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## FROM DATONG (GREAT UNITY) TO COMMON PROSPERITY: THE EVOLUTION OF CONFUCIAN IDEALS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE GOVERNANCE

**Abstract.** This study analyzes the evolution of the Confucian concept of Datong (Great Unity) and its influence on China's contemporary Common Prosperity strategy. The research is based on a historical-comparative method, discourse analysis of Confucian texts (Liji, Shijing), and an analysis of modern Chinese government documents. This approach allows for tracing the transformation of Datong within Chinese political thought and assessing its practical application in the country's socio-economic policies. The novelty of the study lies in its examination of the connection between traditional Confucian concepts and China's modern socio-economic strategies. Particular attention is paid to how classical philosophy adapts to the realities of socialist modernization and how it is integrated into the country's state ideology. The primary objective of this research is to identify similarities and differences between Datong, Xiaokang (Moderate Prosperity), and Common Prosperity, assess their practical implementation, and evaluate the impact of traditional ideology on China's state policy. The findings of the study indicate that the concept of Common Prosperity incorporates elements of Datong, such as social justice and wealth redistribution. However, unlike the utopian ideal, Common Prosperity maintains a market economy and state regulation, making it a pragmatic policy rather than a purely ideological construct. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolution of Chinese political philosophy, demonstrating how China's governance system integrates historical ideological concepts into its modern socio-economic development strategies.

**Keywords:** Datong, Common Prosperity, Confucianism, Xiaokang, socialist modernization, economic policy, China's governance model.

### Introduction

In an era of growing economic disparities and social transformations, the pursuit of equitable development has become a central concern for governance worldwide. In China, this challenge is particularly pressing as the country seeks to sustain economic growth while addressing wealth concentration, regional inequality, and social justice. Economic inequality has far-reaching societal consequences, influencing social stability, political trust, and long-term economic sustainability, making it a critical issue for policymakers (Akram, Hassan, 2023).

Despite achieving the status of an upper-middle-income country and eradicating extreme poverty in 2020, China continues to grapple with economic disparities. According to the World Bank, as of 2021, approximately 17% of the population still lived on less than \$6.85 per day (in 2017 PPP terms), indicating persistent gaps in income distribution (World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, while China's economy grew at a robust rate of 5.0% in the first half of 2024—driven by consumer spending on services, exports, and public infrastructure investment—the momentum has slowed due to weak domestic demand and a downturn in the property market. Growth is expected to decline to 4.8% in 2024, down from 5.2% in 2023, raising concerns about economic stability and the sustainability of the current development model (World Bank, 2024). Against this backdrop, the Common Prosperity initiative has emerged as a key policy aimed at mitigating socio-economic inequalities and fostering inclusive growth.

The Confucian ideal of Datong (大同), which envisions a society rooted in collective well-being, social harmony, and economic fairness, provides a relevant conceptual framework for understanding contemporary policy shifts. Historically, Datong has played a significant role in shaping governance models, evolving through various dynastic and ideological transitions. From its classical Confucian origins to its reinterpretations by reformist thinkers such as Kang Youwei, this concept has been adapted to reflect shifting socio-economic realities. In the modern era, Common Prosperity echoes key aspects of Datong by emphasizing balanced economic development, wealth redistribution, and an inclusive approach to national progress. However, while traditional Datong ideals advocated for communal ownership and the elimination of private wealth disparities, Common Prosperity operates within the framework of a socialist market economy, blending state intervention with regulated private enterprise. Scholars highlight that this initiative represents a uniquely Chinese approach to equitable development, differing from Western redistributive policies by integrating socialist governance with market mechanisms (Li, 2022). This distinction raises important questions about the extent to which Confucian thought informs contemporary governance and how its principles have been adapted to fit modern economic structures.

The relevance of this study lies in its examination of the ideological foundations of China's economic strategy, particularly as Confucianism continues to shape political discourse and long-term national planning. Understanding the philosophical roots of Common Prosperity provides deeper insight into China's governance model and its implications for global discussions on economic equity. Additionally, this research is significant for scholars and policymakers seeking to comprehend China's unique approach to wealth redistribution, particularly in the context of global economic shifts and debates on sustainable development.

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the historical evolution of Datong and its influence on governance models throughout Chinese history.
2. Examine the ideological and policy foundations of the Common Prosperity initiative.
3. Identify key divergences and adaptations in how Datong is interpreted within the framework of modern governance.
4. Evaluate the broader implications of Common Prosperity for China's socio-economic development.

