

Research Article

# Between Empire and Modernity, Kang Youwei's Neapolitan and Pompeian Travelogue as a Catalyst for Reimagining Sino-Western Relations

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## Abstract

This paper reinterprets Kang Youwei's (1858–1927) Neapolitan Travelogue as a pivotal text in the late Qing intellectual transition from the *tianxia* (天下, “All Under Heaven”) world order to the modern system of nation-states. Written during Kang's European exile following the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, the work transforms his journey through Naples and Pompeii into a site of theoretical experimentation, rather than a mere record of travel. Through a comparative reading of Italian antiquity and Confucian historiography, this study argues that Kang employed Southern Italy as a mirror through which to reimagine China's relationship to modernity and global civilisation. By analysing Kang's encounters with Naples's urban layers, the ruins of Pompeii, and the Mediterranean landscape, the paper introduces the concept of Comparative Antiquarianism—a method through which Kang reconciled China's imperial heritage with the demands of progress. Naples, viewed as a “living ruin,” provided a tangible embodiment of his *sanshi* (三世, “Three Ages”) theory, where disorder, transition, and harmony coexist within the same temporal and spatial field. For Kang, Pompeii's excavation offered archaeological proof for a cyclical conception of modernity, transforming the city into a *jian* (鑑, “mirror”) warning China of the dangers of political inertia and moral complacency. Rejecting the Social Darwinist hierarchies that dominated early twentieth-century thought, Kang proposed instead a civilisational parity between East and West—an equative gaze that saw both as participants in a shared human cycle of rise, decline, and renewal. Ultimately, Kang's *Yidali youji* reframed Sino-Western relations through a utopian vision of Global Harmony (*Datong* 大同), where Confucian ethics and modern industrial achievements coexist. His Neapolitan reflections thus reveal an alternative, transcultural genealogy of modernity grounded in mutual recognition rather than binary opposition.

## Keywords

Kang Youwei, *Yidali Youji*, Sanhi Theory, Comparative Antiquarianism, *Tianxia* Nation-State, Cyclical Modernity, Confucian Reform, Global *Datong*

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## 1. The Exile Gaze, an Introductory Framework



**Figure 1.** Full length portrait of the exiled scholar Kang Youwei, ca. 1905, University of California, Los Angeles Library, Department of Special Collections.

In 1904 Kang Youwei arrived in Naples not as a triumphant diplomat, but as political refugee.

The failure of the 1898's Hundred Days' Reform had cast him into a global odyssey. However, the exile became a period of intense intellectual production. Europe was for Kang not just a monolithic entity of "guns and steel", but a complex tapestry of historical cycles. With its Mediterranean temperament and visible and manifest layers of history, Naples provided Kang with a unique laboratory. While his contemporaries like Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) were more oriented toward the Anglo-American constitutional models, Kang was looking for a "spiritual ancestor" to his own vision of a reformed Chinese Empire. This article posits that his writing on Naples represents the birth of a sort of Sinocentric Globalism where China is not an outlier to modernity, but a participant in a shared human cycle of decline and rebirth.

## 2. Literature Review: Beyond The "Impact-Response" Model

For decades, the research around late Qing intellectuals followed the so-called "impact/response" model, popularised in

[1], which viewed Chinese thought as merely reacting to Western stimulus. However, modern scholarship has recently shifted toward Transcultural Studies, by analysing the figure of Kang Youwei first as a politician and then as a traveller.

### 2.1. The Crisis of the Impact/Response Paradigm

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western sinology, led by John Fairbank and the Harvard scholars' entourage, viewed Chinese intellectual history through the Impact/ Response model; a framework positing that the Qing Empire was a static, traditional entity that only began to move or change when struck by the impact of Western imperialism. In this view, Kang Youwei's reforms were interpreted as a dramatic attempt to catch up with a superior Western civilisation.

