

# World-wide conflicts, insular solutions: Universalizing government, language and race in H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and Kang Youwei's *The Great Unity*

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*The Great Unity***

Political theory. Utopianism. Ethnocentrism. Racism. Centralization.

In H. G. Wells's and Kang Youwei's early 20th century utopias, World Governments take center stage by proposing global political orders to prevent large-scale wars. Both texts propose not only the centralization of military and juridical power, but also the homogenization of culture and language as well as race. Despite both texts' ostentatious cosmopolitanism, however, their visions are compromised by their (Anglo- and Sinocentric) ethnocentrism and racism. In light of the complex narrative forms of both texts, this article proposes an alternative to judging them by today's liberal values. Their sprawling form requires a consideration of their full heterogeneity, including Wells's use of narrative irony and Kang's intergalactic vision of cosmic citizenship.

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Since the turn of the millennium the concept of World Government (WG) has been enjoying a renaissance. Faced with the multiple crises of a globalized world, in which the economic, political and ecological dilemmas can no longer be addressed in only localized terms, the current internationalist system appears like an outmoded or, at best, inefficient geopolitical framework. As a measure to manage and prevent financial, geopolitical and health crises, WG would entail the “full integration of all political units into a cohesive global institutional framework” (Cabrera 2018, 514) to ensure long-term peace on both regional and global scales. In contrast to the United Nations in its current shape, this includes supreme military and juridical power over member states, effectually meaning that civil liberties can be overwritten in favor of the security needs identified by a political elite. It is difficult to refute Hannah Arendt’s condemnation of the idea that a WG with supreme juridical and executive authority would abolish political agency itself and install an anonymous and unaccountable tyranny (Arendt 1993, 14). Desperate times, however, call for desperate measures and rouse interest in utopian ideas “beyond what existing political institutions and even imaginations seem to be capable of” (Ingram 2016, xi). In today’s academic realm, support for a unified world – and the sacrifices it may entail – shows in Zhao Tingyang’s reappraisal of *tianxia*, an ancient Chinese concept, as the blueprint for a new world order (2021), through to academics who, in the face of unmitigated climate heating, call for the formation of a WG to enforce eco-friendly policies (Tännsjö 2021).

The present study takes the cue from contemporary discussions of WG to reexplore two modern utopian texts whose central concern foreshadowed the two historical events that most reshaped the globe, the First and Second World Wars. The central theme of *A Modern Utopia* (1904) by H. G. Wells and *Da Tong Shu* (1913; Eng. trans. *The Great Unity*, 1935) by Kang Youwei is how to prevent armed conflicts from breaking out in the first place, even if this means radically reshaping the makeup of human societies. Understandably, the interwar and the postwar period saw a rise in WG enthusiasm, loosely drawing from the utopian imagination of the previous generation. Both Wells’s and Kang’s texts advance a type of political-philosophical reflection that combines the intellectual rigor of social-contract treatises with the creative verve of speculative fiction, a combination that defines the great works of modern utopianism, such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890).

While Kang’s and Wells’s treatises are conceived as positive visions of possible futures, they contain the seeds of dystopia – not simply because the grand narratives of progress have become porous today but owing to the concrete proposals that nurture their imagination. As this article will demonstrate, their visions of world peace are afforded by elements that stand at odds with commonplace notions of a just society. While research has already addressed such aspects with regard to Wells, scholarship has nothing but praise for Kang’s text, probably because of its precarious cultural status as a Chinese utopia. This also applies to the one existing comparative study of both utopian texts, Dmitry E. Martynov and Yulia A. Martynova’s article from 2015. According to their argument, Kang’s commitment to freedom contrasts

positively with Wells' puritanism (Martynov and Martynova 2015), a view that does not account for the complicated cultural undercurrents that show in both texts, not only in the British writer's. The binary *Western/non-Western* is inconsequential for the present discussion. After a historical sketch of the WG imaginary, the article traces how Wells's texts conceive of centralized leadership and how it addresses two problematic themes, the choice of a universal language and racial politics. Then the same focus will be placed on Kang's book. These findings are then considered in light of the texts' confusing vacillation between normative description and playful speculation. Finally, the conclusion asks what their uneasy mix of utopian ambitions and dystopian innuendos says about contemporary WG enthusiasm.

## GENESIS OF WORLD GOVERNMENT

In principle, one can argue that historical empires, such as the early dynasties in China, Ancient Mesopotamia and Rome, already claimed to rule the "world", at least as they understood it (Münkler 2007, 11). From today's perspective, however, such views document the limitation of the geographical data available at the time and a chauvinist attitude toward cultures beyond the known world. Inevitably, this also applies to the earliest speculative vision of WG, Dante Alighieri's "De Monarchia" ("On Monarchy", 1316), written at a time when parts of Europe had been threatened by the largest contiguous land empire in world history, the Mongol empire (1206–1335). In his text, Dante envisions a world ruled by the Romans, claiming that "the noblest people deserve to be put above all others" (Alighieri 1957, 27). While such ethnocentric claims ring hollow today, the treatise's provocative trajectory lies in its secular outline. The Holy See, which at the time strived to install a theocratic monarchy beyond Rome, promptly placed "On Monarchy" on the index of banned works (Bellamy 2019, 30).