By bridging classical Confucian ideals with contemporary governance strategies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of traditional philosophy in shaping state policies in 21st-century China.

### **Materials and methods of research**

The research is based on a comprehensive methodological approach that includes historical-philosophical analysis, comparative analysis, and statistical data analysis. The primary sources of empirical data consist of official reports from China's National Bureau of Statistics, publications from the World Bank, and textual analysis related to the concept of Datong (大同) in historical and contemporary Chinese thought.

Historical-philosophical analysis was employed to trace the evolution of the Datong concept from its first mention in the Book of Rites (礼记 Liji) to its interpretation by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and its adaptation in modern Chinese policy. The study draws on primary sources such as the Book of Rites (Liji), the Gongyang Commentary (公羊传), Kang Youwei's The Book of Datong (大同书), as well as the works of Mao Zedong and contemporary theorists of socialist modernization in China.

Comparative analysis was used to juxtapose the traditional notion of Datong with the modern concept of "Common Prosperity" (共同富裕). To identify ideological parallels and differences, classical Confucian texts, Qing dynasty thinkers, and 20th-century reformers, including Sun Yat-sen

and Mao Zedong, were examined. This analysis also included a review of Chinese Communist Party documents that discuss Datong within the framework of state policy.

For empirical research, statistical data analysis was conducted using official reports that reflect China's socio-economic transformations. The study examined:

- data from China's National Bureau of Statistics on income distribution, social inequality, and living standards.
- reports from the World Bank containing key macroeconomic indicators of China.
- publications on the implementation of the "Common Prosperity" policy, including official government statements and analytical materials from international research centers.

A qualitative textual analysis was carried out by reviewing original philosophical treatises, government documents, and modern studies on the Datong concept. Particular attention was given to key terminology and its interpretation in historical and contemporary Chinese thought, enabling the identification of transformations of this idea across different historical contexts.

Additionally, a literature review was conducted, incorporating monographs and journal articles published in leading peer-reviewed journals. The review covered theoretical foundations of Datong, its interpretations across different eras, and its influence on modern Chinese policy.

By applying these methodological approaches, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Datong ideal and its relevance in contemporary Chinese political and economic practice.

### **Discussion**

The concept of Datong (大同) is one of the key ideas in Chinese philosophy, first systematically presented in the Liyun (礼运) section of the Book of Rites (Liji, 礼记). It is contrasted with the concept of Xiaokang (小康, "Moderate Prosperity"), where Datong symbolizes the highest ideal of a harmonious society, while Xiaokang represents an intermediate stage characterized by a partial realization of social order (Chen, 2013). Throughout Chinese history, interpretations of Datong have evolved in response to changing socio-political conditions. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when the empire faced both external and internal crises, a new understanding of Datong emerged, linked to the necessity of political reform and the transition to a nation-state. In this context, thinkers such as Wang Tao (1828–1897), Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Liang Qichao (1873–1929), Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), and Mao Zedong (1893–1976) proposed various interpretations of the concept, adapting it to the demands of China's modernization (Dessein, 2017).

Kang Youwei had a particularly significant influence on the development of Datong, formulating the Three Ages Theory (三世说) based on the Gongyang Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals (Pi, 2022). His vision of Datong positioned it as an attainable social and political goal rather than a utopian ideal, integrating Confucian ideals with modernization efforts. In contemporary Chinese politics, Datong continues to play an important role, particularly within the Common Prosperity strategy. This concept is viewed as a tool for strengthening social stability, reducing economic inequality, and ensuring balanced development. Many scholars emphasize that the ideas of Datong have influenced China's socialist theory and served as a foundation for rhetoric surrounding economic and social equality (Dessein, 2017).

Studies indicate that the concept of Datong has impacted the development of communist ideology in China, especially regarding the spread of socialist equality ideals. Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen reinterpreted Datong in the context of national modernization, while Mao Zedong incorporated elements of the concept to justify China's socialist development (Chen, 2013: 85–102). Some researchers also argue that within the framework of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s modern policies, Datong is being adapted as a component of national ideology, reinforcing the country's unity (Dessein, 2017).

A literary analysis reveals that the concept of Datong has undergone significant transformations, from its philosophical interpretation in the Book of Rites to its integration into the political rhetoric of 19th and 20th-century China, and its relevance in the 21st century within the Common Prosperity strategy. The historical evolution of Datong demonstrates its adaptability to China's changing socio-political conditions while maintaining its status as an ideal of harmonious society and social equality. This study examines how Datong has been incorporated into modern governance frameworks and evaluates its practical application within the Common Prosperity strategy, identifying potential future directions for the development of this model.