However, since the 1980s, scholars like [2] have challenged this Eurocentric teleology. Specifically speaking, Cohen argued for a "China-centred" history that examines internal dynamics, and this is a total juxtaposition with the opinions of other scholars like [3], who were arguing the presence of a transcultural global approach. The new perspective, then, intends to argue that Kang's encounter with Naples was not a simple response to a superior force, but a horizontal dialogue between two ancient civilisations, China and Rome, both grappling with the pressures of the modern industrialised world.

### 2.2. The Political Kang: Hsiao and the Utopian Dialectic

Notwithstanding a bit old and dated as a study, [4] remains the foundational pillar book of Kang Youwei's studies, where the author recognised Kang Youwei's Utopianism as a coherent political philosophy.

- 1) The dialectic of Reform: arguing that Kang's public constitutionalism and his private *Datong Shu* 大同書 (Book of Great Unity) were not just contradictions but a dialectic of stages.
- 2) The religious turn: some scholars like [5], have expanded this base concept by looking at how Kang Youwei attempted to "religionise" Confucianism, to provide China with a spiritual equivalent to the Western Church- an observation that Kang explicitly refined whilst observing the role of the catholic church in Neapolitans' social life.

### 2.3. The Travelling Kang: Literary Modernity and the Gaze

Some scholars like [6, 7] have shifted from Kang Youwei's

political memorials to his travelogues (*youji* 遊記). On the one hand, it encounters those claiming a certain literary modernity in Kang's texts, in the sense that Kang's prose, although written in classical Chinese (*Wenyan wen* 文言文), it however functions as a cinematic lens, capturing the fragments of European life and reassembling them into a new Chinese consciousness.

On the other hand, there's [8], which posits that late Qing intellectuals like Kang used "foreign" spaces to stage their own nationalist anxieties. By looking at fallen or rising nations, they were debating the future of the Qing, and Naples, in this context, functioned as a stage where Kang could perform a comparative analysis of imperial survival.

## 2.4. The Gap: The Southern Missing Link

Despite the richness of the literature, it highlights significant geographic and thematic gaps. The vast majority of scholars such as [9-11] focus on: a) The Meiji Influence: Kang's fascination with Japan's rapid industrialisation; b). The Anglo-American model: Kang's analysis of British nationalism such as [12].

Unfortunately, the southern European travel experience is largely ignored; most researchers saw Kang's time in Italy as a tourist interlude rather than a philosophical catalyst. The present work intends to fill this gap by arguing that Naples provided a more accurate mirror for China than London or Tokyo.

- 1) The living Ruin Synergy: unlike the hyper-modernity of London, Naples in 1904 was a site of layered history. It possessed the ruins of Pompeii (the classical past), the influence of the Papacy (tradition), and the struggles of a newly unified Italian state (modernity)
- 2) The Argument: the present work intends to propose that the Neapolitan Model was the primary catalyst for Kang's theory of "Comparative Antiquarianism". It was right in Naples that Kang realised a nation could be ancient, aesthetic, and modern simultaneously- offering a "Third Way" for a Qing Empire that refused to choose between its cultural essence (Ti 體) and modern utility (Yong 用)

## 3. Research Methodology

This research utilises a qualitative historical-textual analysis. The primary source is the 義大利遊記 *Yidali youji* (Italy travelogue), specifically the chapters concerning Naples and Pompeii. It started with a philological analysis, to examine how Kang translated Western concepts into the *Guwen* 古文 (Ancient prose) style. Secondly, through a process of comparative historiography, it analysed how Kang mapped the Roman Empire's timeline onto the Spring and Autumn period of China. Third, a spatial analysis served to investigate how Kang's physical movement through the streets of Naples informed his theories on urban planning and social reform.

## 4. Research Questions

- 1) How did Kang Youwei's observations on Neapolitan social life challenge the "Social Darwinist" hierarchies common in 1904?
- 2) In what ways did the archaeological discovery of Pompeii provided Kang with a scientific justification for his New Text Confucianism?
- 3) How does the *Yidali youji* redefine the "West" from a threat to be managed into a historical mirror to be studied?

