestyle. This method, according to Kang's memorial, was not new in Chinese history and was not specific to nation-building. It had already been used in the fifth century by the non-Han emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (467–469; r. 471–499) of the Northern Wei (386–534), who belonged to the Xianbei ethnic group. Emperor Xiaowen had erased the distinctions between Han and Xianbei by imposing the same clothing and the Han language on all the Xianbei families, and by giving them Chinese surnames. Emperor Xiaowen had set the example by replacing his own surname, Tuoba 拓拔 (Tabgatch), with the Chinese Yuan 元. Kang Youwei thus recommended that the Guangxu emperor read the *Book of (Northern) Wei* (*Wei shu* 魏書), written in the sixth century, and particularly the part corresponding to the annals of the Xiaowen emperor.

This proposal laid the foundation for a third and last suggestion, which drew upon the early medieval method of custom transformation and the new method related to the uses of international law: The polity should be given a national name. The *guo*, Kang Youwei argued, should not be called “the Great Qing,” as it was called. Actually, it should not be called by the name of one particular dynasty at all. There were two reasons why: first, because a dynastic name implied that a new country was born every time there was a dynastic change; second, because such a name identified the whole country with only one of its segments, the ruling Manchu dynasty. Instead, the *guo* should have a name of its own: it should bear the name of a nation which, despite its lack of self-awareness and its internal distinctions, had remained the same across the centuries and across the dynasties that governed it. He thus recommended the name *Zhonghua* 中華, which he identified with the foreign word “China.” The word *hua* (the ethnonym for Han Chinese) within the compound *Zhonghua* suggested that the *guo* could be finally homogenized by the Han way of life.

The reference to the role of the fifth century emperor in this transformation of customs was not a simple rhetorical strategy. It actually showed that these proposals, radical as they were, were tied to older ideas about the *guo*. Emperor Guangxu was the first ruler to comprehend this continuity between past and present. For example, when a censor suggested prohibiting the Society for the Protection of the *Guo*, the emperor, according to Kang Youwei, answered:

會為保國，豈不甚善！

“The society’s purpose is to protect the *guo*, how could that not be extremely good?”³⁶

36 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 159.

For the censor, the *guo* referred to in the name of the society – which Kang Youwei identified with the “four hundred million Chinese” in his inaugural speech – threatened the standing of the dynasty. He suspected that the purpose of the society was to turn the monarch into an equal of his own subjects, and, due to this equality, to curtail imperial prerogatives. For Guangxu, “protect the *guo*” only meant that the subjects should become aware of the foreign threats and that they should preserve his territory.³⁷ Guangxu was not simply playing with words. As Kang Youwei himself suggested with his example of the fifth century Xianbei emperor, the principles of the society were perfectly compatible with older forms of institution building, especially with those in which an emperor ruled over ethnically diverse subjects.

Kang’s proposals presumed a conception of history which mixed new and old elements. The new element was the “national” framework of his representation of political history. The history of the dynasty was for him less important than the history of the nation; past and present were not related by the succession of reigning families, as it was in court historiography, but by a common belonging to one single national history. The old element, for its part, was perfectly compatible with this national framework: like in traditional historiography, the past was considered a paradigm for good government in the present. In this conception, a radical separation between a “modern” present and a “pre-modern” past did not make sense: the assumption was that Guangxu could follow the examples of the emperors of the past – no matter how far back in time they lived – because they all belonged to the same national history. Kang Youwei made this conception of history more explicit in his writings. He proposed a periodization which divided the history of the nations in three stages: the time of Chaos, which was the time of despotic monarchies; the time of Increasing Peace, which corresponded to constitutional monarchy; and the time of Great Peace, which would come in the distant future and would eventually bring a republican form of government. Qing China still belonged to the time of Chaos; the Western countries to the time of Increasing Peace. There is no room here to discuss this nation-based world history in detail, which supposed that each nation was inscribed in a different temporality. It will suffice to say that, in such a perception, since China still belonged to the time of Chaos, the present monarchy could still be rooted in the models of the imperial and pre-imperial past.³⁸

37 Murata 1997, 116.

38 *Kang Youwei quanji*, vol. 7, 6 and 90. Kang Youwei’s theory of the “three ages” has to be understood in the context of a more general transformation of historical time perceptions in the Chinese-speaking world. Although he takes up this temporal framework from He Xiu’s 何休 (129–182) exegesis of the Gongyang commentary of the *Spring and Autumns*, and more generally from the New Text scholarship (which, on the basis of a Han dynasty textual tradition, became very prominent during the nineteenth century), he uses this old theory to synchronize

The coexistence in Kang's concept of *guo* of past and present ideas about rulership was especially important with regard to the question of segmentation. Kang Youwei, in his memorial, was not suggesting the abolition of *all* the segments that constituted imperial society. Even if he proposed abolishing most of them for the sake of territorial integrity, he nevertheless gave a key role to the most ancient segmentary distinction: the one that existed between the monarch and his subjects. Maintaining this traditional dimension of emperorship, Kang neither thought that sovereignty should reside in an impersonal institution such as the "state" nor that this institution "represented" the nation.³⁹ Rather, he thought that sovereignty should be borne by a personal figure, the emperor, who had the privilege of inheriting his role and of enjoying life-long rule. This was not a contradiction in Kang's plans. Kang Youwei was not against all forms of segmented rule (he even praised the eighteenth century rulers for using it, as we have seen and will further see in detail), but only against those regional and ethnic divisions that in the new world order represented a threat to territorial integrity. Indeed, not every form of segmentation entailed the same risks: on the contrary, the most ancient form of segmentation, the emperorship, was absolutely necessary for territorial cohesion. The imperial prerogatives, along with the prerogatives of the court, were the only ones capable of "unifying the people's mind." The tutelary role of the emperor and the court towards the people should remain intact, or even be strengthened, before institutional reform was carried out. Otherwise, who would be able to do it? The people (*min* 民), as Kang Youwei claimed, were not ready to undertake reform themselves. They were rather like "children" (*ru zi* 如子) and had to be taken care of.⁴⁰ He thought, like many other reformers, that

今日之患，在吾民智不開，故雖多而不可用，[...].

The cause of the present trouble stems from the fact that the knowledge of the people (*min*) is not enhanced, so that although they are numerous, they cannot be usefully employed, [...].⁴¹

his perception of historical time with Spencerian evolutionism and with nation-based time perceptions of time in nineteenth century Europe. On the transformation of time perceptions in late Qing history, see Kwong 2001.

39 Lefort 2001, 28

40 This old metaphor of the imperial political languages recurrently appears in Kang Youwei's writings, even during and after the period of reforms. See, for example, *Kang Youwei quanji* 4, 376; 5, 242.

41 See Lo 1967, 97 (translation slightly modified). See also *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 168. This widespread idea among reformers was invoked by Kang Youwei before the emperor to propose the reform of the imperial examinations.

In other words, as long as the people remained “ignorant,” the reduction of all the segments of the empire to the segmentation between the emperor and his people seemed to be the most appropriate solution in the present world. The monarch should only share, not yield sovereignty, because he and his advisors were the only ones capable of leading the process of nation-building and popular education. The analogy between empire and family, so typical of the Qing justifications of imperial rule, had a central place in Kang Youwei’s proposal, because it validated the tutelary prerogatives that the emperor and his court needed to assert in order to impose reform. After all, Kang Youwei’s understanding of his own role was informed by his status: the position of degree-holder and scholar-official. It was from this position that he proposed being part of the court, assisting the emperor, giving him advice, ruling with him and, above all, being the sagely man who guided the empire with his words and deeds. In short, it was what any ambitious scholar-official might dream of. The complete abolition of the imperial institutions would have meant the abolition of the scholar-official status, which, in turn, would have meant that no one would have enough authority to carry out reform.⁴² (Later on, when assemblies and a parliament were finally opened by the Qing in 1909–1910, they followed segmentary patterns well-beyond the single one proposed by Kang Youwei in 1898: the court not only kept its sovereign position, but it also had the prerogative of appointing a set number of members of the parliament according to status, titles, and ethnic belonging.⁴³)

Therefore, while proposing that segmentation be abolished, Kang Youwei nevertheless claimed that the emperor/people distinction should remain intact. It was the indispensable foundation of both the emperor’s and the reformer’s tutelary role. While this traditional representation of emperorship made the imperial models of the Chinese past particularly relevant, it made other models relevant as well. Beside the early medieval emperor Xiaowen, Kang raised other examples. One was Chinese, the others were not. The first models were the seventeenth and eighteenth century Manchu ancestors of Guangxu: Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722; r. 1661–1722), Yongzheng 雍正 (1678–1735; r. 1722–1735), and Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–1799; r. 1735–1796), who represented the golden age of the Qing. Although Kang Youwei rejected the sort of segmentary form of rule inherited from these emperors, he retained an important aspect: the necessary concentration of power in Emperor Guangxu’s hands. In his answer to the palace examination in May 1895, Kang Youwei had already stated this political need:

42 “Qing junmin hezhi, Man Han bufen zhe,” 426; see also *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 187.

43 Though in a different form, this segmentary organization of the parliament would find an afterlife in Chinese contemporary institutions. See Crossley 2005, 138–158.

臣尤伏願皇上發憤為雄，乾綱獨攬，正一身以正朝廷，強一心以強天下。剛健乃為天德，志剛乃為大君，整肅紀綱，破除積習，日親賢士，日聞讜言，日講治體，日求新政。

I particularly hope your Majesty makes an effort to become strong and that “supreme power is held only by the emperor;” that you rectify your own person in order to rectify the court, and that you strengthen your heart to strengthen all under Heaven. If vigorous, you shall establish Heaven’s virtue, if strong-willed, you shall become a big lord; you shall adjust the foundations of the empire, eradicate long-standing customs, daily meet virtuous officials, daily listen to straightforward speech, daily talk about the form of rule and daily demand new policies.⁴⁴

This text strongly echoed the old political language of the Qing court. The phrase “supreme power is held only by the emperor” was a direct allusion to the strongest predecessors of the Guangxu emperor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁵ It implied that the emperor should, like Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, rule with absolute power. Kang Youwei assumed that reform should start with the self-transformation of the emperor himself; only in this way could the court be rectified, and this would then pave the way for the larger transformation of “all under Heaven.” He resorted here to a well-known topos in imperial thought, which also came up in his 1898 memorial: the transformation of customs. Institutional change was based on self-transformation from above. Virtuous action on the part of the emperor would rectify human relations and naturally produce the desired transformation below.