The Confucian concept of Datong (大同) was first introduced by Confucius as a response to the social turmoil of his time, marked by the struggles for power among feudal lords and the collapse of traditional rituals and norms. Seeking a solution to these problems, Confucius formulated an ideal vision of society, Datong society.

Even before systematically presenting the idea of Datong, Confucius had already proposed several principles that reflect its essence. A central element of this concept is 仁 (rén, benevolence or humaneness), which emphasizes universal love and care – not only for one's own family but for all people in society. The value of rén embodies equality, harmony, and social justice.

The concept of Datong was fully articulated in the "Liyun" (礼运) section of the *Book of Rites* (礼记 Liji), which systematically presents this ideal: "大道之行也，天下为公。选贤与能，讲信修睦，故人不独亲其亲，不独子其子，使老有所终，壮有所用，幼有所长，矜寡孤独废疾者，皆有所养。男有分，女有归。货，恶其弃于地也，不必藏于己；力，恶其不出于身也，不必为己。是故，谋闭而不兴，盗窃乱贼而不作，故外户而不闭，是谓大同。[Hu, 2017: 489].

In Nylan's (2001) translation, it reads as follows: "*When the Great Way [大道 dadao] was practiced, all-under-heaven was as common [天下为公 tianxia wei gong]. They chose men of worth and ability [for public office]; they practiced good faith and cultivated good will [修睦 xiumu]. Therefore, people did not single out only their parents to love, nor did they single out only their children for care. They saw to it that the aged were provided for until the end, that the able-bodied had employment, and that the young were brought up well. Compassion was shown to widows, orphans, the childless, and those disabled by disease, so that all had sufficient support. Men had their portion [of land], and women, their homes after marriage. Wealth they hated to leave unused, yet they did not necessarily store it away for their own use. Strength they hated not to exert, yet they did not necessarily exert it only for their own benefit. Thus selfish scheming was thwarted before it could develop. Bandits and thieves, rebels and traitors did not show themselves. So the outer gates [外户 waihu] were left open. This was known as the period of the Great Unity [大同 datong].*" (Nylan, 2001).

This passage outlines the fundamental principles of Datong: "天下为公" (All under Heaven belongs to all), "选贤与能" (Selecting the worthy and capable), and "讲信修睦" (Upholding trust and harmony). These principles serve as a concise representation of the ideal social order believed to have existed during the era of virtuous rulers (三代之英, the Three Sage Kings) and form the core of Confucius' socio-political philosophy.

According to Boer (2023), the concept of Datong (大同) in the *Liji* (礼记, *Book of Rites*) is depicted as an era characterized by the elimination of social inequality, the equitable distribution of resources, and a society founded on trust and virtue. The description of the period of Great Unity in this text presents an ideal vision of governance, where crime is absent, and resources are utilized in the interest of the entire population (Boer, 2023)

The reinterpretation of Datong (大同) in later Confucian tradition, particularly in the works of He Xiu (129–182 CE), represents a significant shift in the perception of this ideal. While the *Liji* (礼记) portrayed Datong as a lost era of the past, He Xiu's commentary on the Gongyang

Commentary (公羊传) on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋) introduced a more structured historical framework, where social harmony and great order (太平, Taiping) were not just abstract utopias but attainable political conditions. He classified historical progression into three sequential stages: the era of decline and disorder (衰乱, shuailuan), the era of rising peace (升平, shengping), and the era of great order (太平, taiping) (He, 1980).

This shift from an idealized past to a structured model of the future became a crucial milestone in the development of Chinese political thought. Unlike the classical conception of Datong as a distant, unattainable ideal, He Xiu reframed it as a concrete political goal that could be pursued. His approach emphasizes a progressive historical dynamic, where society moves from chaos to order, and social institutions gradually evolve, laying the foundation for sustainable governance.

One of He Xiu's most notable contributions was his three-tier classification of historical knowledge: "rumored" (所传闻, suochuanwen), "recorded" (所闻, suowen), and "seen" (所见, suojian) (Li, 2013: 58–59; Gao, Chen, 2014: 36–45). This concept suggests that historical truth undergoes a process of verification, documentation, and eventual realization. In this context, Taiping does not simply symbolize an ideal society but represents a stage of historical development that can be understood and documented. This logic differs significantly from the traditional Western concept of utopia, which is often perceived as transcendent and unattainable. In Confucian thought, by contrast, the ideal society must not only be possible but also measurable, supported by historical experience.