## 5. Theoretical Framework: Comparative Antiquarianism and the *Sanshi* Logic

The study employed Comparative Antiquarianism as its primary analytical lens. Moving beyond the binary of "Orientalism" [13] wherein the Western traveler constructs a "backward" Other- Kang Youwei's gaze was "Equative" and "Reciprocal". As argued in [14], Kang engaged in a "world anthropology" that sought to synchronise the histories of the East and West into a singular, intelligible trajectory. Finally, a spatial analysis investigating how Kang's movement through the streets of Naples informed his theories on urban planning and social reform.

### 5.1. The Equative Gaze: Finding China in Italy

In Kang's framework, the ruins of Pompeii and the architectural remnants of Naples were not relics of a foreign other, but mirrors of China's own classical antiquity. This methodology aligns with the concept of Global Antiquarianism as in [15] which suggests that the study on the past in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a tool for asserting cultural parity.

For Kang finding China in Italy was a strategic act of intellectual sovereignty. By identifying parallels between the Roman Empire and the Han dynasty, he exceptionalised European progress. If Italy could rise from the ruins of its own history to achieve modern statehood, then China, sharing a similar weight of antiquity, could do the same.

### 5.2. The Three Ages of Antiquity (*Sanshi*)

The temporal scaffolding of Kang's observations is derived from his interpretation of the Gongyang Commentary on *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. Kang reconfigured the traditional Confucian concept of the Three Ages (*Sanshi*) into a progressive, evolutionary timeline [4, 16, 17].

- 1) The age of disorder (覺亂時 Jueluan Shi): Characterised by absolute monarchy and fragmented states.
- 2) The age of Approaching Peace (生平時): A transitional stage of constitutionalism and colonial consolidation.
- 3) The Age of Universal Peace (太平時/大同): the final utopian stage of global harmony and the abolition of national borders.

### 5.3. Naples as a Physical Manifestation of *Sanshi*

This study argues that Kang perceived Naples as a heterotopia, a site where three ages coexisted simultaneously. In his Travelogue of Italy (Yidali Youji) the city's layers represented a tangible timeline:

- 1) The poverty and chaos of the Neapolitan slums mirrored the Age of Disorder.
- 2) The unification of efforts of the Italian state mirrored the Age of Approaching.
- 3) The aesthetic beauty and technological potential of the Mediterranean landscape hinted the future Age of Universal Peace.

By applying the *Sanshi* framework to a European city, Kang transformed Naples into a laboratory for his theory of "Great Unity" (*Datong* 大同). As noted in [9], Kang used these European traditions into a global philosophy of history.

## 6. Research Findings and Testimonies from Yidali Youji

### 6.1. The Living Ancestor: Naples as a Mirror for China

Kang's first impression of Naples was one of shocking familiarity. He noted that the density of the population and the vibrancy of the street markets mirrored the noise and dust of Chinese cities.

Original version in classical Chinese: 道路污秽滑斜，果菜之渣及马粪盈视。皆铺石板，车行久则成沟。轮过之，时势倾倒，与北京前时相似。

吾久不行此地，累日乘马车，轮转欲倒，震眩惑心，数日后方之心跳。

道中妇女负人，担囊荷重，亦多乞者。呜呼！何其似北京也。

English Translation: the streets are filthy and slippery; scraps of fruit and vegetables, along with horse manure, litter the ground everywhere. They are all paved with stone, but the relentless passage of carriages has worn deep ruts into them. When crossing these streets by carriage, the ground feels tilted, much like the sight of old Beijing. After being away from such places for so long, the eyes grow weary; travelling by carriage, with the constant jolting and swaying of the wheels, gives one the sensation of falling, causing dizziness and nausea. For days afterward, the heart remains unsettled and agitated. Along the way, one sees poor women carrying heavy loads on their shoulders; there are many, as are the beggars. Ah! How much it resembles Beijing!

Analysing this excerpt, one is compelled to examine the urban condition of Beijing during the late Qing Dynasty, specifically during the era of Kang Youwei.

The urban setting of Beijing between the end of the Qing

Dynasty and Kang Youwei's era.