The lingering appeal of Dante's idea shows most visibly in the most influential discussion of WG in political theory, Immanuel Kant's treatise *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (1795; Eng. trans. "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch", 2006). While it argues in favor of actively shaping the global order of things – after all, "the state of peace must be established" (Kant 2006, 73) against the barbaric state of nature – the treatise articulates reservations against forging a "state of peoples" from existing states. Identifying popular with state sovereignty, Kant considers it unlawful for one state to acquire another one, no matter if through peaceful negotiation or as the result of territorial aggression. The only realistic approach to gradually establish perpetual peace, argues Kant, is to establish a "republicanism of all states", that is, a cosmopolitical order that respects territorial borders as contact points between the jurisdictions of discrete national legal systems. Whereas those borders ensure the rule of law, their disappearance within large political unities would entail a backlash into barbarism: "This is so because laws increasingly lose their force as the borders of a government are extended, and a soulless despotism, after having eliminated the seeds of good, ultimately declines into anarchy" (91).

Ignoring Kant's warning against a global tyranny, the early socialist Claude-Henri Saint-Simon envisioned a WG for the post-revolutionary world, "Lettres d'un habi-

tant de Genève à ses contemporains” (“Letters from an inhabitant of Geneva to his contemporaries”, 1803). This pamphlet proposes the end of inherited privilege and endorses the rule of philosophers, as envisioned in Plato’s *Republic* (375 BCE). Saint-Simon’s elite is comprised by the “Council of Newton”, a group of scientists, scholars, authors and artists who will be elected by the citizens. The Council will be “working for the progress of your enlightenment; you [i.e., the citizens] will be endowing these leaders with great prestige and you will be placing considerable financial resources at their disposal” (Saint-Simon 1976, 65). Arguably, the patronizing undercurrent of this form of rule, which leaves no room for checks and balances, represents the birth of avant-garde politics, the central concept behind the Leninist and Stalinist “revolution from above”. Building on such early forays, socialist internationalism also challenged national boundaries, which it considered a byproduct of bourgeois politics and which Friedrich Engels imagined to simply “die out” (1983, III: 147) at some point.<sup>1</sup>

Kang’s and Wells’s utopian visions actively draw from this WG matrix. Their argument is that the existing world order needs a structural shakeup and that its benefits would go beyond the mere prevention of war: they promise the world’s spiritual rebirth from the limitations inherited from the 19th century.

### TOWARD A POST-EMPIRE EMPIRE (H. G. WELLS I)

Wells’s novel *A Modern Utopia* represents the author’s first foray into how a central authority could reshape human life on the planet, and it was followed by *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), a fictional work of history that documents how a WG emerges from a century of global war, and *The New World Order* (1940), a non-fiction book that proposes the establishment of a socialist and scientific WG. In comparison, *A Modern Utopia* is more unrestrained in its ideas. While the largest part of the narrative is comprised by discursive exposition, the storyline follows an Englishman, the story’s narrator, and his fellow traveler, the ignorant botanist, on their unexpected sojourn on an Earth-like planet. Despite being populated by the same human population, social relationships are designed in such a way that the whole place forms “an imaginary whole and happy world” (Wells 2005, 11). Central to its realization is the advent of a “World-State authority”, a central administration that oversees monetary and economic policy, engineers social mores, and implements eugenic long-term planning.

For obvious reasons, critics consider *A Modern Utopia* a highly problematic text. Readers who take its vision of a perfected world at face value cannot help noting the unmistakable imprint of Wells’s English cultural background and his value preferences, for example when the text endows the World State with suspicious similarities to the British colonial administration (Shadursky 2020). In the same vein, it was considered “unflatteringly” prescient regarding contemporary Europe’s supranational mobility control, as Wells’s utopia affords borderlessness by nightmarish levels of surveillance (Foster 2020). According to Sarah Cole’s overall judgement, Wells’s works merit to be considered along their mixed legacy, as the author’s progressive radicalism and his chauvinism form a complex unity. They “showcase the enmesh-

ment of incompatible positions and impulses within a mind of exceptional activity, whose limitations and biases can be visible in the most troubling way” (2020, 56). This also applies to *A Modern Utopia*’s ideas of global unification as well as its linguistic and racial policies.

Akin to Saint-Simon’s “Council of Newton”, the World State is ruled by an elite. But rather than being comprised of an elected group of scientists and artists, the elite in Wells’s text comprises an order of gifted men and women, the “samurai”. Their ascetic code not only prohibits them from consuming meat, drink, tobacco and narcotic drugs, they are also denied the possession of material goods, a policy that supposedly makes them immune to corruption and self-interest. Originally a militant organization, the samurai successfully campaigned against all political entities that stood in the way of unification. Now they hold all the power: “Practically all political power vests in the samurai. Not only are they the only administrators, lawyers, practicing doctors, and public officials of almost all kinds, but they are the only voters” (Wells 2005, 207). In short, the samurai hold an unchecked monopoly over the fiscal and executive power of the World State.

