To gauge the full extent of Kang’s radicalism, it is not enough merely to look at his political views. His attempt to reinvent Confucianism as a philosophy of social change was even more radical since it challenged not just the policies of the government but its cultural basis. And in the failure to reinvent Confucianism lay the future destruction of the entire cultural edifice of the imperial system: the emperor and his court, the recruitment of the bureaucracy through the exam system, and the very enterprise of classical learning—the worldview that had not only socialized generation after generation of gentry, but also provided the glue that held together the various regions and the diverse classes. To understand the significance of this, it is necessary to review such esoteric debates of the eighteenth century as “Song Learning” versus “Han Learning”, “New Text” versus “Old Text”, and the rise of “evidential studies” (kaozhengxue). To the scholars of the eighteenth century, of course, these were not esoteric: they were the stuff of academic careers, social commentary, and even political snakes-and-ladders.

The academic trends of the Qing period led eventually to the de-canonization of classical learning. Qing scholars proved that various parts of the sacred classics (supposedly written before Confucius, or the sixth century BC) were in fact later forgeries of the Han dynasty (209 BC-AD 206). Having noted this problem, however, Qing scholars did not immediately suffer a crisis of faith but rather found ways to continue believing in the essential truths of the classics. Well into the nineteenth century, there seemed no pressing reason to doubt them. But after the political catastrophes of foreign invasion and domestic rebellions, the cosmological kingship
could no longer stand. Before discussing its collapse, let us examine the roots of a political ideology of enormous persuasive power, linking the emperor to the very nature of the cosmos.

The ideology that proclaimed the emperor to be the Son of Heaven had possessed about the same propaganda functions as “divine right” in the West, but it rested on a completely different base. “Heaven” to Chinese literati was not an anthropomorphic, omnipotent, intentional force but rather more like the balance of the cosmos or a kind of natural law. The Chinese emperor was given a “mandate” due to the sacred qualities of virtue and ritual propriety that he embodied. Real emperors of course were known to make mistakes, act at whim, and even commit crimes. Moreover, the principle of inheritance of the Throne by sons from their fathers was at odds with Confucian ideals. One of the fundamental tensions of the traditional Chinese polity thus lay between the emperor as the Son of Heaven on the one hand and as the mere son of his father on the other. Another tension—institutional as well as ideological—lay between the emperor on the one hand and the gentry as the masters of the tradition, of the sacred texts, on the other. Individually, gentry and even officials were politically powerless before the Throne but collectively they maintained a certain moral autonomy. Most Sons of Heaven acknowledged their need to practice self-cultivation and engaged in self-criticisms when disaster struck. An earthquake or even peasant uprising, for example, was seen to reflect the personal morality of the emperor. And though it would have been impolitic to dwell on it, everyone knew that in the end all dynasties were subject to Heaven’s change of the Mandate.
The political order and the moral order were both related to a cosmological symbolism that represented change within a larger harmony. On the popular level as well as in the sometimes cabalistic musings of philosophers, ideas about the five agents, yin-yang, and the hexagrams of the *Classic of Changes (Yijing)* presented an organic vision of the universe all of whose parts were interrelated. In the Song dynasty (960-1279) Confucian thinking developed a cosmology that both rationalized these elements in terms of a sophisticated metaphysics and also emphasized the moral nature of the cosmos. The interpretations of the Cheng-Zhu school (named after its leading spokesmen) eventually became orthodoxy and were enshrined as the basis of the examination system until nearly the end of the Qing dynasty. Although Cheng-Zhu emphasized that social hierarchies were embedded in the nature of the cosmos, it also spoke of the obligations of parents, elders, and rulers. This is why the Son of Heaven himself would engage in self-criticism. Not merely outright rebellion, but unusual natural occurrences might call forth rituals of humility. An earthquake, say, might be interpreted by the court as a sign of Heaven’s warning that the emperor had neglected his duties or that the people were suffering. This did not diminish the emperor’s real powers in the least, but clearly shows how nature, morality, and the political and social orders were placed in the same conceptual net.

Some of the premises of this worldview fell under attack in the eighteenth century. Qing “evidential studies” and Han Learning began as rebellions against trends of the Ming dynasty that were considered decadent. Qing scholars blamed a subjective approach to the classics for resulting in a kind of individualism that was destructive of good order and ultimately the fall of the Ming. Intuitive moral reasoning was
condemned; instead, Qing scholars turned back to the original classics, using techniques of philology and astronomical dating to authenticate what were Confucius’s real words. This more empirical approach was thus “evidential” and compared different texts in great detail; it was also called “Han Learning” because it relied on Han dynasty commentaries as being closer to the original texts, as opposed to the more intuitive Song Learning.

This fundamental philosophical shift dominated most of the intellectual life of the Qing, much as the European Enlightenment challenged Christian orthodoxy in the eighteenth century or the “postmodern” rebellion challenged the received epistemology of the Enlightenment in the last decades of the twentieth century. As in the West, orthodoxy in China had its defenders. But so many of the best minds of the period were influenced by the new trends that they altered the perspectives of all. The historical irony is that rebellion against Song and Ming Confucianism began in a conservative and fundamentalist spirit—to recover the original meaning of the Classics. Indeed, this intellectual rebellion was entirely orthodox politically, seeking to put the new Qing dynasty on sounder footing by correcting the excesses of the Ming.