As reported in [17], during the tenure of Kang Youwei (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), the streets of Beijing reflected the traditional urban organisation of the Qing dynasty. While the city maintained its ceremonial majesty, its material conditions were precarious, falling significantly short of the infrastructural standards seen in contemporary Western metropolises or the treaty ports of coastal China.

In [18] the analysis of the urban organisation of Beijing seems to go further in depth. The city's layout was dominated by an intricate network of the so-called *hutong* 胡同, narrow alleys that provided access to the *siheyuan* 四合院 (courtyard houses). This structure was as much social as it was architectural; the names of these alleys, often derived from local landmarks such as wells or markets, defined neighbourhood identities. However, this spatial granularity was not supported by centralised public services, rendering urban navigation both complex and fragmented. Despite the considerable width of the primary thoroughfares, the road surfaces remained largely unpaved. Period chronicles and studies by [18], depict a city plagued by suffocating dust during the dry spells and paralysed by deep mud during the rainy seasons. Maintenance was negligible, and the absence of modern sewage systems led to chronic unsanitary conditions. In Rogaski 2004 it emphasises that rudimentary waste management and sanitation became, in the eyes of reformists, powerful symbols of the imperial decline and the urgent necessity for a hygienic modernity. In addition, urban mobility was characterised by a technological transition. While traffic remained predominantly pedestrian or dependent on animal-drawn carts, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the introduction of the rickshaw from Japan and the gradual emergence of the first bicycles. Motor vehicles remained virtually non-existent until the fall of the dynasty, preserving a city rhythm dictated by industrial speeds.

In terms of public lighting, it was either non-existent or left to private initiative, leaving the city in near-total darkness after sunset- a condition that was often associated with the specific dynamics of social control and policing during the era. It was only through reformist movements, such as the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 championed Kang Youwei, that a structural transformation of the capital based on international models, began to be theorised.

So, to respond to the first question of the research, in 1904 the prevailing global intellectual climate was dominated by social Darwinism, a framework that ranked civilisations on a linear scale from primitive to advanced. Under this hierarchy, the Anglo-Saxons and Germanic races were placed at the apex, whilst the stagnant East was viewed as a biological and social failure destined for extinction.

Kang Youwei's observations of Naples were revolutionary because they fundamentally subverted this hierarchy by using a comparative civilisational lens rather than a biological one. Kang noted that Neapolitans are passionate, noisy, and unrestrained; traits that Northern Europeans and many Chinese Reformers like Liang Qichao associated with backwardness.

Kang, instead of seeing this as inferiority, interpreted it as a sign of warm civilisation. He argued that if a European nation could be vibrant, loud, and disorganised yet still be part of a Great Power, then the cold efficiency of Britain was not the only definition of modernity. He effectively decoupled Modernity from Germanic Discipline.

Furthermore, a core tenet of Social Darwinism was that poverty and filth were indicators of a race's inability to adapt. Many Westerners looked at Beijing's beggars and concluded China was a "Sick Man".

By writing extensively about the filth, beggars, and banditry in Naples, and about how similar this situation was to the one in Beijing, Kang sought to demonstrate that poverty was a socio-cultural stage, not a biological destiny. If Italy could be both a civilised European power and filthy at the same time, then China's current state was not an evolutionary dead end, but a temporary phase of a Living Ruin, awaiting its own *Risorgimento* (Renaissance).

Original in classical Chinese: 及知久国整顿极难，亦屋难拆段故也。伦敦之不如柏林，纽约者亦在此。故欲整道路，治宫室，非别辟新埠不可。吾国自北京以至各省都会皆然，可惜鉴矣。

English Translation: it is well-known that, restoring an undeveloped country is extremely difficult; as difficult as the demolition of old mansions. So Berlin is better than London, as it is New York as well. So, to have clean and orderly streets and well-structured buildings, nothing else could be done than opening new construction sites near the sea.

My country, starting from Beijing, up until all its provinces, is at the same guise of Naples, therefore [cities like London and New York] should be considered as models.

Regarding the role of London and New York in terms of developed Western big cities, Kang saw these two cities as one of the main examples of modernity, good politics and social order.