In contrast to such centralization, the World State’s language policy seems comparatively *laissez faire*. Once the narrator sets foot on utopian soil – in fact in Lucerne – he realizes that if he is to give a precise account of this place, he must have perfect command of the local language. Vacillating between the descriptive and normative speech, the narrator explains: “The whole world will surely have a common language, that is quite elementary Utopian, and [...] we may suppose that language to be sufficiently our own to understand. Indeed, should we be in Utopia at all, if we could not talk to everyone?” (18) This statement proposes a variant of English as the common language, one that the narrator can “sufficiently” understand. Yet the universal tongue is also described as a coalesced language, such as modern English, itself a mix of Anglo-Saxon, Norman French and scholarly Latin. The universalized tongue draws from additional sources, including vocabulary from a dozen once separate tongues that forge “a living tongue, an animated system of imperfections, which every individual man will infinitesimally modify” (21). The make-up of this coalesced language, here described as an open system, stands at odds with a central feature of the utopian World State. Overall, cultural and economic bridge-building is conceded to an administrative elite whose normative power overwrites localisms, and one would imagine linguistic aspects to be included. Critics argued that Wells’s universal language rests on the idea that the languages of the world will eventually yield to a variant of Basic English (Cole 2020, 312). Since the language must be “sufficiently” understood by the narrator, his knowledge of foreign languages may expand the portfolio. Given his portrait as a man of some erudition, he may also understand French and traces of other European languages. It is inconceivable to imagine the book’s universal language including elements taken from Slavic, Sino-Tibetan, Atlantic–Congo, or from any other major language families of the world. Glad to find himself a speaker of the universal language, the narrator interrupts his exposition soon enough: “This talk of languages, however, is a digression” (Wells 2005, 22).

Since the novel is also written in English, one can take the text's programmatic disinterest in further discussion as a clear signal: whatever interferences existed between the dozens of tongues before they coalesced into the universal language, there is nothing left that cannot be represented adequately in modern English. This indicates a radical departure from utopian language politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the creators of artificial tongues such as Volapük and Esperanto hoped to overcome communication barriers through a new, accessible lingua franca. Wells's commitment to natural languages puts faith in a non-intentional, transhistorical process to reverse the Biblical *confusio linguarum*, causing linguistic heterogeneity to become redundant, even in the absence of a centralized, intentional design. Such narrative choices deserve to be taken seriously and give away the same Anglocentric focus that also shows in most cultural aspects of World State. Indeed, this utopia's open design is considerably compromised by the narrator's declaration "that Westminster shall still be a seat of world Empire, one of several seats, if you will – where the ruling council of the world assembles" (164).

### UTOPIAN POLITICS OF RACE (H. G. WELLS II)

In terms of racial politics, Wells's utopia offers a more cosmopolitan outlook than Dante's insular claim that the Romans deserve to be put above all others. The anti-racism of *A Modern Utopia* is summed up in the following statement: "What the average Chinaman or Englishman may be, is of no importance whatever to our plan of a World State. It is not averages that exist, but individuals" (221). In the narrative, the botanist acts as a spokesman for the prejudices and race theories that were common currency during Wells's time, which posited that the struggle between the races was the major driving force of world history (Berg and Wendt 2011, 2). As the botanist expresses his dismay at the potential union between a Chinese man and a white British woman, the narrator retorts:

"Yes", I said, "you've got to swallow that, anyhow; you shall swallow that." He finds the idea too revolting for comment. I try and make the thing seem easier for him. "Do try", I said, "to grasp a Modern Utopian's conditions. The Chinaman will speak the same language as his wife – whatever her race may be – he will wear costume of the common fashion, he will have much the same education as his European rival, read the same literature, bow to the same traditions." (Wells 2005, 227)

Indeed, Utopia's universal culture is modelled after Anglo-European templates that set the example for dress codes, gender relations and religious beliefs. The greatest homogeneity is achieved by the samurai class, whose modest dress, strict sense of duty and abstract theology are indebted to Protestant norms. This cultural code is available for all global citizens, hereby complicating the relationship between race and culture, two categories that the pseudo-scientific racism of the late 19th century considers mutually determined (Geulen 2011, 66). This said, the utopia's anti-racism largely remains "putative" (Bell 2020, 184). The travelers encounter practically no non-white Utopians between Lucerne and London, the exception being a "white-tunicked [Chinese] clerk" and "a prosperous-looking, self-respecting young negro, in a trimly-cut coat of purple-blue and silver" (Wells 2005, 211).

The narrator encounters various samurais, but none of them are described as non-white.

This is all the more worrying given *A Modern Utopia*'s bio-politics. The world population is categorized into four types: the Poietic, the Kinetic, the Dull and the Base. Based on every individual's mental and physical unique set of abilities (or lack thereof), the four categories determine every citizen's prospect for success in the World State's society. Accordingly, the Poietic and the Kinetic represent the mentally, morally and physically desirable population, who take up roles as artists, thinkers, top managers and administrators. Only the Poietic and the Kinetic are allowed to create offspring (without incurring financial punishment) and to become part of the samurai class. Meanwhile, the Dull, "the people who never seems to learn thoroughly, or hear distinctly, or think clearly", and the Base, people with "a narrower and more persistent egoistic reference than the common run of humanity" (181), are limited to hold basic income jobs and hindered from procreating. Within this type of eugenics, it is only fitting that the carriers of transmissible diseases as well as "drunkards, drug takers, and the like" will be isolated on remote islands. Such measures will help "the maximum elimination of its feeble and spiritless folk in every generation with the minimum of suffering and public disorder" (99). In the end, Wells's utopia merely reinvents racial eugenics as another type of eugenics that focusses on ability.