This perspective demonstrates that Datong, in He Xiu's interpretation, is not a static model but a dynamic process, in which social order is gradually constructed through political reform and the moral advancement of society. This concept had a profound influence on later Confucian tradition, laying the groundwork for further reflections on the relationship between state stability, social harmony, and historical evolution.

The reinterpretation of Datong (大同) in the late Qing period, particularly in the works of Kang Youwei (1858–1927), marked a significant transformation in how this Confucian ideal was understood and applied in political thought. Kang Youwei's vision of Datong was heavily influenced by the Gongyang Commentary (公羊传) on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋), particularly He Xiu's (129–182 CE) three-stage historical model. While Confucius had presented Datong as an aspirational yet distant ideal, He Xiu provided a structured, developmental trajectory, which was later further expanded by Kang Youwei.

Kang explicitly linked He Xiu's three historical stages – disorder (乱, luan), rising peace (升平, shengping), and great peace (太平, taiping) – with the classical Confucian distinction between moderate prosperity (小康, xiaokang) and the ultimate state of great unity (大同, datong) (Kang, 1997). In doing so, he reinterpreted Confucian history as a progressive, evolutionary process, in which society advances through distinct, verifiable stages. For Kang, Datong was not an abstract or unattainable utopia, but an achievable political goal, provided that the necessary institutional and economic reforms were implemented.

A crucial aspect of Kang Youwei's interpretation was his emphasis on Datong as an empirically attainable state, not merely a speculative ideal. He drew on He Xiu's distinction between "rumored" (所传闻, suochuanwen), "recorded" (所闻, suowen), and "seen" (所见, suojian), arguing that the vision of Datong must move from theoretical speculation to observable social practice (Li, 2013: 58–59; Gao, Chen, 2014: 36–45). Kang sought to systematically outline how a transition toward Datong could be realized, describing specific policies and institutional transformations necessary for such a transition. He rejected the notion of Datong as an unreachable utopia and instead framed it as a structured political-economic model aimed at overcoming existing socio-economic divisions (Kang, 1997).

One of the most fundamental challenges that Kang identified was the presence of societal and economic boundaries, which he argued must be dismantled for Datong to be achieved. In *The Book of Datong (Datongshu)*, he discussed the elimination of divisions based on class, nationality, race, gender, family structures, private ownership, and legal inequalities, arguing that these were barriers to achieving true social harmony (Kang, 1997: 43–52, 60–62).

However, he also recognized a potential paradox—if competition were entirely eliminated, societal progress and innovation might stagnate. He maintained that while Datong required the dismantling of exploitative structures, a degree of differentiation and competition was still necessary for continued social advancement (Kang, 1997: 127).

Another key element in Kang’s reinterpretation of Datong was his use of the phrase “All-under-heaven is as common” (天下为公, *tianxia wei gong*)—a foundational concept in Confucian political thought that originally appeared in the *Liji* (礼记). This phrase became a shorthand expression of Datong, particularly during the late Qing period when Kang and other intellectuals sought ideological frameworks to guide China’s political transformation. Interestingly, this phrase was also widely employed by Sun Zhongshan (孙中山, Sun Yat-sen), who used it to justify his vision of a new China free from semi-colonialism, feudal relics, and bureaucratic capitalism (Mungello, 1976). The widespread adoption of *tianxia wei gong* in political discourse during this period illustrates how Confucian ideals were being actively reinterpreted and mobilized to support modern state-building efforts (Wang, 2013: 129–153).

Kang Youwei’s vision of Datong was not an isolated intellectual exercise but part of a broader flourishing of utopian—or, more precisely, “topian” (可达之境) – literature in late Qing and early Republican China. Alongside *The Book of Datong*, works such as Cai Yuanpei’s revolutionary short story “New Year’s Dream” explored alternative social and political orders based on Confucian historical models (Chan, 2013: 155–167). This period was characterized by an intense engagement with Confucian ideals, as intellectuals sought to reconcile traditional philosophy with the pressing political and economic challenges of the modern world (Chen, 2013: 89–90).