Taken literally, and out of context, this phrasing was very similar to more ancient discourses on institutional reform. But those who in May 1895, right after the Sino-Japanese war, knew the implications of this proposal could easily guess what Kang Youwei meant by “rectification”: a “despotic” process of reform. Two other models, this time from abroad, reinforced this image: the Meiji emperor, whose reforms were carefully explained in the *Riben bianzheng kao* 日本變政考, a very long essay Kang Youwei finished in June 1898, and Peter the Great, whose “despotism” (*zhuanzhi* 專制) he considered a source of inspiration for imperial reform. It is not necessary to stress here the central role of the Meiji model in these years and during the subsequent decade, as this topic has been well

44 “Dian shi ce,” 67.

45 For this allusion, see He Guanbiao 2002. I follow He’s translation. The expression *qiangang* 乾綱 refers to the power of the emperor. The *qian* evokes the “way of Heaven” (*qian* is the first hexagram of the *Book of Changes*), and, through it, the Son of Heaven; *gang* is the order that should be preserved by the virtuous monarch. *Dulan* 獨攬, “to wield alone,” with variants such as *duduan* 獨斷, “to decide alone,” and *duyu* 獨御, “to manage (or “ride, drive”) alone,” refers to the concentration of power in the emperor’s hands.

studied.⁴⁶ It is worth bearing in mind, however, that Peter the Great's model, although sometimes neglected, played an important role as well.⁴⁷ In an essay Kang Youwei wrote and submitted to Guangxu in March 1898, he described the Russian emperor in a way that was customary for the eighteenth century Qing rulers. Approvingly, he said that Peter had had the intention of "renewing the people and renewing the *guo*" with "despotic" means.⁴⁸ The language of power of the eighteenth century, referring to both the era of the Great Qing and of enlightened despotism, harmoniously coexisted in Kang Youwei's political discourse with the more recent reforms of the Meiji emperor and the now nation-oriented old Legalist ideal of "wealth and strength" (*fuqiang*). They all provided models of a "tutelary despot" that the emperor would do well to follow if he wanted to carry out reform and "preserve the *guo*."

Nation and matter

These reform projects were grounded in a territorial conception of the nation: Without a territory, neither a reform nor a nation seemed to be possible. But after 1898, Kang's ideas changed. His life took a turn which required a new perspective. Indeed, when the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908) cracked down on the reformers, imprisoned Emperor Guangxu in the palace, and put an end to the reform process, Kang Youwei had no choice but to go into exile and wander from one city to the next. Within a few of months, his activities as reformer were no longer taking place in the Qing territory, but among the overseas Chinese in different parts of the world, often in the Americas. In this new environment, his "nation" started to look slightly different. Although he never abandoned the nation concept to represent Chinese unity, he increasingly downplayed the territory and emphasized racial and civilizational elements. Outside China, his writings showed an increasing concern with the race and civilization of the Chinese people and with the role and position of this people in world history. These elements, which became an overarching conceptual framework of new social and political projects abroad, indicated Kang's need of creating Chinese cohesion beyond territorial borders. How then did Kang Youwei represent and produce this new form of non-territorial national cohesion? And what were the circumstances that pushed him in this direction?

46 The Meiji model for the reforms in China is indeed one of the most studied ones. For a thorough study on the Japanese model and contacts between China and Japan from 1898 to 1912, see Reynolds 1993.

47 Don C. Price has made a thorough study of the positive model that Peter the Great represented for Kang Youwei and other literati reformers of the time. See Price 1974, 29–62.

48 "E Bide bianzhengji," 37.

In Victoria, Canada, in 1899, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and some other reformers (either in exile or based abroad) established a trans-continental association: the *Bao-huang hui* 保皇會, Society for the Protection of the Emperor.⁴⁹ This structure had branches in Japan, South East Asia, and beyond, but many of its most important branches and financial sources were in the Americas.⁵⁰ In principle, the society was to pursue court politics from outside the court. Even though it was founded on the other side of the Pacific, Kang Youwei hoped that some hesitant reform-minded ministers of the Qing Empire would still listen to him from afar and, furthermore, that the Empress Dowager would at some point feel internal or external pressure to restore the emperor and open the way to reform. But he soon discovered that the new social and geographical framework of his political activities – potentially everywhere – entailed new challenges. The most pressing challenge (which, as we will see, would turn out to be a decisive factor for his concept of nation) was that he desperately needed funds and political support. The Society for the Protection of the Emperor was therefore organized as an enterprise or company, a *gongsi* 公司, with both political and economic purposes. It focused on social networks that could eventually become financial resources for its activities. One of its constitutive rules, which Kang Youwei wrote and published in 1900, said:

此公司為保救大清皇帝公司，即保種公司，保國公司，亦為保工商公司之事，皆同一貫。

This enterprise (*gongsi*) is an enterprise to protect the emperor of the Great Qing, that is, an enterprise to protect the *zhong* (“race” or “kind”), an enterprise to protect the *guo*, and also an enterprise to protect industry and commerce: all are but one single thing.⁵¹

The text goes on to say that the protection of the *zhong*-race and of the *guo*-nation cannot be effective without reform, and that reform cannot be carried out without protecting the reform-minded Emperor Guangxu. In this respect, the mission of the enterprise was no different than the one the reformers had given themselves in 1898. But the emphasis on the economic dimensions of the organization was a sign that they were now operating on a new front. In practice, the main target was no longer in Qing China (where the reform-

49 The society had a different name in English: China Reform Association or Chinese Empire Reform Association. The different names were explicitly conceived both to make a conceptually accurate presentation of the society’s purpose and to transmit it to different interlocutors. See, for example, Lo 1967, 256, note 6. There were different attempts at changing the name in following years.

50 Lo 1967, 258, note 8, and 275, note 49; *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 273. There were other important branches outside the Americas – in Hong Kong and Malaysia, to name two of the most important ones.

51 “Baojiu Da Qing huangdi gongsi xu li,” 258. Kang probably wrote the rules in October 1899.

ers still had a huge influence), but in those places outside of China that were the most concerned with China's fate: the Chinese neighborhoods of different major cities of the world, from East and Southeast Asia to Australia and the Americas.⁵² The society was supposed to address the specific needs of the overseas Chinese, who often had two major concerns: the situation of their families and friends within Chinese borders on the one hand, and their own situation in their host countries on the other. In this sense, the society was not only devoted to "protecting the emperor" at court and protecting the territorial integrity of the Qing territory, but also to include the overseas Chinese in their political and economic activities. It was devoted to getting membership fees and political support of different kinds from the lower strata of the Chinese neighborhoods, and financial support for publications, schools, and political activities from the upper strata, particularly businessmen and investors.⁵³

The reformers followed different fundraising strategies. Besides membership fees, they counted on so-called "nationalist fundraising" (i. e. campaigns to raise funds by invoking a national cause) and on capitalist enterprises of different sorts, both in finance and industry.⁵⁴ Regarding the latter strategy, the overseas Chinese were not the single source of financial support. An equally important role was played by the society's "lobbies" among non-Chinese. Ministers, businessmen, diplomats, journalists, politicians, and members of oligarchic and noble families in the host countries became part of the large financial and political network of the society. Its leaders, especially Kang Youwei, soon managed to reach these prominent people in their residences, clubs, embassies, hotels, or even ministries, and, among them, they made several faithful friends. These people were important for the reformers in exile for two reasons: First, they publicly pled for their cause; second, and most importantly, they helped them find financial opportunities and obtain administrative facilities.⁵⁵

52 For the different branches of the society in the Americas and in other parts of the world, see Lo 1967, 258, note 8.

53 This financial help would become even more important in 1903 during the boycott of the Chinese Exclusion Law. See Lo 1967, 270–271, note 30. For the activities of Kang Youwei and his Society for the Protection of the Emperor in Canada, see Chen 2014; and in the United States, see Larson 2007. For the development of the Society in the Americas, see Armentrout Ma 1990; and more generally Worden 1972.

54 Chen 2014, 15; Armentrout Ma 1990, 109–112.

55 For the network built in the Americas by the Society for the Protection of the Emperor, see for example Armentrout Ma 1990, 45–51, which mostly concentrates on the diasporic network; Robert Worden's unpublished dissertation, quoted below, gives a very well documented overview of Kang's network among American, Canadian and Mexican politicians, diplomats, and businessmen. See Worden 1972.

Kang Youwei thus discovered, especially in the Americas, the power of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century institution Karl Polanyi called (using the French word) *haute finance*:⁵⁶ the network of banks, trusts, and companies that dominated both financial and political institutions in Europe and the Americas. The conditions of the “Belle Époque” were indeed highly suited to the society’s economic-cum-political activities.

During the years Kang Youwei devoted himself to the organization and expansion of the society, in which he made innumerable trips between Asia (mostly the South and South East), the Americas and Europe, he started to adopt a new attitude towards “China.” The slogans “protect the *zhong*-race” and “protect the *guo*-nation” were certainly the same as in 1898, but now that he was no longer in Qing China, what was the best way to “protect the *zhong*” and “protect the *guo*”? What role should commerce and industry (a priority of the society) play in this context, if China (territorial China) was only partially affected by the economic activities of the reformers in exile? The answer to this question necessitated, on the one hand, a new nation-building role for commerce and industry, and, on the other, a new definition of China as a “nation.” We will first focus on the role of commerce and industry, which Kang Youwei conceptualized in terms of a Japanese-inspired neologism: *wuzhi* 物質, “matter.”