## 6.2. The Case of Pompeii

More than the visit in Naples, Kang's visit to Pompeii was a real decisive intellectual event, which constituted the archaeological proof for his theories of cyclical modernity and Confucian reform.

Specifically, Pompeii represents for Kang the emblem of evolution and regression (*jintui* 进退) and a mirror (*jian* 鑑).

In the Confucian tradition, *jintui* (advance and retreat) refers to a complex constellation of ritualized and ethical behaviors through which appropriate conduct and respect are enacted. While rooted in physical movement, *jintui* extends beyond literal gestures to express a cultivated sensitivity to circumstance—specifically, the ability to discern when action is appropriate and when restraint or withdrawal is required. Such discernment is central to Confucian ethical reasoning, which consistently privileges contextual judgment over rigid rule-following (Analects 1.12; 4.10).

Within classical Chinese thought, particularly as articulated

in the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), *jintui* emerges as a fundamental principle of leadership and decision-making. The *Yijing* repeatedly emphasizes responsiveness to changing circumstances and the moral necessity of acting—or refraining from action—at the proper moment (*shi* 时). The text was historically read not merely as a divinatory manual but as a guide to ethical and political judgment grounded in an awareness of transformation and timing (Smith 2008, 32–35). This sensitivity to timing was later incorporated into Confucian moral philosophy as a core attribute of effective rulership. [20]

Within the Confucian sphere, *jintui* is embedded in the quotidian practices of ritual propriety (*li* 礼), alongside gestures such as bowing, yielding, and regulated movement. The [21] explicitly links bodily comportment to moral cultivation, framing advance and retreat as expressions of inner ethical order manifested through ritualized action (*Liji*, "Qu li"). On a personal level, *jintui* functions as a discipline of self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养), articulating a dynamic balance between engagement and withdrawal, assertion and restraint. This balance reflects what the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*) identifies as the highest form of wisdom: acting in accordance with circumstance while maintaining moral equilibrium (*Zhongyong* 1–2).

Ultimately, *jintui* embodies a fundamental insight of Chinese cultural thought: wisdom does not lie in perpetual forward movement, but in the capacity to align one's actions with shifting conditions through a rhythmic alternation of progress and retreat. As modern scholarship on Confucian ethics has emphasized, moral agency in this tradition is inseparable from situational awareness and the ability to harmonize personal conduct with ritual order and the broader patterns of change governing the human and cosmic realms, as reported in [19, 20].

As for the concept of *jian*, within the Confucian tradition, history is not understood as a linear progression toward improvement, but rather as a cyclical process of rise and decline. The concept of *jian* (鑑/鏡), literally meaning "mirror" and traditionally made of bronze, plays a central role in this historical consciousness. Just as a mirror reflects one's appearance and enables self-correction, history reflects the errors of the past, allowing rulers to reform their governance accordingly. For the Chinese intellectual, the contemplation of ruins does not primarily evoke romantic nostalgia; instead, it prompts the search for political admonition and moral warning.

Kang Youwei mobilized the notion of *jian* as an urgent and highly charged political metaphor. In his writings, Pompeii functions as a mirror of the Qing dynasty. The ancient city—wealthy, devoted to luxury and pleasure, and oblivious to the looming threat of Vesuvius—offered Kang a powerful parallel to the Manchu elites of the late Qing. Convinced of their cultural superiority and the enduring stability of the "Celestial Empire," they lived under the illusion of perpetual peace while failing to recognize the signs of imminent catastrophe. The

lesson conveyed through this comparison is stark: a civilization can be obliterated in an instant if it ignores the warnings embedded in its present conditions.

This interpretive framework is closely connected to the Chinese concept of *bianfa* (变法, institutional reform) and to the influence of social Darwinism that permeated Kang Youwei's political thought. Change, in this view, is governed by inexorable laws, and adaptation becomes a prerequisite for survival.