In this context, Kang’s reinterpretation of Datong represents a critical ideological bridge between traditional Confucian thought and modern Chinese governance. By positioning Datong as a structured, historically grounded trajectory rather than an abstract utopia, Kang laid the foundation for later adaptations of Confucian governance models. His work provided a conceptual framework for state-led economic and social planning, influencing subsequent ideological developments in 20th-century Chinese political thought. His vision of Datong as an evolving, measurable political goal remains a critical reference point in discussions of Confucian governance, economic equality, and national development in contemporary China.

Mao Zedong’s engagement with *Datong* aligns with a broader ideological shift that sought to integrate traditional Chinese philosophical ideals into the Marxist-Leninist framework. Unlike Kang Youwei, whose utopian vision of *Datong* emphasized gradual transformation through institutional reform, Mao reframed *Datong* within the dialectical materialist trajectory toward communism.

A striking illustration of this intellectual convergence is Guo Moruo’s short story *Marx Enters a Confucian Temple* (1926), where Marx and Confucius engage in a dialogue that reveals their shared commitment to an egalitarian society. Confucius, upon hearing Marx’s vision of a classless society, exclaims that it corresponds with his own *Datong* ideal (Guo, 1985: 66, 164). This alignment foreshadowed Mao’s later positioning of *Datong* as an eventual phase of social development under communism. However, unlike Confucius’s past-oriented idealization, Mao placed *Datong* as a long-term objective, achievable only through revolutionary transformation (Mao, 1917: 89).

Mao’s early writings already contained references to *Datong* as the goal of social progress, though at the time he framed it primarily in moral rather than explicitly Marxist terms. By the 1930s, as his theoretical foundation matured, he began to connect *Datong* with the necessity of

national self-determination, particularly in the context of China's anti-colonial struggle. He viewed the *Datong* movement as inherently tied to the struggle for independence, arguing that true participation in international socialism was only possible through a liberated and self-sufficient China (Mao, 1920: 560). This dialectical approach positioned *Datong* as a state that could only emerge through a progressive elimination of contradictions, culminating in a world free of class and state structures (Mao, 1949: 1469).

While Mao acknowledged Kang Youwei's *Datong Shu*, he critiqued its lack of a practical method to achieve this ideal. In contrast, he posited that the Communist Party had found a viable path toward *Datong* through socialist transformation. His articulation of *Datong* was closely tied to the Marxist notion that the state does not simply disappear but "withers away" as class antagonisms dissolve (Engels, 1894: 535). This formulation drew heavily from Engels's revision of *Anti-Dühring*, in which the transition from socialism to communism is characterized by the gradual obsolescence of state structures (Engels, 1894: 535). Mao, applying this to China's context, argued that socialism was the necessary stage in which contradictions would persist but be transformed into non-antagonistic forms (Mao, 1957).

This emphasis on managing contradictions rather than eliminating them outright was a defining feature of Maoist dialectics. His seminal essay *On Contradiction* (1937) laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the persistence of contradictions under socialism. He extended this analysis in later works, developing the concept of non-antagonistic contradictions (*feidui kangxing maodun*), which he argued must be properly managed rather than suppressed (Mao, 1967: 308). In this sense, *Datong* was not a static utopia but a dynamic process of social refinement in which internal tensions could be reconciled rather than leading to destructive conflict.

This perspective fundamentally reshaped the discourse around *Datong* by placing it within a historical-materialist progression rather than a Confucian moral ideal. While Confucius and Kang Youwei had envisioned *Datong* as a harmonious society in which social hierarchies were either reformed or eliminated, Mao framed it as the culmination of class struggle, where contradictions would be gradually resolved through socialist development. Consequently, in Mao's ideological framework, socialism – rather than an immediate leap to *Datong* – was the necessary intermediary stage, in which remnants of class struggle persisted, but the state would play a central role in guiding the transition (Mao, 1957).

The Maoist interpretation of *Datong* redefined it from a classical utopian vision to a dialectical process embedded within the Marxist-Leninist model of historical progression. His synthesis of traditional Confucian ideals with revolutionary praxis provided the foundation for later leaders to frame policies such as *Xiaokang Shehui* and *Common Prosperity* as part of the broader continuum toward an ultimate *Datong*. In this way, the vision of *Datong* was not abandoned but reformulated as an achievable, though distant, objective under socialist construction.