Kang Youwei highlighted the concept of matter in a text he wrote in the United States in 1904, after five years in exile. The text, which was not published until 1908, was called *Wuzhi jinguo lun* 物質救國論, *Salvation of the Guo through Matter*. He saw “matter” as an autonomous social force. Its science, *wuzhi xue* 物質學, the “learning of matter,” was for him the only path toward strengthening a nation. Institutional reform was certainly important, but it was nothing without matter. If some parts of the Americas and Europe were strong, he claimed, it was because they acknowledged the absolute power of this force. The idea of matter was symptomatic of Kang Youwei’s ideological shift in these years. One might say, somewhat schematically, that he discovered the power of the “economic sphere.” But just as the Euro-American world did not have a concept of a distinct sphere of economic exchanges before the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, the concept of “matter” represented both more and less than what we now understand by “economy.” Kang’s concept actually remained linked in some respects to the Qing language of rulership. According to Wolfgang Lippert, the Chinese term *jingji* 經濟, later used to differentiate “economics” from other spheres of human activity, kept the meaning it had been given by the statecraft tradition until the last years of the empire: *jingshi jimin* 經世濟民, “putting the world in order and helping the people.”⁵⁷ *Jingji* was the name of the top-down ethical duty of the

56 Polanyi 2001, 9–20. In the nineteenth century, the expression *haute finance* was used in French even outside the French-speaking world.

57 Lippert 2004.

emperor and his officials towards their subjects. It consisted of securing their welfare through regulation and extraction of wealth and, in times of crisis, through mechanisms of protection. There was no autonomous sphere of economics in the Chinese imperial society. Wealth was the object of activities we would generally define as both “political” and “ethical.” The old generation of reformers – the so-called “self-strengtheners” who were especially active during the Tongzhi 同治 Restoration in the 1860s and 1870s – found no contradiction between this conception and their ideal of “wealth and strength,” which, in practical terms, meant the development of industry and military technology. And Kang Youwei, in his 1898 proposals, followed similar principles himself: a strong *guo* could only be built on the basis of industry and military defense. “Matter” contained many of those meanings, and yet this new keyword also expressed a certain conceptual break. Kang’s new concept was indeed very broad, involving industry, commerce, finance, and technology, and it referred to a much more powerful force than arms and troops. As the ultimate foundation of any institution, of any *guo* and, more generally, of any self-standing community, it was not to be equated with military strength or any other activity. Matter had a life of its own.

The United States was a perfect example of the power of matter. In his *Salvation of the Guo through Matter*, after lengthy remarks on the supposed immorality of the Americans – who would never be changed by *jiaohua* 教化, “teaching and transformation” – Kang Youwei explained the seemingly paradoxical reasons for their prosperity:

國人惟逐利，故尚工而不好文學。然以尚富故，人皆講工藝，而致富強矣。

The people of this country only seek profit; they revere industry and don’t like the learning of culture (*wenxue* 文學). But since they revere wealth, everyone discusses technology, and thereby increases wealth and strength.⁵⁸

Matter actually was the ultimate foundation of military strength and of any viable polity, because

治軍在理財，理財在富民而百事皆本於物質。

The control of the army relies on the regulation of finance, the regulation of finance relies on enriching the people, and everything has its roots in matter.⁵⁹

To a certain extent, this emphasis on technical and industrial development took up the discourse of the older generation of reformers, who had never ceased to emphasize the importance of “wealth and strength.” Kang Youwei, too, did not conceive of a distinction between “economics” and “politics:” “Matter,” rather, entailed the interpenetration of the

58 *Wuzhi jiuguo lun*, 83.

59 *Wuzhi jiuguo lun*, 79.

two. But, again, the new concept represented a certain rupture. One of the differences with the older reformers was explicit in the foreword of this text. In Kang Youwei's view, their approach was too narrow: while the old reformers, like for the court in general, conceived industry, commerce, and finance chiefly as a political tool, he saw matter as the fundamental pillar of any human community. A second difference was less explicit but no less important: It was Kang's uncompromising attitude about the "conspicuous consumption" of the court.⁶⁰ Kang Youwei and the new generation of reformers regarded this form of consumption with great suspicion. For the court, the expenses on luxury had the symbolic role of making visible the power of the palace; it was the case of the reconstruction of the Summer Palace, which was cherished by Cixi as a symbol of dynastic power. For Kang Youwei and other reformers, on the contrary, these expenses represented an unproductive use of wealth; the reformers were more sympathetic to Emperor Guangxu's frugal attitude, which, though it certainly remained within traditional patterns, reduced to a minimum the imperial interference in commerce and industry.⁶¹ Now in exile, Kang Youwei was far removed from these conspicuous uses of money. He now had a new idea about money which can be summarized with the following phrase: Money should beget more money. Kang Youwei's discovery of "matter" was a symptom of his enthusiastic embrace of early twentieth century Euro-American capitalism.

This emphasis on matter as an autonomous force may have been tied to the emergence of liberal-inspired political economy in the circles of reformers.⁶² Although Kang Youwei does not seem to have mastered English or Japanese,⁶³ he nonetheless had access

60 I take the well-known concept used by Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class*. It is worth noting that Veblen developed that concept precisely in those years.

61 Kang Youwei, Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi seem to have represented three different attitudes towards luxury. Kang Youwei criticized the reconstruction of the Summer Palace with the purpose of using funds to issue government bonds, and so to partially subordinate the budget to the financial market; Guangxu criticized luxury within the traditional framework of court frugality, that is, not on market terms, but on the ethical opposition between excess and sobriety; and the Empress Dowager used luxury mostly for its traditional symbolic dimensions (as a sign of status). These three attitudes deserve further research. See Kwong's observations on Cixi's taste for luxury (Kwong 1984, 33) and on Guangxu's policy (Kwong 1984, 56). On Kang's critique, see Lo 1967, 98.

62 Matten 188–197.

63 Although he appears to have written some letters in English, they do not display a very sophisticated knowledge of the language. In 1898, he certainly could not read Japanese; he says himself in his preface to his book on the Meiji restoration that his Japanese sources were roughly translated for him by his eldest daughter Kang Tongwei 康同薇 (1879–1974). See "Ribenzheng kao," 104.

to many classics of liberalism in translation. For instance, Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) had made Adam Smith available since 1901, and the book of the Chambers brothers mentioned above was, after all, a manual of political economy inspired by liberal ideas. But the most important theoretical inspiration for Kang Youwei was probably his own experience – more precisely, his own first-hand knowledge of banking and industrial activities in the particularly favorable conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century world.⁶⁴ These activities demonstrated to him the power of finance and industry. He saw them as powerful artificers of the Belle Époque, as the “anonymous force” – as Karl Polanyi called it – that determined the fate of the international system.⁶⁵ “Matter” was the name Kang Youwei gave to this multifaceted force of late nineteenth-early twentieth century capitalism. It had no homeland and knew no territorial borders or institutional monopoly of force. More powerful than any state or army, it controlled everything.

For Kang Youwei, this territorially unbounded force was the new ground for nation-building. He thought that while territorial borders were important, they were no longer the main goal in “unifying the people’s mind.” Matter could do better. It could help him rebuild the Chinese nation on a broader basis, both inside and outside China, and bring together the “people of Huaxia” who lived both within and beyond territorial borders. And in case the historical China perished, he could use matter to build a China outside China, a new China, which offered propitious conditions for the perpetuation of the Chinese “lineage.” For this purpose, Kang Youwei intended to use the hidden mechanisms of matter: capital and labor. His New China would be built by workers, managers and stock-holders.

A New China in Mexico

The Society for the Protection of the Emperor gave a clear priority to “matter.” But *where* should “matter” be developed? The rules of the society were ambiguous in this regard. If its mission was to be viewed through the lens of nation-states, as many certainly did, then the society’s role was limited to materially develop Qing China; its mission remained within the original purpose of Chinese reformers: turn Qing China into a “wealthy and strong” country. Some of the particulars in the rules of the society pointed in this direction. For example, one of the major aims of the organization, as per the rules of its Commercial Corporation (*Shangwu gongsi* 商務公司) from 1903 (which Kang Youwei

64 Kang’s ideas seem to resemble those of Tokutomi Soho 德富蘇峰 (1863–1957), especially those of “Heiwa seikai 平和世界”, “A Peaceful World.” I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

65 Polanyi 2001, 9–20.

wrote), was to accumulate a huge quantity of capital, invest it in China, and seize the Chinese market from foreign enterprises.⁶⁶ In short, the purpose was to build what could be called a “patriotic monopoly.” But a different interpretation was also possible. Another statement in the same rules suggested that the nation-states, including China, were less important than financial institutions for the survival of the nation:

國家或有倒亡之時，而吾會銀行無有不求存之理，其堅固廣大真有不可思議者。If the states [*guojia*, that is, any polity of the world] perish one day, there will be no motive not to demand the subsistence of the banks of our Society. Their solidity and dimensions will be really inconceivable.⁶⁷

In other words, as long as its own banks worked, the society was more reliable than states themselves. Even if geographical China disappeared from the surface of the earth together with other nation-states, the self-preservation of the “Huaxia people” would be secured by the financial activities of its banks. China could perish as a physical territory, but the nation would subsist.

According to this second interpretation of the society’s mission, the “Huaxia people” did not need a territory of their own. This had far-reaching implications. If the existence of geographical China was no longer crucial for Chinese self-definition – matter was in fact more important – the Huaxia nation could consider itself to be a self-standing entity beyond borders and territories. Its life insurance, in a manner of speaking, was commerce, industry, and banking. The idea of such a nation, a “nation without state,” did not come out of the blue. Indeed, Kang Youwei seems to have taken the Jewish nation as a model.⁶⁸ For example, in his first public speech in Vancouver in 1899, he stated that the Chinese nation might become like the Jewish one if Qing China was colonized by the Powers. It is true that, in this case, he used the image of the Jews and the notion of a stateless nation to deplore the fate of the people who were deprived of their homeland. At the same time, however, he used them to suggest that the overseas Chinese and the inhabitants of Qing China were all part of the same “imagined community” and that they therefore shared similar concerns. By then, territory seemed to have lost its primacy in the question of

66 “Zhongguo shangwu gongsi yuanqi fu zhang cheng,” 268.