Within this Eurocentric utopia, such emphasis on ability is difficult to untangle from questions of race. Regardless of the proposition that education should be uniform for all citizens until the age when differences become apparent, there are two aspects that reflect badly on this seemingly open design. First, there is the text's general cultural bias, a factor that makes it more probable for non-white races to fall into the category of the Dull. After all, the lingering traces of non-universal cultural codes may hinder their ability to "think clearly" – that is, to reproduce the codes that administrators classify as "clear thought". As recent work on "racial color-blindness" has shown, it is next to impossible to erase educational inequality as long as racial gaps are not addressed aggressively from an early stage (Martin et al. 2017; Orfield 2024). Admittedly, such second thoughts on universal education, very much a 21st-century concern, are alien to the turn-of-the-century paradigms that form the background of Wells's text. And yet they bring to light the layers of injustice that hide behind the façade of the utopian society. Tellingly, the narrator admits that the population's division into the Poietic, the Kinetic, the Dull and the Base does not stand the test of reality, as too many inconsistencies arise from this classification:

Obviously, this is the rudest of classifications, and no Utopian has ever supposed it to be a classification for individual application, a classification so precise that one can say, this man is "poietic", and that man is "base". In actual experience these qualities mingle and vary in every possible way. It is not a classification for Truth, but a classification to an end. (Wells 2005, 182)

It turns out that the utopia's eugenic grand scheme is merely an instrument for the sake of classification.

The discussed biases and idiosyncrasies go against the narrator's initial claim that he sets "all the customs and traditions of the earth" (135) aside. Instead, he draws

on the European humanist tradition to extrapolate a de-facto ethnocentric World State, hereby reiterating a feature of the earliest WG vision, Dante's Roman world empire. In Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, the elites do not have to *be* Roman, but they must excel at *acting* Roman: there is no place for non-European cultures but only for their human resources. Taking all this into account, there is some truth in the claim that 1920s dystopian literature also emerged as a direct reaction to the supposedly positive utopia of Wells (Flaherty 2020). Before the discussion moves to the pertinent question of the status of such speculations, the article now turns to a utopia that emerged in the Chinese context and shows striking parallels.

### FROM THE EMPIRE TO GREAT UNITY (KANG YOUWEI I)

Paradoxically, Kang's vision of supranational unity in *The Great Unity* emerged in a period in Chinese history, when the multi-ethnic Qing empire was in the process of a wholesale transformation from empire to nation-state. This process had started in reaction to the Opium Wars during the 1860s and gained traction when charismatic figures like Sun Yat-sen argued that a sense of nationhood, centering around Han identity, was essential to encourage collective solidarity against colonial aggression (Sun 2020, 25–49). In contrast, *The Great Unity* rejects the Westphalian system's focus on the nation-state, arguing that it hinders the true teleology of humanity's evolution: "The progression from dispersion to union among men, and the principle whereby the world is gradually proceeding from being partitioned off to being opened up, is a working of the Way of Heaven and human affairs" (K'ang 1958, 79). The manuscript's textual genesis spans several decades, as Kang's initial work on the manuscript covers the period between the 1880s and 1902. After fragments were printed in 1913, the full form was published posthumously in 1935. The book exerted a considerable global influence, not only because Kang's disciples included influential Chinese reformers such as Liang Qichao, but also because the manuscript's readers included US President Woodrow Wilson, who was conceiving the League of Nations at the time (Manela 2006, 1342). In contrast to Wells's book, the existing scholarship on *The Great Unity* considers it a "model of absolute freedom" that features an "open society free from any social, intellectual, ethnic and gender barriers" (Martynov and Martynova 2015, 1), "where the earth's human inhabitants are living together as free equals without cultural, national, racial divides" (Yan 2017, 254). In more concrete terms, the book is characterized as a testament to Confucian universalism. But while this judgement implies that Kang's work envisions "a moral and quasi-religious framework anchored in a unitary, all-encompassing order" (Wang 2017, 50) and that it offers a "potentially *universal* model of civilization" (Brusadelli 2020, 9, emphasis in the original), it remains unclear to what extent this vision bears relevance for the non-Confucian rest of the world.

In contrast to the prehistory of the WG idea in the West, its Chinese counterpart does not emerge from the Enlightenment and the socialist movement but from the kind of late 19th-century scholarship that embraced Western learning without throwing the Confucian heritage overboard. Kang indeed formed part of the scholarly elite that administrated the Qing Empire, but he often found himself at odds