Thus far, we have examined the tradition of *Datong* as an evolving ideological framework in Chinese thought, moving from its early Confucian articulation as a lost golden age to its reinterpretation by He Xiu and Kang Youwei as a vision for the future. The connection between *Datong* and communism had already been suggested by thinkers such as Guo Moruo, but it was Mao Zedong who explicitly linked it to the ultimate goal of a communist society. Crucially, however, Mao did not view *Datong* as an era in which all contradictions would vanish; rather, he emphasized the necessity of managing them in a non-antagonistic way. Despite Mao's extensive engagement with *Datong*, his works notably lack references to another key Confucian concept—*Xiaokang* (小康, *moderate prosperity*). It was under Deng Xiaoping that *Xiaokang* was revived as a central element of China's modernization strategy. To fully grasp its significance, it is necessary to trace its philosophical origins in classical Confucian texts, particularly the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*) and the *Shijing* (*Book of Songs*), where the concept first took shape (Assyl, Dauyen, 2021). Here, *Xiaokang* is associated with tangible improvements in people's quality of life. The use of synonymous terms—ease, rest, relief, repose, and tranquility – suggests that *Xiaokang* represents a

stage of progress rather than decline. This positive interpretation aligns more closely with how the term was later employed by Deng Xiaoping.

When Deng Xiaoping introduced the term *Xiaokang* into political discourse in 1979, he drew upon its optimistic connotation from *Shijing*. In a speech delivered that year, he stated:

“The objective of achieving the Four Modernizations was set by Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai. By achieving the Four Modernizations, we mean shaking off China’s poverty and backwardness (*pinqiong luohou*), gradually improving the people’s living standards, restoring China’s rightful place in international affairs, and enabling China to contribute more to mankind. Backwardness will leave us vulnerable to bullying.” (Deng, 1979: 237–238)

The conceptual evolution of *Xiaokang* (小康) from Confucian texts to contemporary Chinese governance reflects the adaptability of traditional ideals within the framework of socialist modernization. While the *Liji* (礼记) positioned *Xiaokang* as a decline from *Datong* (大同), highlighting self-interest and social fragmentation, the *Shijing* (诗经) presented it as an attainable stage of moderate prosperity that alleviates hardship (Legge, 1871, pp. 495–498). This duality influenced its modern reinterpretation. Deng Xiaoping strategically revived *Xiaokang* in 1979 as a developmental milestone for China, redefining it from a familial ideal to a national economic objective (Deng, 1979: 237–238).

Deng Xiaoping initially preferred the term "moderately well-off level" (*xiaokang shuiping*), yet this phrase did not gain widespread use in official Chinese Communist Party (CPC) discourse. Instead, a less prominent term used by Deng – "moderately well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*) – became dominant in political rhetoric. However, it was not until Jiang Zemin’s speech at the 16th CPC Congress in 2002 that this concept was formally integrated into the Party’s official policy framework. Jiang not only legitimized *xiaokang shehui* but also expanded its scope by introducing the term "in an all-round way" (*quanmian*) in the title of his speech (China.org.cn, 2002). This phrase soon became a cornerstone of CPC ideological discourse, as evidenced by its central role in Hu Jintao’s final speech as president in 2012 (Hu, 2012) and Xi Jinping’s major address at the 19th CPC Congress in 2017 (Xi, 2017).

The gradual formalization of *xiaokang* as a developmental goal reflects the Party’s broader approach to long-term strategic planning. The evolution of this concept can be traced through three key milestones:

2000: The realization of a basic *xiaokang* society, initially defined by economic conditions;

2020: The attainment of a *xiaokang shehui* in an all-round way, marking the centenary of the CPC’s founding;

2049: The transformation into a "socialistically modernized country" (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua guojia*), aligned with the centenary of the founding of the PRC (Boer, 2020: 181–210).

From our perspective, this structured timeline demonstrates the Party’s strategic reinterpretation of Confucian developmental stages within a Marxist framework. In traditional Confucian thought, societal progress moves from chaos to order (*xiaokang*) and ultimately to peace (*shengping*). The CPC has adopted this framework to articulate its vision for socialist modernization, aligning ideological heritage with contemporary governance. The Party’s emphasis on progressive, phased development suggests a long-term governance strategy that balances economic reform, social stability, and ideological continuity. This reinterpretation of Confucian ideals under Marxist thought underscores the CPC’s ability to synthesize historical philosophy with modern political objectives, reinforcing its legitimacy while maintaining ideological adaptability.