67 “Zhongguo shangwu gongsi yuanqi fu zhang cheng,” 278: Due to the context, *guojia* should be interpreted here in a general sense, and not as the Chinese state in particular.

68 Chen 2014, 8–9. For the history of the topic of the “nation without a state” in Europe, see for example “Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse,” 382–389. Kang Youwei’s project looks astonishingly similar to Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State*, published in 1896. Herzl proposed in his book the creation of a “Jewish Society” and of a big enterprise called “Jewish company,” both would help the “Jewish nation” to build its own state. Herzl also analyzes the possibility of creating the Jewish state in Latin-America, particularly in Argentina. See Herzl 2016, 21–23.

national self-definition. Kang seemed to be looking for new ways of representing the unity of the Chinese nation beyond its multi-territorial reality.

A year after this first speech, in 1900, the rules of his Society for the protection of the Emperor explicitly laid out its double mission: On the one hand, the society was to protect the Qing territory; on the other, it was to preserve the existence of a Chinese community beyond territorial borders. The two were now equally important.⁶⁹

The split between the inhabitants of the Qing territory and the overseas Chinese was not the only concern that necessitated a redefinition of national cohesion. There also existed in most of the Chinese neighborhoods of the Americas long-entrenched divisions, and these divisions were sometimes the ground for conflicts between different groups. Indeed, the overseas Chinese had brought from China, especially from the south, their family and local distinctions, and they had developed surname organizations, regional associations, and brotherhoods.⁷⁰ Once again, Kang Youwei was confronted with social and institutional segmentation, although this time he could not even invoke a shared territory as the main framework of national unity. What, then, was to be the conceptual framework that could overcome both segmentation and territorial boundaries? In the rules of the society from 1900, he emphasized two concepts he had used earlier on: *zhong* 種, “race” or “type,” and *zu* 族, “lineage.”⁷¹ In other writings of the time, he resorted to *wenming* 文明, “civilization,” a word he had frequently used before.⁷² Two features made these concepts very useful. The first feature was their high degree of semantic density: race and lineage made older Qing notions of ethnic segmentation fit in with Social-Darwinist theories,⁷³ and civilization linked previous Chinese conceptions of human perfectibility to Euro-American historicized conceptions of world cultures.⁷⁴ The second feature that made these concepts

69 See “Baojiu Da Qing huangdi gongsi xu li,” 254.

70 Armentrout Ma 1990, 14–29; McKeown 2001, 61–134. However, as both McKeown and Armentrout Ma point out, there also were umbrella organizations defined in national terms, such as the *zhonghua huiguan* 中華會館. See, for example, McKeown 2001, 79.

71 “Baojiu Da Qing huangdi gongsi xu li,” 244–263

72 See, for example, “Dai Shanghai guohui ji chuyang xuesheng fu Hu Guang zongdu Zhang Zhidong shu.” We will not develop in detail the use of the concept of civilization in Kang Youwei’s writings. We will just mention that the word *wenming*, which absorbed the connotations of the word civilization in nineteenth century Europe, contained like the latter one two correlated meanings: the idea of culture (like in “Chinese civilization”), on the one hand, and the idea of cultural and material achievements (like in “degree of civilization”), on the other.

73 Dikötter 1997, 14–18; Crossley 1999, 337–361.

74 The word *wenhua* 文化, “culture,” another Japanese-mediated loan (*bunka*), did not have as much prominence as the word *wenming* or “civilization”, because the latter was the word mostly used by Japanese “enlighteners” like Fukuzawa Yukichi. *Wenhua-bunka* would gain

useful was their potential for national representations: they referred to “realities” that transcended existing divisions between Chinese and that constituted the supposedly objective ground of a fundamental unity. In this sense, these concepts were as instrumental as the concept of territory was in Qing China. This was certainly not the first time among reform-minded literati that these concepts had national connotations; actually, in 1898 and earlier, Kang had not only combined nation, race, lineage and civilization, but he had actually been inspired by the close interconnection that these concepts already had in Europe and America.⁷⁵ However, from the point of view of Kang’s own itinerary, there was indeed something new: even more than before, these concepts became during his exile key overarching pieces of his discourse on national cohesion. He found in racial and civilizational terminologies the necessary conceptual tools to downplay regional and familial distinctions, to overcome the divisions between the diasporic groups, and, more fundamentally, to represent the unity between the overseas Chinese and the Qing subjects.

It was on the basis of this idea that Kang Youwei proposed building what he called – somewhat informally – a “New China” (*Xin Zhongguo* 新中國), a China outside of China. This project actually went back to 1897 at the latest, one year before the one hundred days. Kang Youwei had been meditating on the possibility of “colonizing (i. e. sending migrants to) Brazil.”⁷⁶ At that time, however, he told Chen Chi 陳熾 (1855–1900) in a moment of frustration:

君維持舊國，吾開辟新國。

“You preserve the old *guo* (*jiuguo* 舊國); I will develop a new *guo* (*xinguo* 新國).”⁷⁷

Since the Qing court did not seem willing to carry out reform, he thought that China was probably lost.⁷⁸ His only hope, then, was to rebuild the Chinese nation somewhere else.

prominence through Japan when, following the established opposition between the German *Kultur* and the French *civilisation*, it would be used to express the singular features of Chinese and Japanese “cultures” against the West. See Howland 1996, 245–247. About the history of the word “civilization” in Europe until the nineteenth century, see the old but always useful article written by Lucien Febvre (1930).

75 This close association had existed at least since the European Enlightenment. For the relation between nation and race during the Enlightenment, especially in the Scottish one, see Sebastiani 2011; and for the racialized conception of nation in China, see Matten 2012, 74–85.

76 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 388.

77 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 138.

78 The Qing court had engaged in the path of reform since 1901: it was the beginning of the period of *Xinzheng* 新政, the “New Policies.” However, a lot of reformers and constitutionalists considered the dynasty too slow and were anxious about the possibility that a constitutional monarchy would never be achieved.

He planned to meet the Brazilian ambassador, who visited Hong Kong that same year, with the aim of making official arrangements to send laborers to Brazil. He had concluded that Brazil, and Latin America in general, offered suitable lands for settling the Chinese population and building a New China. This “New China” was not merely intended to foster Chinese migration to the Americas. Actually, this was already happening, as huge numbers of Chinese had already settled in Northern, Central, and South America since the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ “New China” was more than that: it was a nation-building project.⁸⁰ The expression itself – “new *guo*,” “new *Zhongguo*” – indeed evoked a national dimension. Like the old one, the New China would be some particular place where the race could perpetuate its history, and where the inhabitants could constitute, despite the distance, a single nation along with the old one.

Although the New China would share many features with the old one, one feature in particular made it very different: the new relationship it entailed between race and territory. When in 1898 Kang Youwei explained to the emperor why segmentation should be abolished, he saw the territorial institutions as the main agents of nation-building. The politically defined territory was the fundamental framework and the physical space for the “unification of the minds of the people.” In the New China project, by contrast, the territory of the young Brazilian republic was of no relevance for the national self-definition of the Huaxia people. The Chinese nation would rather have its own place or a set of places to develop its activities and would not claim any political jurisdiction in the Brazilian territory. The word *guo* in the expression “New China,” while certainly employed to designate a spatially circumscribed entity, was not a territory in the sense of international law. It was just a place. Though Brazil seemed to be the right place, any other place would also have been acceptable as long as the Chinese “race” or “type” could perpetuate itself. Yet how would the race perpetuate itself? In a word: through “matter.” The new place needed to be propitious for industry, banking, and labor immigration, the three necessary conditions for the survival of the New China. The earth was simply perceived as the physical space where financial activities, industrial development, and market exchanges occurred. Political geography was now less important than economic geography. For

79 See *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 137–138. For Chinese migration to Latin America, see, for example, McKeown 2001.

80 The expression “New China” may certainly have the ordinary meaning of a “China different from the old one,” and it might also evoke a “renewed” China, the idea of a morally regenerated China. But it seems to me that Kang Youwei is resorting to a typical expression which resonates with previous European settlements and colonial projects in America, such as “New England” or “New Germany.”

Kang Youwei, matter was the most important condition for the protection of the Chinese race and civilization.

Brazil appeared to be the best option until 1905. Kang Youwei even planned a trip to this South American country that same year, but he never went.⁸¹ Instead, he travelled to Mexico. By 1907, Mexico had already become the main option for his New China project.

Like Brazil, Mexico itself was not supposed to become a New China, but only to provide the territorial framework in which the New China – a stateless China – could devote to financial and industrial activities. In Mexico, the two sorts of Chinese inhabitants Kang envisaged for his New China, businessmen and laborers, would find an accurate place to live and suitable conditions to “preserve the race.” Some Chinese had already been there since the nineteenth century; others would be brought from Qing China⁸² or other parts of the world. As for fostering migration, he set out (as he had planned to do in Brazil) to bring thousands of Chinese workers to Mexico. These workers would provide the necessary cheap labor for the industrial enterprises of the society and would constitute the largest part of the New China population. Kang did not mention in this context the word “coolie,” which suggests forced labor. In his 1898 autobiography, when he mentions his Brazilian project, he uses the expression *zhaogong* 招工, “to hire laborers.”⁸³ However, Charles Ranslett Flint (1850–1934), a friend of Kang Youwei, is more precise in this regard. When he describes Kang Youwei’s project in his *Memories of an Active Life*, he uses the term “coolies:”

Kang Yu Wei discussed the possibility of his talking with President Diaz of Mexico, concerning the admission of coolies to develop Mexico. He stood ready to finance the undertaking.⁸⁴

81 Worden 1972, 199 and 207.

82 Flint 1923, 278.

83 *Kang Nanhai zibian nianpu*, 39. In an English interview he gave to the Mexican Herald (quoted below; see note 122), where he criticizes the Chinese Exclusion Act and demands the admission of different sorts of Chinese migrants into the United States, he explicitly says that he doesn’t have in mind the migration of coolies. The Chinese Exclusion Act, made permanent in 1902, prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States. In 1904–1907, there was a boycott of US goods in China, and the Society for the Protection of the Emperor was very active in fostering this boycott. See Lo 1967, 270–271, note 32. Aware of the pressure of the Exclusion Act on Chinese migration, Kang Youwei thought that a New China in welcoming places like Brazil and Mexico could absorb the migrants that were unable to make it to the United States.