Pompeii, powerless in the face of natural forces, was buried by nature itself. China, by contrast, faced the risk of being buried by history—or by stronger, more adaptive nations—if it failed to comprehend the profound transformations reshaping the modern world. The mirror, in this context, delivers an uncompromising message: those who do not evolve are destined to be buried. For Kang, the lava threatening China was not geological but political in nature.

In his travel poetry, particularly in the poems composed during his journey through Europe, Kang expresses deep sorrow for Pompeii. This sorrow, however, is not merely elegiac; it functions as a form of anticipatory protection—a warning meant to forestall a similar fate for Chinese civilization. Encountering a city frozen in time offered Kang a concrete vision of what becomes of a nation that ceases to adapt: it is transformed from a living, organic entity into a historical artifact, preserved but lifeless.

Respectively, modernity is not for Kang a direct line. The vision of the ancient Roman technology in streets, theatres and sewage systems, convinced him on the fact that antiquity was modern already and that the decline is a real possibility for every empire, China included. Moreover, in the Chinese historiographic tradition, a mirror is either a text or an event serving as a lesson for the present, and for this, Pompeii became for Kang a mirror for the Qing Dynasty: a warning on the speed through which a civilisation can be “buried” if it didn't understand the change laws and regulations.

At this point it becomes necessary to give the reader a proof of the just faced concepts. First of the cyclical modernity. [21]

Original passages in classical Chinese:

1) 凡其宫室器具无一不与今中国边省同者。

English Translation: In general, among the buildings and utensils of Pompeii.... there is not one that is not similar to those found in the remote counties of China today.

The excerpt aims to reinforce the idea of cyclical modernity: Kang Youwei observed that what for Europeans was of an archaeological nature, on the other hand, was still actual technology for the Chinese people, highlighting a cycle that never broke in China. With this, it intends to explain how much Kang Youwei sees China as a “living Pompeii”, meaning that modernity was for him not a chronological target, rather a technical evolution which was accomplished by Europe, but not by China.

2) 以此行并带去残砖，碎瓦，旧灰，瓦器，皆二千年前开国旧物，实甚瑰宝难得。

English Translation: On this journey, I have taken away with me broken bricks, shattered tiles, old ash, and terracotta

vases. These are old objects dating back to the founding of the country two thousand years ago: truly rare and difficult to obtain.

In this passage Kang Youwei meticulously described the object he took away with him. Such a gesture is not just a matter of collecting, but a symbolic act: those objects are like “seeds” of a past that should push to reflecting on the Reform.

The broken bricks (*canzhuan* 残砖) and the shattered tiles (*suiwa* 碎瓦) represent the physical connection with history. Kang used the rarity of these finds to remark that, whilst Europe preserved the ancient as a find, China used this find like a tool. It treats about a powerful example of how the Confucian reform should pass through the awareness on its own antiquity in respect to the modern world.

3) 然我国二千年后，扰然如是，则是大可羞也。

English Translation: However, the fact that a country, after two thousand years have passed, is still just like that [stagnant] at the level of ancient Pompeii, is a cause for great shame.

This passage is crucial for the Confucian Reform. Kang reflected on the fact that Pompeii was “stopped” by a natural disaster, while China was “stopped” by political inactivity. The true cruciality is represented by the term *xiu* 羞 (the shame); for within Kang's reformist Confucian philosophy the shame is the key for a change. If China doesn't reform itself, it will remain like a fossil, just like Pompeii, with the difference that Pompeii didn't have a choice; China did.

4) 百年前屋宇大抵卑小，亦与中国同，则亦不必羞也。

English Translation: A hundred years ago, houses [in Europe] were for the most part low and small, just like China; therefore, there is not even a reason to feel ashamed [of the past, but only for the present].

This last passage represents the definite example of how Kang sees modernity like an accelerated and recent process, and not as an innate Western superiority. This example intends to tell us that modernity is cyclical; every civilisation starts from a similar base [short and small houses]. The difference stands in the courage of carrying out the “Big Evolution” (*dàyan* 大眼) during the last hundred years. It is a call to action: China could recover the wasted time.