with its ossified structure. Kang was the author of a string of moratoria addressed to the Emperor, but his attempts at reform and modernization were never successful (Thompson 1958, 11–25). Given the Hobbesian undertones of *The Great Unity* and its commitment to egalitarianism, critics such as Zhang Longxi have it as “very much influenced by his understanding of Western ideas and Western social and political systems” (2005, 195–196). To consider the book’s ideas as mere concessions to occidental values, however, means to dismiss the great lengths that *The Great Unity* goes to root its vision in ancient Chinese philosophy. Kang invokes the *Zhou yi* (*Book of Changes*) to make a case for humanity’s need to be governed by ever larger states: “Since, in the time of the rude beginnings, there were many states standing together, there were then strong and weak coexistent. The large and small states fought with each other, daily going to war and grinding down the people. This was most unpeaceful!” (K’ang 1958, 79). Emerging from such chaotic beginnings, humanity progressed from “animality” (*qinshou*) to “barbarism” (*yeman*) through to “civilisation” (*wenming*) (64). Hereby, Kang offers a deeply Confucian outlook on human history. Significantly, the Confucian tradition posits that one can only overcome “barbarism” by submitting to the rule of a Sage King, through integration into social hierarchies and by adopting civilized standards (Poo 2005, 66–67). Another significant source of Kang’s interpretation of human history is Confucius’s *Li ji* (*The Book of Rites*), a text that he treats to an unorthodox reinterpretation. Indeed, the concept of *datong*, the “Great Unity”, derives from a passage in which Confucius references the time when such unity will be (or, according to orthodox readings, was) realized.<sup>2</sup> To Kang, Confucius’s notion of the three ages points toward future perfection, as history moves from the present “Age of Disorder” to an “Age of One World”:

If we look at all the ways of saving the world through the ages, to discard the Way of One World and yet to hope to save men from suffering and to gain their greatest happiness, is next to impossible. The Way of One World is utmost peace-and-equality, utmost justice, utmost *jen*, and the most perfect government. (K’ang 1958, 72)

According to Kang, this unifying tendency is complemented by democratization. In contrast to Kant’s conviction that “laws increasingly lose their force as the borders of a government are extended”, the Chinese thinker argues that the formation of the United States and the unification of the German Empire had a democratizing effect, notably by bringing about the countries’ constitutions. While one could argue that there exists plenty of evidence of the reverse process, such as the Russian Empire’s growth alongside repression, this observation allows Kang to extrapolate the genesis of a “world parliament”, an elected, extraterritorial institution that would hold supreme authority over its global citizens. Based on simple majorities, this parliament would regulate the relationship between the states and their complete disarmament. Once full unification will be achieved, the parliament’s functions would be conceded to a premier, the head of the World State and supreme commander of its military troops.

It is important to note that Kang’s “world parliament” is surprisingly passive, as it acts as a mere instrument of historical progress. Despite its concessions to the principle of majority rule, which was first institutionalized in England during the Res-

toration period, it ignores its most consequential epiphenomenon, party politics (Bulman 2021, 180–205). Instead, the majority principle is accompanied by the re-emergence of consensus politics, as there is no indication that their vote can interfere with the large scheme of things. Parliamentary decisions reflect the path-dependency of progress, which shows in irreversible developments, including gradual demilitarization, the abolition of monarchies across the world, the division of the world into ten continents, the installation of a global coordinate system dividing the planet into 10,000 grid squares, et cetera. Strikingly, Kang also demands women's equality and the complete dismantling of the traditional family structure, an unheard-of proposal from a Confucian scholar. Exciting as such proposals are, they clash with the world parliament's agency. As world society moves toward the Great Unity, participatory politics can only hasten but not correct, let alone roll back, the historical trajectory. Interestingly, Kang's vision also sees the president's power increase over time, a nod to Confucius's idea of the Sage King.

While the proposed reset of the global calendar to Year 1 upon unification suggests that the Great Unity starts from scratch, features such as the Sage King highlight Kang's commitment to the Chinese cultural heritage. This is also shown in his ideas on the universal language: "If the Chinese language were to be adopted, with the addition of an alphabet, to form the new world language, the energy expended would be slight, and much would be gained" (K'ang 1958, 101). According to Kang, two aspects speak in favor of choosing this language: not only does Classical Chinese facilitate faster letter composition than any Western or Indian language, it is also the most ancient among all living languages. While the higher speed of letter-writing indeed holds true, as more information can be transmitted in less space, Kang forgets to mention a significant side-effect; after all, mastery in this language entails a long period of education that only the elite class can afford. This is why many of Kang's contemporaries, who aimed to combat the endemic illiteracy of the Chinese population, pursued the exact opposite approach: their idea was to replace the classical idiom with a vernacular variant (Zhou 2011, 104–117). The consequence of Kang's proposition is drastic, as it entails the continuation of a historical feature of Chinese civilization: the formation of an aristocracy of the educated who rule over a largely illiterate population. Moreover, Kang's reference to the venerable age of the Chinese language undermines the notion of a true Year 1, a move into the opposite direction of the artificial language movement. There is no doubt that the Anglocentric outline of Wells's vision is matched by Kang's Sinocentrism.

### **FORGING A NEW RACE (KANG YOUWEI II)**

Another aspect that the Great Unity seeks to universalize relates to the planet's races. Kang cautions that the abolishment of political and economic barriers would amount to nothing if races continued to exist: "At present there are in the world the white race, the yellow race, the brown race, and the black race. Their surface colours are completely different, and their spiritual constitutions are very dissimilar. How can they be smelted?" (K'ang 1958, 141). His emphasis on the differences between their spiritual constitution, including intellectual abilities, gives away the hier-

archy that informs Kang's views on race. In regard to the mixing of the "white", which he considers the "strongest", and the "yellow" race, which he considers the "wisest", he sees no obstacles for their complete blending, at least after a given period of interbreeding and after observing similar dietary regimes. With respect to the "brown" and the "black" races, however, Kang is pessimistic about their ability to survive in the long term. On the one hand, their numbers are in decline already, an observation he applies to the indigenous populations of both China and the Americas (whom he both classifies as "brown") as well as to the "black" population of Africa. On the other hand, he finds that their physiological "weakness" has a debilitating effect on their progeny, arguing that the mixing with the "white" and the "yellow" races produce predominately non-brown and non-black offspring.