84 Flint 1923, 278.

Flint was a well-known American businessman Kang Youwei had met in the United States. It is not clear how Kang managed to get to know the “father of trusts,” as Flint was called, but he eventually became his friend. Flint often invited Kang to chat and go hunting, and helped him with administrative issues. He was also the tutor of Kang Youwei’s daughter, Kang Tongbi 康同璧 (1881–1969), while she was studying in New York.⁸⁵ Flint had many business interests in Mexico and became one of Kang’s intermediaries with the Mexican authorities; he was probably the one who encouraged him to contact Porfirio Díaz.⁸⁶ Flint’s description of the enterprise, at least in its economic dimensions, is probably more accurate than Kang Youwei’s partially utopian presentation of it. As was the case in other parts of the Americas, the largest part of the New China inhabitants would consist of Huaxia coolies. Although we cannot make too many assumptions about the working conditions Kang Youwei envisioned for these laborers, the particularly harsh conditions that may have awaited them are at least conceivable if we think of the regime of contracted Chinese labor in Cuba and Peru from the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁷

The choice of Mexico was first and foremost due to the welcoming attitude of the Mexican government towards Chinese immigrants and to the advantageous conditions of the country for capitalist industry and banking. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico had indeed experienced impressive industrial development on the basis of foreign investments and low-waged labor. The north of the country, especially Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Sonora, was home to an increasing number of Chinese-owned businesses.⁸⁸ Beyond this, Kang Youwei’s enthusiastic hopes were a product of his admiration for the political force behind this business-friendly atmosphere: the President of Mexico. As Kang Youwei would describe the Mexican leader in an interview he later gave to *The Mexican Herald*, Porfirio Díaz was in his eyes “a just and farsighted ruler.” Kang Youwei seems to have quickly familiarized himself with the recent history of Mexico.⁸⁹ He knew that Mexico had gone through multiple wars during the nineteenth century, from the Reform War (1857–1860) to the Franco-Mexican War (1861–1867), and that it had endured a long period of political instability. With the support of his troops, Porfirio Díaz had indeed managed to impose strict control on Mexico’s institutions. He controlled the legislative and judiciary branches of government and remained in office between 1876 and 1910 (with the exception of the years 1880–1884). Although he did not belong to the traditional oligarchic families, many of them welcomed Díaz as the guarantor of political

85 See Worden 1972, 203; Lo 1967, 205.

86 Worden 1972, 204–205.

87 See Hu-Dehart 2005, 82–89.

88 Lalich 2006, 182.

89 See his interview with Díaz quoted below.

stability and as the only person capable of creating favorable conditions for local and foreign investment. Mexico thus became one of the key places of early twentieth-century *haute finance*. The *porfiriato* was the Mexican Belle Époque, characterized by an optimistic faith in economic and scientific progress. Kang Youwei would later compare the political virtues of President Díaz to those of the prominent emperors of Chinese imperial history, because he saw Díaz as a visionary man who used “despotic” rule (a word used, as we will see, both by Kang and the intellectuals of the *porfiriato* themselves) to push the purportedly immature Mexican nation onto a path of industrial development.⁹⁰

It is no wonder therefore that Kang Youwei found in the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz, especially in the north of the country, a good alternative for the establishment of his New China. Kang Youwei seems to have considered Porfirian Mexico from at least 1904.⁹¹ He was told that Mexico, where his society was already active, would increase his capital if he made larger investments in its territory. When he visited Mexico for the first time in 1905, he tested the levels of profit by buying a piece of land and selling it again some months later. He was convinced by the profit he obtained. Deciding to strengthen the financial support for the activities of his society in Mexico, he therefore let the Commercial Corporation handle the investments.⁹² He also consulted with Charles Ranlett Flint, who provided him with advice and loans, and who helped him solve administrative issues with the American Bureau of Immigration. In 1905, the Commercial Corporation founded a bank in Torreón, the Bank of Mexico and Canton (*Yuemo yinhang*). Huang Kuanzhuo (Wong Foon-chuck), one of the few of Kang’s men who could understand Spanish, also became a leading figure in the venture.⁹³ Finally, in 1907, Kang Youwei received an invitation from Porfirio Díaz, whom he met on June 29.⁹⁴ When Kang arrived at the capital, *El Imparcial*, one of the Mexican newspapers subsidized by the Porfirian government, portrayed him as a *negociante*, “businessman.” In a way, this depiction was a more accurate image of Kang Youwei than that of “reformer” or “scholar-official.”⁹⁵ When Kang Youwei

90 “Gonghe pingyi,” 15

91 “Deguo youji,” 444.

92 Lo 1967, 202–203; for the organization of the Corporation, see Lo 1967, 195–196.

93 See Armentrout Ma 1990, 110. For a history of the Chinese settlements in Mexico, see Hu-Dehart 2006.

94 The interview between Díaz and Kang seems to have had three layers of translation: from Chinese to English and from English to Spanish. In the interview, there were Kang Youwei’s secretary, Linn Cheu Sang, and Rafael Chousal, Porfirio Díaz’s secretary. See “Kong Yu Wei met President Yesterday,” *The Mexican Herald*, June 30 1907.

95 “Kong You Wei, prominente negociante chino, en México,” *El Imparcial*, 29 June 1907. For a report on the interview, see “Kong Yu Wei met President Yesterday,” *The Mexican Herald*, 30 June 1907.

finally met the Mexican president, he told him about his project of bringing Chinese migrants to Mexico. Porfirio Díaz said he would be happy to welcome Chinese in his country, “but, if they bring capital (*ziben* 資本)” – as he said according to Kang’s Chinese translation of the interview – “it would be even better.”⁹⁶

What would then be the relationship between New China and the Mexican government? Although Kang Youwei was not explicit about it, his perception of the *porfiriato* certainly gives us some clues. The following excerpt of the interview⁹⁷ is very telling in this regard. Here, Kang explains to Díaz why he finds Mexico propitious for Chinese settlements:

墨亂已久，非專制不為效，[...]。惟墨國以民主共和之體，略兼專制而行之，此真地球獨一之政體，古所無也。用能長治久安，今各商人皆樂委巨資於墨，吾華人亦開銀行買地於此，信總統也。

Mexico has been in trouble for a long time, and it has not been able to make any achievement without a despotic rule (*zhuanzhi* 專制). [...] Only Mexico has democratic-republican (*minzhu gonghe* 民主共和) institutions and exerts an almost despotic rule to make it work: this is certainly a unique body politic (*zhengti* 政體) in the world; this is something that did not exist in the past. It preserves an everlasting rule and a permanent peace, and today every businessman happily makes great investments in Mexico – just like our Huaxia people, who have opened banks and bought real estate here. This is all because they trust you, Mr. President.⁹⁸

Far from being empty talk, Kang’s expression of admiration for both Mexico and the Mexican president reflect the opinions he formulated in other writings and public speeches. Mexico was depicted as a model of institutional organization. Due to the exceptional conditions of Mexico, “despotic” (*zhuanzhi*) rule was unavoidable in Kang’s opinion. But this was a “good” form of despotism, because it was directed solely at developing “matter.” In this sense, it was both a model for the old China and a good place to build the new nation. The New China, which was in any case excluded from political participation (at least in the case of new migrants), would actually benefit from this “unique” body politic.

This portrait of Mexico seemed to borrow from the arguments that Porfirio Díaz and the intellectuals of his regime used to justify the *porfiriato*.⁹⁹ “Despotism”, in the

96 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 409.

97 This Chinese version, whose veracity can be proved with the existence of different reports in the Mexican press, is certainly not a literal rendering of what Porfirio Díaz told Kang Youwei. To date, I haven’t been able to find a Spanish version of the whole interview.

98 “Ye Moxige zongtong duiwen ji,” 303; *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 407–408.

99 For a justification of the combination between *despotismo* and republican institutions in the political writings of the Porfirian regime, especially among the so-called *científicos*, see *infra*. More generally, see Hale 1989, esp. ch. 2. This was also a *topos* in Latin-American political writings. In

Porfirian discourse, did not always have a negative meaning. Indeed, some Mexican men of letters, including those who had positions in the Porfirian administration, used this word (and other related ones) in a way that combines late eighteenth century enlightened despotism with nineteenth century republican liberalism. Porfirio Díaz was seen as a necessary evil: He was depicted as an absolute ruler whose mission was to help the Mexican nation to reach enough maturity for self-government. “Despotism” was not conceived as a “backward” form of rule – as it was the case, for example, with “oriental despotism” – but as a necessary path leading to a better future. Justo Sierra (1848–1912), minister of Porfirio Díaz and a prominent intellectual of the *porfiriato*, explained in one of his political histories of Mexico that presidents in “new countries” like Mexico or the United States could wield even more power than the Tsar of Russia.¹⁰⁰ And he justified Porfirian rule in the following terms:

Esta investidura, la sumisión del pueblo en todos sus órganos oficiales, de la sociedad en todos sus elementos vivos, a la voluntad del presidente, puede bautizarse con el nombre de dictadura social, de cesarismo espontáneo, de lo que se quiera; la verdad es que tiene caracteres singulares que no permiten clasificarla lógicamente en las formas clásicas del despotismo. Es un gobierno personal que amplía, defiende y robustece al gobierno legal; [...] Por eso si el gobierno nuestro es eminentemente autoritario, no puede, a riesgo de perecer, dejar de ser constitucional, y se ha atribuido a un hombre, no sólo para realizar la paz y dirigir la transformación económica, sino para ponerlo en condiciones de neutralizar los despotismos de los otros poderes, extinguir los cacicazgos y desarmar las tiranías locales.

