ABSTRACT

Kang You-wei, the great Chinese reformer and political philosopher of the turn of the century, is well known for his role in the 1898 Reform Movement of late imperial Ch'ing, in which he chose the middle road of gradual change of the political institutions and social customs of China as the means of preserving and restoring China. He therefore advocated and worked for a limited monarchy as a transition from absolutism to true democracy.

His belief in this gradual evolutionary process for China rather than a sudden revolutionary transformation invited strong criticism and even accusations from both the nationalists and the communists. In their dogged preoccupation of branding him a conservative reformer and dynastic restorer, these critics failed to see the historical significance of his Da-tong philosophy which served to explain his practical political philosophy. The 1898 Reform Movement was only his 'minimum' programme, a first step towards the world of Da-tong or utopia. His great plan of reform for the whole world which was far more comprehensive and profound than anything expressed in his practical reforms, found full expression in his book, the Da-tong Shu (《大同书》). The idea of progress or the law of Three Ages (the progress of mankind from the Age of Disorder to the Age of Ascending Peace and finally the age of
Universal Peace) determined his thinking.

Armed with an indepth knowledge of the Chinese tradition and a personal acquaintance with modern Western civilization, he was both imaginative and bold in constructing an ideal society for all humanity in the capacity of one of the first utopian writers in Modern China.

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