Since Kang's speculations depart considerably from scientific racism of the European type, scholars have downplayed his ideas on race as "just another aspect of the global progression towards *Datong*" (Brusadelli 2020, 109). But as in Wells's case, an open attitude toward race mixing comes paired with a eugenic long-term plan to neutralize the "weak". This includes moving "brown" and "black" people into the north, where the "strongest" among them would develop "white" and "yellow" features. Over the next two or three centuries, the "brown" and "black" races will gradually disappear:

Throughout the whole world there will only be the yellow and white peoples. Taking it that there are numberless persons of the good yellow and white races; if they contract mixed marriages with one or two persons of the bad brown and black races, then the one or two of the inferior races are few, and forthwith there are the numberless persons of the good races to rectify and redress this. (K'ang 1958, 147)

Quite in contrast to Kang's many borrowings from Confucius, racial attributes such as "weakness" and "inferiority" unmistakably depart from ancient universalism, which builds on the conviction that human differences are cultural attributes. Similar to Wells's notion, the Confucian tradition posits that every ethnic group can assimilate and adopt those attributes, thus changing their status from "barbarian" to "civilized". Kang's ethnic reinterpretation departs from this norm by dividing the world's population into two desirable and two undesirable races. Despite the rise of the Japanese Empire as the most powerful actor in South-East Asia during the late 19th century, Kang leaves no doubt to who he concedes primacy among the "yellow" race: to the Chinese people. Indeed, Kang's influence on Chinese notions of race cannot be underestimated, as his views were further amplified by his own students, among them Liang Qichao, who would make the case for a hierarchy of the human races, in which the "yellow" and the "white" races dominate the world, while the others hold an inferior position (Dikötter 2015, 37–60). Contrary to its universalist claims, Kang's Great Unity pursues an idiosyncratic agenda that concedes primacy to Sinic values, such as his preference for Classical Chinese as a universal language. *The Great Unity* also takes an ethnocentric perspective toward the world's racial future, and while he generously extends the torch of civilization to Europeans and North Americans, there is no long-term future for "brown" and "black" people. While of no direct influence, Dante's Roman Empire appears congenial to the ethnocentric ar-

rogance of Kang's Great Unity. Likewise, the world parliament's blind implementation of a given set of reforms is reminiscent of Saint-Simon's Council of Newton, an avant-garde that installs a revolution from above without further consulting its citizens. Whereas the Council's members are "working for the progress of your enlightenment", the commoners in this world of peace become passive objects of history: while one part is smelted into a Sinophone super-race, the other is left to die out.

### NORMATIVE VS. SPECULATIVE UTOPIANISM

In sum, Kang's vision of the Great Unity reiterates many features of Wells's *A Modern Utopia*. When considered in the light of today's liberal values, those features certainly represent defects, as they tinge their uplifting visions of a better world with the hallmarks of dystopia. This starts with Kang's questionable commitment to democratic participation, resulting in a world parliament whose policies are already set and, once unification is achieved, the installation of an all-mighty president. As in Wells's case, whose samurai represent an unelected and unaccountable elite, this technocratic ideal is emblematic for two 19th-century gentleman scholars, one British and one Chinese, who cannot quite bring themselves to give electoral power to the uneducated, a characteristic that applies to wretched commoners and hereditary aristocrats alike. In addition, there are two features that further compromise both utopias: their culturalist notions regarding which tongue should be chosen for a universal language (a variant of Basic English for Wells, Classical Chinese for Kang) as well as their racist accounts of who should populate the world of tomorrow (Europeans and assimilated non-Europeans for Wells, "whites" and "yellow" people for Kang).

But do Wells and Kang actually propose the ideas that their texts advance? How serious are their recommendations? Both texts vacillate between the realm of fiction and non-fiction, and the former part deserves to be taken just seriously as their factual collision with general ideas of a just world. Indeed, both texts are replete with signals that veer off into a realm that is disconnected from the type of discursive speech found in sociopolitical pamphlets. In Wells's case, this starts with the author's introduction of the "Voice", the narrator, whose monologue meanders between imaginary journey and political-philosophical reflection. In the preface, the author points out that this narrator is not identical with himself but should be imagined as a "whitish plump man, a little under the middle size and age, with such blue eyes as many Irishmen have, and agile in his movements and with a slight tonsorial baldness [...]. And his Voice (which is our medium henceforth) is an unattractive tenor that becomes at times aggressive" (2005, 7). While one should not entirely rule out the possibility of this being a candid self-portrait, the author characterizes the narrator in unflattering terms, for example by highlighting his defective looks and the "unattractive" sound of his voice. So is the peculiar Europeaness and Anglo-centeredness of the imagined World State merely a result of the intellectual narrowness of the person who imagines it? Is Wells offering a critical portrait of the kind of utopia that is produced by the idiosyncrasies of birth, education and class? In the book's conclusion, the author points out that "this so-called Modern