This investiture, the submission of the [Mexican] people in all its official organs, of society in all its living elements, to the will of the President [Díaz], could be called by the name of social dictatorship, of spontaneous caesarism, or whatever; the truth is that it has singular features that do not logically enable us to classify it within the classical forms of despotism [*despotismo*]. It’s a personal government that enlarges, defends and strengthens legal government [...]. Therefore if our government is eminently authoritarian, it cannot stop being constitutional without perishing, and it has been given to a man not only to carry out peace and orchestrate economic transformation, but also to enable him to neutralize other powers, extinguish chiefdoms and dismantle local tyrannies.¹⁰¹

In this regard, Kang Youwei’s description of the *porfiriato* did not differ very much from Justo Sierra’s. Shared ideas and a common vocabulary are used in the justification of Díaz’s

his *Bases*, a very influential text in Latin America, Juan Bautista Alberdi opposed the “república posible” or “possible republic” to the “república verdadera” or “actual republic.” Latin American countries, Alberdi suggested, were only ready to have a limited, tutelary form of republic before they could reach the “república verdadera.” See Alberdi 1933, 72.

100 Sierra 1980, 326.

101 Sierra 1980, 289–290.

“non-classical” despotic government, because both Kang and Sierra thought that the Mexican nation needed such a regime for its material progress.

This seemingly essential association between a despotic ruler and economic development was actually not new. In nineteenth century Mexico and Latin America, it was grounded on the positivist assumption that society should be governed by a minority of “scientists” who understood its laws; it also had as forerunners eighteenth and nineteenth century debates on “enlightened” rule and on labor supervision.¹⁰² The question we might then ask Kang Youwei is the following: did the New China project not contradict his previous political projects? After requesting a parliament in China and the active participation of the Chinese people in ruling the empire, it seems contradictory at first glance to bring the Chinese “race” to a country where parliaments were disempowered and where the Chinese could not even participate in political life. But there was no contradiction; this project was of a very different nature than the one in Qing China. New China was a “matter” project, the project of a race and a civilization, whose perpetuation depended on its capacity to create industrial and financial means of subsistence. Since it was not a state project, it was as indifferent to territorial jurisdiction as to territorial political institutions. In this sense, then, it was perfectly compatible with Porfirian “despotism”. If such despotism offered the means to carry out the project, the exact nature of the political institutions in the host country were not the most important critical factor. Moreover, even if New China was not necessarily going to enjoy “co-rulership” under Porfirio Díaz, Old China under the Qing court was not necessarily going to enjoy it either; the Qing had promised a constitution, but no one knew whether it would ever see the light of day. In both Mexico and China, there were only promises, not facts. Why wouldn’t Kang Youwei, then, bring the Chinese race to Mexico, where the ruler – a president-despot – actually created the conditions that the Qing dynasty could not?

Porfirio Díaz was more than just a host to New China. When we read Kang’s recurrent praise for the Mexican president, we are tempted to think that he saw in him a model for the relation between himself and the Chinese nation. Kang Youwei certainly did not think of himself as a “despot.” However, his relation to New China, especially to its workers, was in some respects close to that between a tutelary ruler and his subjects. Somewhat paradoxically, the tutelary role Kang Youwei implicitly assumed in New China gives rise

102 Stanziani 2008. This “despotic” characterization might also be part of the process that Yves Cohen describes in *Le siècle des chefs*: the increasing concern, in the world between the 1890s and 1940s, with “commandment” and “leadership.” See Cohen 2013. For the role of Auguste Comte’s positivism in Mexican (and more generally Latin American) political ideas of the period, see Hale 1986, 387–391.

to another fundamental question: the relation between this national project and the “Great Unity” – the ideal society he envisaged for humanity.

Kang Youwei is well known for his utopian writings. His *Datong shu* 大同書, *Book of the Great Unity*, was a very influential text in the twentieth century and probably the first systematically utopian work in the Chinese-speaking world (leaving aside here some late Qing novels and previous concepts of ideal societies in imperial history¹⁰³). The core idea of this book was that all kinds of *jie* 界, “boundaries,” – between classes, sexes, races, *guo*-s – would be abolished in the last stage of human evolution, the era of Great Peace (*Taiping*). Once abolished, the Great Unity would come into being and all the suffering these boundaries produced would disappear. The book had many sources of inspiration: It contained elements from the New Text interpretation of the ancient classics (the “Great Unity” was an ideal world order explained by Confucius in the *Book of Rites*) revived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; other aspects came from Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity; and yet others from socialism, especially (but not only) socialist utopianism. If we read what this text – whose first draft seems to have been completed around 1902 – says about the role of industry and finance in the history of humanity, we see that Kang Youwei conceived the structure of enterprises according to a monarchic model – and not precisely a constitutional one. Many pages of his book are devoted to the historical role of capitalist enterprises. In a passage about the powers of big companies, he warned that they would soon have the size of states and be ruled accordingly. Their “princes,” he said, would be the owners, and the “common people” the workers:

[...], 其用工人至為億為兆而不止，如小國焉。其富主如國君，其百執事如士大夫，其作工如小民， [...].

[...]. The utilization of workmen will reach to a hundred thousand, to a million, and will not stop. [Such an enterprise] will be like a small state; its wealthy owners will be like the state’s princes; its hundred managers will be like the gentry and great officials; its workers will be like the common people. [...].¹⁰⁴

While the metaphor is used here negatively, he then explains, in a positive sense, how these huge enterprises would pave the way for the Great Unity. When the Great Unity appears, the enterprises will also look like states. This time, however, they will be in public hands for the benefit of all. The idea recalls one of the key assumptions in Marxist writings, which, in turn, had roots in previous socialist schools.¹⁰⁵ What may have inspired

103 On this issue, see Bauer 1971 and Andolfatto 2015.

104 *Datong shu*, 154. I follow Thompson’s translation; see Thompson 1958, 212–213.

105 Thompson claims that Kang Youwei was not familiar with Marxism, but Kang’s description of the inevitable development of large industries, and, especially, his explanation of how the contradictions between capital and labor – which, in these enterprise-states, would in his

Kang Youwei was the idea that huge monopolies, although they served capitalist interests, were easier for the state to expropriate; they therefore created the conditions for the final abolition of private property.¹⁰⁶ In this context, it is not difficult to understand how Kang Youwei could reconcile his socialist inspirations and his actual practice as investor and company manager. His Society for the Protection of the Emperor, and especially its Commercial Corporation, seemed to be part of the inevitable process that first led from small to large scale industry and banking, and then to a “world government” that would seize these enterprises and manage them for the common good.

In this sense, Kang Youwei might play in his New China, built on the basis of finance and industry, an analogous role to the one Porfirio Díaz played in Mexico: On the one hand, he was a tutelary figure whose mission was to protect and guide the nation with the political tools of the “enlightened despotism” that he had already advocated for Qing China; on the other, he was a transitional figure who prepared the nation for its final liberation from oppression and for self-government. In the following poem from 1905 – composed within the literati tradition that “poetry expresses [political] ambitions” (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志) – Kang Youwei articulated in verse this transitional dimension of the New China project. At the time, he still thought of colonizing Brazil:

我將殖民巴西地，樓船航渡歲億千。
 樹我種族開我學，存我文明拓我田。
 移民迅速殖千萬，立新中國光互天。
 既救舊國開新國，我族既安強且堅。
 雖未大同天下樂，我願庶幾救顛連。

opinion became the major social contradiction – would lead to the final abolition of private property, seems to point to some indirect communication with Marxian ideas. It is true that Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, which Kang Youwei read in translation, explained Marxian ideas without mentioning Marx; but we cannot discard some knowledge of Marxism through his American and Japanese networks: by 1902, when the first draft of the *Book of the Great Unity* was finished, there were partial translations of the *Manifesto* in Japanese (see Chen Liwei 2006; on Kang’s admiration of Bellamy’s novel, and on the importance of this work for late Qing reformers, see Andolfatto 2015, 4–8). Kang’s criticism of Charles Fourier (if “Mr. Fu” is Fourier indeed) and his sympathies with “the method of common property” (*gongchan zhi fa*, most probably, as Thompson suggests, “Communism”) might be taken as sign of some familiarity with socialism. See *Datong shu*, 154; Thompson 1958, 228.

106 See, for example, Friedrich Engels’s classical text, “Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft.” Engels 1987, 220–221. Another source of inspiration may have been Saint-Simon’s idea of the nation-factory. See Saint-Simon 1821, 204–205.

We will colonize Brazilian land
 Huge ships will cross the ocean for many years
 To implant our race (*zhongzu* 種族) and to open schools
 To develop our civilization (*wenming* 文明) and to develop our land
 Migrants will quickly become thousands
 They will create a New China (*Xin Zhongguo*) and its brightness will join Heaven
 The old *guo* will be saved and the new *guo* established
 And our lineage (*zu* 族) will be settled with strength and vigor
 Even though this will not be the Great Unity (*Da Tong*) and the joy of all under Heaven
 I hope it will at least save [our race] from hardship and suffering¹⁰⁷

Kang Youwei's poem discloses the relation between his project and his ideas about the Great Unity. One could be tempted to think that Kang's utopian writings were the symptom of an increasing disengagement with practical activities. But, in fact, the opposite was true: the Great Unity was the perfect theoretical pendant to his New China project.¹⁰⁸ New China would be built on the grounds of material progress, that is, on his society's economic activities. Material progress, and along with it human progress, made national boundaries useless. Therefore, as long as the Chinese race (or "type"), represented by the society, advanced materially, no territorial boundaries were needed. New China followed the direction of the Great Unity and embodied the future of humanity. Indeed, if all boundaries were sooner or later doomed to disappear, it made perfect sense that the Chinese nation would move to a place where it had more propitious conditions for its material development. Although the foundation of New China, as Kang Youwei says in his poem, would "not be the Great Unity" – for the boundaries of race, lineage, and civilization still had a role to play – it would nevertheless bring the Chinese nation closer to that ideal world order.¹⁰⁹

The poem clearly displays the intimate relation between the New China project and the languages of race and lineage. In 1898, the "protection of the race" was subordinated to the protection of territorial integrity. Both in his proposals to the emperor and in the society he organized in 1898, the "race," as a nation-inspired slogan, had not been meant

107 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 388; *Kang Nanhai Xiansheng nianpu xubian*, 63.