### 6.3. Re-imagining Sino-Western Relations: Detailed Analysis

Kang's transition, from observation to policy, is rooted in his rejection of the “Clash of Civilisations” narrative. Instead, he proposed a “Consanguineous Globalism” based on the following three pillars.

1) The global fraternity of “Collapsed Empires”

Kang posited the modern era's greatest tragedy was the erasure of historical memory by the forces of rapid industrialisation. He viewed both China and Italy not as “Backward nations”, but as “fragments of collapsed empires” (*feixu zhi yu* 废墟之余) that shared a common trauma of lost centrality.

Kang argued that China should seek diplomatic “spiritual

resonance” with Southern European and Mediterranean nations. This was a radical departure from the Qing court’s obsession with the “Big Four” powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia) suggesting instead a coalition of “Ancient-Modern” states to counterbalance pure imperialist aggression.

## 2) Bridging the “Aesthetic-Industrial” Gap:

Kang identified a specific danger in the Western model of progress: the loss of the “human soul” through pure militarism.

In Naples Kang saw a society that had industrialised (the railways, the museums, the unified Italian navy) without losing its “glorious past” and argued that China can bridge the gap between its Confucian aesthetics and modern industry, offering a model of “Compassionate Modernity”. This would lead the world away from the “path of pure militarism” (*wuli zhuyi* 武力主义), which he believed would eventually consume the West itself.

## 3) From nationalism to Great Unity (*Datong* 大同). [22]

Following the theories of Kung-chuan Hsiao, we see Kang’s time in Italy accelerated his transition toward its utopian Great Unity.

He suggested that the laws and lessons (*fajie* 法戒) found in the ruins of Pompeii are universal, not just Western.

Moreover, by arguing that “evolution and regression” are global laws, he created a framework where China and the West are not enemies, but fellow travellers on the same historical cycle. His policy suggestion was for a “Universal Parliament where ancient virtues would temper modern laws.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has argued that Kang Youwei’s *Yidali youji* should be read not merely as a travel narrative, but as a crucial site of theoretical innovation in late Qing thought. Kang’s encounter with Naples and, more decisively, with the ruins of Pompeii catalysed a reconfiguration of Sino-Western relations that moved beyond both cultural defensiveness and uncritical Westernisation. Through the lenses of *jian* (mirror) and *jintui* (advance and retreat), Kang transformed Italian antiquity into a comparative device for diagnosing China’s historical predicament and envisioning its possible futures.

Naples functioned for Kang as a living palimpsest in which disorder, transition, and aesthetic continuity coexisted. By mapping the city onto his reinterpreted *sanshi* framework, Kang demonstrated that modernity need not entail the eradication of antiquity, but could emerge through its reactivation. Pompeii, in turn, offered a stark ethical lesson: a civilisation may become a museum of itself if it fails to recognise the imperatives of change. Unlike Pompeii, however, China’s stagnation was not imposed by natural catastrophe but sustained by political inertia—making reform not only possible, but morally obligatory.

By rejecting Social Darwinist hierarchies and biological determinism, Kang articulated a civilisational, rather than racial, theory of progress. His comparative reading of Rome and

China dismantled the presumed monopoly of the North Atlantic world over modernity and proposed instead a horizontal dialogue among ancient civilisations confronting industrial modernity. In this sense, Kang’s Neapolitan writings anticipate later forms of global intellectual history by situating China within a shared, cyclical human experience of rise, decline, and renewal.

Ultimately, Kang’s Italian journey reveals a thinker attempting to reconcile Confucian ethics with global modernity without surrendering cultural sovereignty. His vision of reform—grounded in historical consciousness, ritual sensibility, and comparative antiquarianism—offers an alternative genealogy of modernity, one in which China is neither belated nor derivative, but a conscious participant in a universal historical rhythm. Seen in this light, Naples and Pompeii were not peripheral episodes in Kang Youwei’s exile, but central mirrors through which he reimagined China’s place in the modern world.

## Author Contributions

Guido Anichini is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The present research doesn’t present any conflicts of interest regarding payments or external research fundings or affiliations to research agencies.

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