Utopia is a mere story of personal adventures among Utopian philosophies" (247), further eroding the idea that the text's ideas about world politics, culture and race represent normative rather than personal narrative speech. It would follow that *A Modern Utopia* tells of a blue-eyed, occasionally aggressive man's idea of a perfect world, thereby cunningly inverting the political-philosophical and the psychological spheres. Fascinating as this prospect seems, the text offers a much simpler solution to the problem of perspective; after all, there are several occasions when the narrator's personal idiosyncrasies enter in conflict with utopian practice. This includes a passage when he fervently praises Burgundy and ales (50–51), a preference that conflicts with the utopia's prohibitionist tendencies: here, alcoholics are dispatched to remote islands and samurai must abstain from drink or any other form of intoxication. Although this discrepancy creates a sense that the narrator is not quite suited for this supposedly perfect world of tomorrow, this episode casts a different light on utopian standards. Their rules and habits appear less like an incontestable ideal but more like the strange habits observed in an exotic country. Although the samurai's world appears superior in many respects, the last word has not been spoken yet, which is why the narrator closes his account with a statement that indicates a new perspective: "There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real, with its problems lying closer and closer to the problems of the Thing in Being" (245). The narrator, the "whitish plump man", has begun to question his own idiosyncratic positions as well as the grand scheme of Wells's utopia. The future remains open.

The case of Kang Youwei's novel *The Great Unity* cannot be resolved by reference to authorial alter-egos, as the text unmistakably affirms Kang Youwei as its narrator; after all, the book commences with an autobiographical account of Kang's educational journey and his realization that only world peace can bring an end to human suffering. Given the many injustices described in the book, it appears that *The Great Unity* is compromised by its unabashed Sinocentrism. Kang's work, however, is more complex than that. On the one hand, there is reason to consider *The Great Unity* along the same line of tentative speculation that also applies to *A Modern Utopia*. While there is no narrator who puts everything into perspective, the text can be aptly related to the utopian form, which Fredric Jameson considered crucial in challenging the status quo (2005, 232). Since the genesis of the book spans both the late feudal and the early republican period of China, Kang's project is directed against two ideological antagonists: first, against the Qing administration, where he tried to fight for reform and modernization; and second, against China's gradual reinvention as a nation state, placing the author in direct opposition to Sun Yat-sen (Platt 2007, 95). To read Kang's WG in Jamesonian terms means to emphasize its antagonistic outline while, at the same time, treating its bio-politics and ethnocentrism with some leniency.

It also merits consideration that *The Great Unity*, like *A Modern Utopia*, is not a political pamphlet but that its political-philosophical content represents just one of many other foci. Next to its autobiographical section, the book dwells on cosmological and soteriological thought. Regarding cosmology, Kang's text takes a specu-

lative turn early on when he mentions the “living creatures on Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune” (1958, 67) and all the states, peoples, and cultures that are dispersed across the galaxy. And while he acknowledges that the Great Unity can only apply to the Earth and its inhabitants, he holds out the prospect that “the uniting of states will never be completed. Since there is no limit to the possible size of a state, then there is also no limit to the feasibility of uniting coexistent states. At the extremes of this amalgamation, it would extend to the star-clusters and nebulae, and still would be unlimited” (80). In opening up this cosmic perspective, the proposals of the Great Unity are dwarfed by such cosmic scales, as the earthly variant of the Great Unity is bound to be corrected by the norms set by cosmic civilization. Strikingly, Kang’s reference to other worlds does not focus on technological progress alone; rather, the seemingly unsurmountable distances between the different cosmic civilizations, argues Kang, will be transcended by humanity’s achievement of immortality and Buddhahood. Therefore, Kang closes *The Great Unity* with a superimposed perspective that considers unification as merely a political means to a spiritual end: “For One World is the ultimate Law of this world; but the study of immortality, of life without death, is even an extension of the ultimate Law of this world. [...] After the studies of immortality and buddhahood will come the study of roaming through the heavens” (275–276). Kang’s Sinocentric, racist variant of the Great Unity is bound to be corrected by other norms that will be set by cosmic citizenship. In this light, it becomes apparent that *The Great Unity* is merely a prelude to Kang’s most outlandish and neglected work, *Zhu tian shu* (The book of heavens, 1927), where Martian and other civilizations are discussed in great detail (Andolfatto 2024).

## CONCLUSION

If the aim is to judge the concrete proposals featured in *A Modern Utopia* and *The Great Unity* by today’s standards, there is little reason to consider them worthy of analysis. Their visions of a positive future are replete with alarming levels of authoritarianism, culturalism and racism. The WG matrix that started with Dante’s ethnocentrism and Saint-Simon’s unaccountable avant-garde seamlessly continues into the early 20th century, when thinkers devised new forms of government to prevent the outbreak of global wars. And while the Westphalian system turned out incapable of preventing the horrors of two world wars, Wells’s and Kang’s utopias feature enough horrors themselves. They act as reminders of Kant’s reservations against pursuing a “state of peoples” and Arendt’s warning against the anonymous and unaccountable tyranny of WG. Today, however, such skepticism against grand schemes of salvation is slowly eroding. Contemporary critics have started to challenge Kant’s preference for a weak federation of sovereign nations (Lutz-Bachmann 1996, 38; Gloy 2008, 349); meanwhile, political philosophers such as Zhao Tingyang lament the “failure to create a world entity” (2009, 6), commending a WG vision that complements the People’s Republic of China’s authoritarian politics. And Torbjörn Tännsjö, fearful of humanity’s self-destruction, freely speculates about the UN Security Council’s transformation into the organ of an “enlightened despotism” of the future.