108 For the complex relation between Kang's utopian and practical projects, see Hsiao 1975, 409–412.

109 Kang Youwei's languages of race and lineage deserve further research. Here, I will limit myself to say that the end of racial boundaries, as he conceived them, would not consist on dismissing them as irrelevant, but on eugenics. In the *Book of the Great Unity*, he said that the black and brown races should be improved by intermarriage with yellow and white people, and those of the superior races who dare do it should be rewarded. See *Datong shu*, 44; Dikötter 1997, 2. See also what I say below in this article.

to oppose the “Han” to the “Manchus” – this would have given legitimacy to the Qing traditional vocabulary of lineage and, with it, the segmented institutions of the empire which he had proposed to abolish. Instead, Kang had intended to use “race” as an inclusive concept. He had used it to emphasize the common belonging of the imperial population to the same *quo*, the same polity – whose territory, a common good, was to be preserved from internal and external threats. This inclusive use of race, which Kang Youwei never abandoned, differed from the one used by the main rival political group of the Society for the Protection of the Emperor: the revolutionaries. Among Chinese revolutionaries, especially the advocates of a “racial revolution,” the language of race was mainly intended for political exclusion. It was on the basis of racial difference that they demanded the expulsion of the Qing – of this “alien race” that had conquered the Han in the seventeenth century – and the creation of a Han government for the Han race. The neologism *minzu* 民族 or “lineage of the people” was a central term in the discourse of the racial revolution. Like Kang Youwei, its advocates combined the ancient connotations of lineage and ethnicity (contained by the word *zu*) with the new Social-Darwinist ideas about race,¹¹⁰ but they identified the “Chinese nation” with the “Han nation,” that is, with only one of the segments that constituted the empire.¹¹¹

Kang Youwei, a loyalist, rejected the racial revolution, not only because he was against all forms of revolution, but also – as he would explicitly claim in 1911 – because it was based on an “archaic” conception of race. After centuries of miscegenation and surname changes, how could anyone tell the difference between Chinese and non-Chinese within the “yellow race”?¹¹² However, during his exile, “race” became for him as important a concept as it was for the revolutionaries: Once he had to explain the grounds of a national unity that transcended territorial borders, race re-emerged as a central piece in the architecture of his plan. His racism certainly was less politically radical than the revolutionaries’. He kept race and lineage semantically open to avoid any reference to either the traditional segmentation of the Qing empire or the “racial revolution” of his political enemies; his purpose undoubtedly was to prevent an equivocal interpretation regarding the Manchu dynasty. However, like the revolutionaries, he now gave race and lineage a prominent place: indebted to the same Social-Darwinist ideas, he considered the “yellow race” – which included all the different East Asian “sub-races” – a major actor in world

110 Matten 2012, 74–85.

111 Crossley 1999, 337–361.

112 He was against the racial revolution during his whole life, but his arguments are clearly formulated in the following letter from 1911, “Yu Li Yuanhong, Huang Xing, Tang Hualong shu,” 204–209.

history.¹¹³ He seems to have conceived his New China in Mexico on the basis of these inclusive, nation-oriented, semantically flexible, and somewhat opportunistic notions of race and lineage.

An example of the inclusiveness of these concepts – at least within the New China project – is Kang Youwei’s enthusiastic support of the hypothesis about the Asian origins of the Mesoamerican populations. This hypothesis had already been intensely discussed in Mexico for some time. If Mexico had provided favorable geographic conditions for the flourishing of Mesoamerican races, Kang Youwei wondered why the same would not also be true for the Chinese race. After all, according to the monogenetic theory, it had the same origins as the Mesoamerican people. It is difficult to tell exactly when Kang Youwei started exploring this theory. We know that Kang had thought, at least since 1888, that some parts of Latin America and China shared similar features (especially regarding climate), and we also find some monogenetic arguments in his *Book of the Great Unity* (although he might have introduced them in the book much later).¹¹⁴ Whenever it was that he started to contemplate the linkages between China and Latin-America, it was not until his first stay in Mexico in 1905–1906 that he felt he had found definitive evidence to support the monogenetic theory. During this six-month stay, when he visited Mayan and Aztec ruins and learned Mexican history, he supposedly identified common patterns in the etymologies of Nahuatl and Chinese and in the architectural style of buildings in Mexico and China. In light of these observations, he concluded that the Xianbei (the population from Siberia that had founded the Northern Wei dynasty in the fourth century and had ruled China for a century and a half) were the direct ancestors of the Mesoamerican races.¹¹⁵ It will be recalled that Kang Youwei had already evoked the Xianbei rulers in a different context: He had recommended that Emperor Guangxu follow their model in homogenizing the “customs” of the Qing Empire. Now, however, he invoked the Xianbei in a different way. His daughter Kang Tongbi recalled her father’s ideas as follows:

113 His discourse on the “yellow race” goes at least as far back as 1898. In his *Book of the Great Unity*, he devotes a whole chapter to the role of race in history. We cannot tell whether the chapter was written before or after the New China project, but the ideas in one and the other are consistent.

114 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 55; *Datong shu*, 46. Since the passage that mentions these arguments can only be found in the Zhonghua shuju edition (1935), we cannot say with certainty whether Kang thought of these arguments before or after going to Mexico.

115 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 391. For the topic of *tongzhong* 同種 or “same-raceness” in the discourse of the reformers, see Karl 2007, 38–44.

黃寬卓[焯]、黃日初請一墨人教書，謂其種出於吾族，[...]。觀其古王宮廟，皆五百年前物，似吾國北方廣式紅牆[牆]層門，其石刻與西伯利亞博物院中物皆同，乃知確自鮮卑傳來。

[When visiting Yucatan and Mitla with my father], Huang Kuanzhuo and Huang Richu asked a Mexican man to teach them, and he said that their race came from our race (*wu zu* 吾族, “our lineage”), [...]. [My father] observed the old palaces and temples, which were five hundred years old and looked like the broad ones with red walls and layered doors in the North of our country; besides, their stone inscriptions were like the ones on the objects of the museum[s?] about Siberia.¹¹⁶ He thus had the proof that these objects came from the Xianbei.¹¹⁷

While these arguments (which Kang Youwei also emphasizes in a poem¹¹⁸) appear somewhat imaginative, they nevertheless fit in with the racial conception of the nation that was so widespread by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. When Kang Youwei returned to Mexico two years later, in 1907, he made his views public; he even mentioned that he was planning to write a history of Mexico. Neither Porfirio Díaz nor the Mexican press seems to have made fun of his ideas. *La Voz de México* reported:

También visitó el Museo, siendo recibido por el Sr. Lic. Don Genaro García, subdirector del Establecimiento y el señor Feller, arqueólogo y mexicanista alemán. Ahí manifestó que los monumentos y geroglíficos aztecas se asemejan mucho a los que dejaron los primeros habitantes de Mongolia, Siberia y China, cuya escritura es muy parecida a la de los mayas. Kong Yu Wei escribe en su lengua actualmente una historia de México, con objeto de que sea conocida por sus compatriotas.

[Kang Youwei] also visited the [National] Museum; he was received by Mr. Lic. Don Genaro García, the vice-director of the institution, and Mr. Feller, archeologist and German specialist of Mexico. There [Kang] said that the Aztec monuments and hieroglyphs look very much like the ones that were left by the first inhabitants of Mongolia, Siberia, and China, whose writing is similar to the Maya's. Kong Yu Wei currently writes a history of Mexico, with the purpose to make it known to his countrymen.¹¹⁹

The utopian dimensions of Kang's views also did not remain hidden: He made them clear in an interview he gave with *The Mexican Herald* at the Hotel Palacio in Mexico City. *El*

116 I have not been able to identify what museum or museums Kang Tongbi was referring to.

117 *Kang Nanhai Xiansheng nianpu xubian*, 65.

118 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 391–392.

119 “Visita de un estadista chino a las obras de Xochimilco y al Museo,” *La Voz de México*, 5 July 1907. This history of Mexico is also mentioned in Zhang Bozhen's “Nanhai Kang xiansheng zhuan,” 498. But I haven't been able to find it. It is possible that the book was never written.