Yet in practice the evidential studies movement was literally deconstructive. Philological proofs showed how Song-Ming metaphysics were “contaminated” by Daoist and Buddhist influences. That the classics, such as the seminal *Documents or History (Shangshu)* cited by Confucius, contained forgeries inserted into them later was demonstrated beyond refutation. Such questioning spread to other classics. The Han Learning scholars of the Qing tended to be professionally skeptical and rationalist, and the process of pruning away the historical accumulation of misinterpretation was potentially subversive. Where would it end? Indeed, the intellectual historian Benjamin
Elman has suggested, “Han Learning represented more than just an antiquarian quest. Its advocates cast doubt on the Confucian ideology enshrined by Manchu rulers when they legitimated imperial power.”

Above all, Han Learning historicized what had previously been the transcendental sacred. In showing that certain texts important to the broadly defined Confucian tradition—and central to imperial Confucianism specifically—contained forgeries, Han Learning raised doubts about the entire corpus. Moreover, in making philology something of a scientific method, the movement raised questions about objective standpoint. Confucianism had not faced such a serious challenge since the outside threat of Buddhism a thousand years earlier, even though the Han Learning scholars considered themselves true followers of Confucius.

In spite of its findings, the subversive potential of Han Learning mostly remained latent. One reason was that the majority of its adepts deliberately ignored the broader implications of their scholarship. Han Learning thus tended to bog down in philological trivia. Han Learning shared with the Cheng-Zhu mainstream both a respect for scholarship and a skepticism of utopian thinking. As a fairly technical art requiring years of specialized training, it encouraged skeptical more than speculative habits of mind. It abjured questions of morality and cosmology for more narrowly focused research concerns.

Eventually the pendulum swung back—but not exactly to the previous status quo. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a feeling that thoughtful people had better consider questions of morality and even metaphysics had become fairly widespread. In attacking the philosophy of the Song and Ming periods, the Qing’s Han Learning had not really tried to replace it. The answers were still supposed to lie in the classics, as now
better understood. But in fact the answers still had to come from interpretation, the kind of approach evidential studies by itself simply could not handle. One new approach was self-consciously synthetic: to combine the precise scholarship of Han Learning for textual questions but then to go on to use Song Learning as a guide to basic principles, especially in ethics. Precisely to the extent Han Learning had succeeded in rediscovering the words of the sages, the problem of how to make them relevant was accentuated.

In order to understand the real intellectual revolution of the late Qing, one other feature of evidential studies must be mentioned. The Han Learning scholars, in their pursuit of all the evidence from the most ancient times, rediscovered the philosophical debates of the Warring States era (fourth to third centuries BC). This was the period, of the generations following Confucius, when competing schools against and within Confucianism were elaborated—some of which had been lost. Qing scholars discovered how to tease them out from the very partial documentary evidence available. In turn, some of these ideas from Mohist, Daoist, and Legalist traditions provided important resources for late Qing intellectuals. These new resources enriched the philosophical vocabulary. Suddenly, Chinese culture became more than Confucian orthodoxy.

Finally, the direct antecedent to Kang Youwei’s philosophy, the “New Text” school, also arose out of Han Learning. The “New Text” versus “Old Text” controversy was originally an ancient one. Somewhat different versions of the classics—in two different writing styles—appeared in the Han dynasty when Confucianism was revived after the attempt of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) to eradicate it. “New Texts” referred to writings in the contemporary epigraphical style, written by contemporary scholars from memory, while “Old Text” versions written in pre-Han styles were allegedly discovered
hidden in the walls of Confucius’s old house. The Former Han (206 BC-AD 8) had favored New Text while Later Han (AD 25-220) scholars, after some debate, favored the Old Text versions (they had much in common but differed in a few features). By the Qing, the New Text school was long forgotten. The Han Learning school of the Qing had rediscovered this controversy and by the eighteenth century some, though by no means all, evidential studies scholars were denouncing the Old Text tradition as based on fabrication. Certainly, portions of Old Text classics were Han period forgeries, but the main point was not relatively small textual differences.

The substantive issue at stake was the image of Confucius. Confucius allegedly wrote or at least edited all of the classics. One of the briefest of these was the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, sparse court annals of Confucius’s own small state of Lu. Various commentaries were attached to explain these annals, and of these the New Text school paid special attention to the *Gongyang* commentary. While Old Text commentaries pictured Confucius as a teacher whose greatness resided in his revival of ancient traditions, the *Gongyang* treated Confucius as the “uncrowned king” whose greatness lay in founding new institutions. The *Gongyang* Confucius was a charismatic, even mystical leader. The political point was that in orthodox Confucianism Confucius himself was safely dead: gentry might claim to be masters of sacred texts but they were bound to the status quo. But in New Text thinking Confucius became a living, disturbing presence: though never a king or even prime minister, he had understood how to preserve Chinese culture in a time of turmoil, laid the foundation of the unitary empire, and even foreseen the future. Anyone who could speak in the name of this magical Confucius became a prophet or “sage” himself, and might in turn challenge the established order. New Text
scholars found Han dynasty references to an evolutionary scheme of “three ages”—from “Chaos” to “Lesser Peace” to finally a “Great Peace” and unity. Such progressivism, however vague, supported a basically optimistic worldview and justified Kang Youwei’s radical Confucianism.