There are a couple of lessons to learn from Wells's and Kang's texts that should make us wary of such proposals and may contribute to combatting their one-sidedness. At the same time, this awareness can also create more awareness of the utopian form:

1. It is difficult, perhaps impossible to speak *for* the world as long as one only belongs to a certain part of it. The normative power of the British Empire compromised Wells's utopian imagination just as classical Chinese erudition limited Kang's imagination. Despite the proposition of Wells's narrator "that we are on another planet, and that all the customs and traditions of the earth are set aside" (2005, 135) and despite Kang's insistence that all sociopolitical norms require thorough reform, both concede primacy to the basic templates of their native cultures. Only selected elements of their visions are excluded from this general rule, for example Kang's radical egalitarianism among the genders and the boundless mobility of Wells's workforce. Any vision of WG that fails to reflect on its cultural limitations inevitably produces more ills than it can possibly solve.

2. There is a tendency that visions of WG do not address the "world" after all – that is the totality of the sociopolitical structures on our planet. Instead, they enter into an intracultural dialogue with the archives of their native cultures. Strikingly, *A Modern Utopia* advances the kind of rule that is closest to the ideal that Plato lays out in *The Republic*, a state ruled by philosophers, one that also features prominently in the writings of Saint-Simon. Meanwhile, Kang's WG culminates in the rule of a Sage King, reiterating a quintessentially Confucian trope. Such visions of tomorrow offer a glorified return to mythical ideas that are never tested in reality but continue to inspire the quest for a better tomorrow. Such historical borrowings are fascinating objects for the study of the human past but are not relevant beyond the realm of scholarship.

3. Visions of WG tap into the possibilities that emerge from the interplays between fiction and non-fiction, between normative and speculative thought and between real-world analysis and the flight of fancy. Such interplays do not conform to the rules established by political common sense or genre designations; instead, they deviate into uncharted territory. This is why Wells's utopia requires an unreliable narrator, the "whitish plump man", who indulges in his own vision rather than presenting an omniscient account thereof. For the same reason, Kang sees no point in limiting his Great Unity to the realm of humans but jumps at the opportunity to move beyond earthly limitations, pursuing a cosmic citizenship that extends to the star-clusters and nebulae. Such flights of fancy are integral to WG visions; after all, the reproduction of common sense would only affirm an author's inability to think beyond existing structures.

4. Underneath the projected vision of long-term peace, WGs hold the seeds of devolution. If utopia's universal language, as imagined by Wells, indeed shows a tendency to "infinitesimally modify", it will not be long before the tongue will undergo fragmentation and give rise to new localized cultures. Furthermore, this World State also allows the seeds of unrest to gather on remote islands, probably under the assumption that the Dull and the Base lack incentive and ability to coop-

erate against their samurai overlords. But since the ascribed “qualities mingle and vary in every possible way”, such ghettos will host scores of quasi-Poietic and quasi-Kinetic. With indignation they will take note of their treatment, prompting them to organize bloody rebellions. Similar caveats feature in Kang’s vision: the scholarly elite of the educated, practically new mandarins, will infallibly create resentment among the masses. Why shouldn’t they mobilize against the centralized authority? Indeed, Chinese history abounds with such instances, the last time being 1949 when Mao Zedong proclaimed the People’s Republic. Once a Sage King is installed, other familiar patterns of history will reappear, including regicide, wars of succession and civil war.

5. It is imperative to keep in mind Wells’s narrator who reminds his readers that “[e]ach generation will have its new version of Utopia”. This truism has two implications: one is encouraged to overcome the political cliché that “there is no alternative” through imaginary practices. On a more pessimistic note, this also indicates that certain utopias emerge at certain times. In the past, the WG imaginary flourished prior to the outbreak of two global wars.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Since the classics of socialism provided no clear doctrine regarding how the post-national world should be steered – or if it needed any steering at all – Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin rejected such internationalist visions as pipe dreams (Van Ree 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> Commonly referenced as an appraisal of a peaceful age long ago, Kang takes the liberty of placing the civilizational stage of *datong* in the future rather than in the past. This is an interpretation which Kang already pursued in one of his earliest publications “Li Yun zhu” (Annotations on Li Yun, 1835), a commentary on a section of Confucius’s *Book of Rites* (Li ji). Since Confucius’s original is written in Classical Chinese, the passage lacks clear temporal markers. Meanwhile, James Legge’s classic translation into English endows Confucius’s speech with an unmistakably nostalgic tone, rendering all verbs in the past tense: “I never saw the practice of the Grand course, and the eminent men of the three dynasties. [...] This was (the period of) what we call the Grand Union” (1967, I: 364–365).

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