Imparcial reproduced parts of this interview in Spanish. When the *Herald* asked about the “yellow peril,” Kang remarked:

There is no yellow peril, there is no white peril, there is no black peril, or brown or any peril, of any special color. [...] In the fundamentals, all the races of men are similar if not identical. The great question that is presented today to civilized nations is not whether their unimportant differences will lead them to clash but rather whether their inherent similarities and oneness will induce them to unite in the great worldwide work that needs to be done.¹²⁰

These opinions were consistent with the *Book of the Great Unity*. It is true that some of Kang’s assertions in this book seem to contradict the idea that “all the races of men are similar if not identical.” For example, the book claims that the yellow and the white races are superior (the white one even superior to the yellow one), and suggests migration and intermarriage as methods to improve “inferior” races.¹²¹ However, by the same token, it also stresses that in the Great Unity even the two superior races will finally merge into a single one.¹²² Since the Xianbei, who were ancestors of the “Mexican races” and racially similar to the Han, had not only adapted to Mexican conditions, but had also produced advanced civilizations, they seemed to provide Kang Youwei with clear historical proof

120 “China is Mexico’s Future Customer, Kong Yu Wei, Chinese Reformer, Talks of Conditions”, *The Mexican Herald*, 28 June 1907, 1. *El imparcial* summarized these ideas in the following way: “Emitiendo sus opiniones acerca de lo que ha dado en llamarse el ‘peligro amarillo’, dijo: ‘En lo fundamental, todas las razas humanas son casi iguales: persiguen su engrandecimiento y su bienestar.’ ‘En el mundo no hay peligro amarillo ni blanco, ni rojo ni negro. La civilización se encargará de que desaparezcan las radicales diferencias que ahora hay entre ciertos pueblos, y no está remoto el día en que el mundo tenga un idioma universal” (When he gave his opinions about what has come to be called the “yellow danger”, [Kang Youwei] said: “In their fundamental features, all the human races are almost the same: they look for self-exaltation and well-being.” “In the world there is neither yellow nor white, neither red nor black danger. Civilization will erase the radical differences that now exist between certain peoples, and the day is not far when the world will have a universal language”). “Kong You Wei, prominente negociante chino, en México,” *El Imparcial*, 29 June 1907. The translator (into English) must have been Kang Youwei’s secretary, Linn Cheu Sang.

121 *Datong shu*, 47, and more generally the whole chapter on race.

122 Taking these ideas into account, further research should be conducted on the political dimensions of Kang Youwei’s conception of race. Kang Youwei thought that a polity should not necessarily consist of one single “race” or “lineage.” Like in England or in China itself, the rulers could belong to one race, the ruled ones to another, as long as racial differences did not entail privileges for any of the ethnic groups that composed the nation. “Da nan bei Meizhou zhu huashang lun Zhongguo zhi ke xing lixian bu neng xing geming shu,” 329–330.

that Mexico was suited both physically and racially to host the Chinese race and to let it perpetuate itself. Kang was not explicit on this last point,¹²³ and yet he certainly implied that bringing Chinese migrants to this part of the world would get the yellow race closer to the white race that governed Mexico. Kang Youwei was perfectly aware of the comingling of the descendants of the Spanish *conquistadores* and the descendants of the Maya and Aztec populations, not to mention the atrocities the former inflicted on the latter.¹²⁴ But this history, for him, was not a prologue to the future. If all races were to become a single race in the end, the New China was a clear step forward in the historical path leading to the Great Unity.

Epilogue: bringing the nation back to China

Now that Kang Youwei had found in Mexico a suitable place for producing “matter” and “protecting the race,” the conditions must have seemed right for a mass migration. The New China project was only partially realized, however. In the end, Kang Youwei was consumed by his own personal uncertainty: He did not know whether he should stay in the Americas or go back to China. The following episode in Charles Ranlett Flint’s *Memories* is very explicit in this regard:

While we were discussing Mexico [with Kang Tongbi, Kang’s daughter], I asked: “Can your father wield sufficient influence to bring about the emigration of so many coolies?” “The question is not *can*,” she flashed, “it is *will* he”.¹²⁵

Kang and his daughter thus felt the project was feasible, but it was unclear whether Kang really wanted to make it work. Neither the New nor the Old China were totally convincing for the former scholar-official. Both had pros and cons. New China was a reliable source of income, but he did not want to renounce his former ambition of becoming an important minister for the Qing dynasty. Old China was the place where he expected to come back with honors, but if the dynasty did not actually follow the path of reform despite its recent promises, going back would have been pointless. Kang Youwei thus continued to waver between New and Old China.

123 Though the role of these arguments within his inclusive concept of race – here including the “Mexican” races – was clear. In 1911, in one of his innumerable critiques of the racial revolution, he insisted on the existence of this trans-Pacific racial community. See “Yu Li Yuanhong, Huang Xing, Tang Hualong shu,” 207.

124 See for example “Deguo youji,” 412. He even feared that the Chinese civilization might have the same fate if the Powers colonized China.

125 Flint 1923, 278.

Two unforeseen events brought the New China project to an end: bankruptcy and revolution. The former resulted from conflicting interests within the society and the 1907 financial panic.¹²⁶ This seemed to prove, despite his previous conviction, that politics could not in fact be reduced to financial and industrial activities. In a letter from 1910 to Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei not only blamed Huang Kuanzhuo for the failure of his society's bank in Mexico, but he also criticized his own earlier enthusiasm for finance as a political force:

今思其故，一切皆自黃寬卓[焯]為之。此人才高術深跡密，籠罩一切，而吾黨人皆為所賣也。[...]。今知孟子不言利之深切著明也。

Now that I think of its causes [i. e. the financial problems of the Mexican venture], I discover that everything was handled by Huang Kuanzhuo. This man's talents are lofty, his art is deep and his traces hidden; he controls everything, and the people of our party (*dang*) have been sold by him. [...]. Now I understand the deep and clear character of Mencius' "not talking about profit."¹²⁷

The allusion to Mencius is not just a rhetorical device. Kang Youwei regrets having concentrated on "profit" at the expense of politics. Beyond the fact that the Mexican venture was his most profitable, it taught him a number of lessons. The complete reference of the *Mengzi* says:

王何必曰利？亦有仁義而已矣。

What need do you have of talking about profit [to rule your kingdom]? Benevolence and rightfulness are enough.¹²⁸

Kang was not now turning against finance and industry, and profit, moreover, was not incompatible with good rule. The allusion suggests rather that he should have never placed profit – and thus "matter" – before politics.

The second blow to the New China project in Mexico came from the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Mexican Revolution put an end to the *porfiriato* and, more generally, to the Mexican Belle Époque. It put Mexico into a state of social and political turmoil that lasted for more than a decade. This revolution not only caused Kang Youwei to lose most of his investments; it also resulted in the death of many Chinese, including his own nephew. Kang later considered that he was responsible for these deaths; he should have predicted the – in his opinion – inevitable failure of any republic in "immature" countries

126 Lo 1967, 210.

127 *Kang Youwei xiansheng nianpu*, 466–467.

128 *Mengzi jizhu*, 1: 201–202.

like Mexico or China.¹²⁹ The beginning of the Chinese republican revolution a year later made him feel that he was right. As a result, Kang's arguments against profit-oriented politics became more intense: Without proper political institutions, he believed, revolution or civil war would just destroy "matter." The crisis of his New China project, together with the revolutionary events in both Mexico and China, pushed him to focus on the most effective institutions for governing a nation. In the decade that followed – during which he returned to China and devoted himself to writing against the young Chinese republic – he abandoned the rhetoric of a multi-territorial China and insisted rather on the need to restore the recently deposed Qing monarchy. From then on, despite his utopian writings, he mostly focused on questions which made him once again emphasize a territorial conception of the nation.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, Kang Youwei's nation-building projects were grounded on a single premise: the tutelary conception of the nation-builder. Neither his reform ventures in China, nor his migratory projects across the Pacific – enabled through lobbying and financial activities – involved national self-government. On the contrary, the former tutelary relation between the court and the nation was replaced in the New China project by a similar relation between reformer-businessmen and laborers. The quasi-equivalence of economic and political activities outside of China actually strengthened the tutelary dimensions of the reformers' newly defined mission. While "co-rulership" in Qing China pointed to the larger inclusion of imperial subjects in national matters, Kang's "matter politics" in the Americas was only based on the agency of the leaders and businessmen of the society. The model of the *porfiriato* confirmed this direction. The increasingly conservative stance in Kang Youwei's writings during the pre-revolutionary decade, which was a source of monarchist arguments in China well beyond the fall of the empire, can be explained by the fact that his specific experience in the Americas made him stress the tutelary and "despotic" dimensions of his project from 1898.

Between the Hundred Days' Reforms in 1898 and the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Kang Youwei's nation-oriented languages – one territorial, the other non-territorial (or multi-territorial), civilizational, and racial – were embedded in the rhetoric strategies he was moved to adopt in different contexts. When he addressed the emperor, the court, and his fellow reformers in China, he evoked the territory as the main pillar for building a non-segmentary nation. The territory, which persisted indifferently to the intermediate

129 "Zhongguo shanhou yi," 270. For more details on the bankruptcy of the Mexican venture and the massacres of Chinese during the Mexican Revolution, see Worden 1972, 217–225.

segments of Qing society, seemed to reveal in its physical objectivity the fundamental unity of its otherwise scattered inhabitants. Kang Youwei therefore demanded from the emperor and his ministers, as the ultimate guarantors of territorial integrity, the “despotic” means they needed to keep the territorial borders intact. By contrast, when he addressed the overseas Chinese and his fellow reformers in exile, he could not insist on the territorial dimensions of the Chinese nation. This would have excluded his interlocutors, who did not live in Qing China. Instead, he emphasized the ideas of race, lineage, and civilization, which enabled him to conceptualize the Chinese nation beyond territorial borders.

One wonders whether these uses of the nation, intended to produce “imagined communities” in very different circumstances, were the result of “Westernization,” or if the Chinese words “Sinicized” Western concepts. But this opposition is probably misleading. Especially in Kang Youwei’s case, an emphasis on one or the other would only provide a one-sided description. The shared history between East Asian and Euro-American languages, undeniably asymmetrical, did not preserve either “Western” or “Eastern” vocabularies. It rather produced specific languages which, shaped by practice, merged conceptual materials from different traditions and subordinated them to available discourses, practical challenges, and localized needs.

In other words, if Kang Youwei took part in the production of the modern Chinese languages of cohesion-making, he did it as a player who repeatedly improvised his role on an unfamiliar stage. His various uses of “nation” in response to different contingencies of life – the way he articulated this concept and related it to experience, the way he employed it to justify projects with diverse ends in different human environments – reveal the unexpected historical possibilities that the modern world society has opened to this, so to speak, strange concept of our political language.

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