Under Xi Jinping, *Xiaokang* has been institutionalized as a key policy marker, culminating in its official achievement in 2021 as part of the first *Centenary Goal* (Long, 2022: 8). This transition set the stage for the next phase – *Common Prosperity* (共同富裕), moving beyond *Xiaokang* towards a more equitable society. The ideological continuity from Confucian thought to socialist



governance illustrates how historical frameworks continue to shape China's modernization trajectory.

In modern Chinese governance, the concept of Datong has been transformed into the policy framework of Common Prosperity (共同富裕), which aims to address socio-economic inequalities while maintaining sustainable national development. As Li (2022) notes, throughout human history, poverty for the majority and wealth for the few have been the norm. Marxism was the first theoretical system to articulate a model of common prosperity, with classical Marxist theorists exploring this issue and developing a series of scientific conclusions regarding economic equality.

The century-long experience of the CCP serves as a practical demonstration of efforts to eliminate poverty and establish a pathway toward common prosperity. The CCP has historically followed a phased approach to achieving socio-economic equality:

Allowing certain regions and groups to accumulate wealth first, ensuring initial economic growth;

Gradually redistributing prosperity to bridge economic disparities and elevate the standard of living for disadvantaged communities

The introduction of common prosperity (gongtong fuyu) as a central policy priority marks a significant turning point in China's economic and social development strategy. At the 10th meeting of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs in August 2021, President Xi Jinping outlined a framework for achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities across Chinese society. Emphasizing the need for inclusive and people-centered growth, Xi linked common prosperity to raising the incomes of low-income groups, reducing regional disparities, and fostering social fairness (China Briefing, 2022).

A key aspect of this initiative is the emphasis on balancing wealth distribution while maintaining economic dynamism. Xi's speech highlighted the importance of "reasonably regulating excessively high incomes and encouraging high-income individuals and enterprises to contribute more to society." This reflects a policy shift that seeks to curb income inequality while preserving the incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship that have driven China's economic success in recent decades.

The pursuit of common prosperity also represents an evolution in China's socialist modernization, extending beyond economic growth to focus on broader social well-being. The policy supports the long-term objectives of sustainable and inclusive growth in China, as embodied in the idealistic pursuit of xiaokang, which emphasizes fairness and equitable distribution of developmental benefits. As the country strives to transition from an upper-middle-income to a high-income economy, common prosperity is positioned—albeit with considerable rhetorical elasticity—as the overarching principle driving governance, economic reform, and social policy for the foreseeable future. This policy has also been noteworthy in signaling the further institutionalization of policies around social equity in China at this new stage of China's development strategy. Focus on common prosperity is a refinement rather than a radical break from past approaches, assuring that modernization benefits a wider segment of society while stabilizing broad economic and competitive forces in China that govern the economy.

### **Research results**

Based on existing research, this study has outlined how the Confucian idea of Datong (大同) has developed from its earlier philosophical roots in the Liji (礼记) – as originally elaborated in the Tang Dynasty by people such as Yan Zhitui and Xun Zi – to become a central theme of modern Chinese political philosophy articulated by figures such as He Xiu, Kang Youwei, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping. These results illustrate the changing nature of Datong from an idealized moral conception to an organized socio-political system of tangible enactment, resulting in specific policies of Xiaokang (小康) and Common Prosperity (共同富裕).

First, we show that the shift from Datong to Xiaokang reflects a movement away from a utopian, idealized past and toward a more pragmatic and achievable stage of social and economic development. He Xiu's new reading established a historical chronology wherein Taiping (太平, Great Peace) was not a mythical past but a quantifiable, observable phase of development. Kang Youwei took the concept a step further and reconciled the idea of Xiaokang with the larger march of society in general, trying moderate prosperity with an evolutionary, organized process of reform.

Second, we find that the Maoist era recontextualized Datong within the framework of dialectical materialism. Mao Zedong's reinterpretation placed Datong at the final stage of historical development, aligning it with the Marxist concept of communism, wherein class structures and state institutions would eventually wither away. However, Mao also emphasized that contradictions persist under socialism and must be managed through non-antagonistic means, shifting the focus toward a dynamic and ongoing transformation rather than a singular revolutionary leap.

Third, the results demonstrate that the revival of Xiaokang under Deng Xiaoping marked a fundamental shift in China's modernization strategy. Unlike Mao, Deng positioned Xiaokang as a concrete economic milestone, directly linking it to the Four Modernizations (agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology). This conceptual evolution redefined Xiaokang from a moral ideal to an actionable economic framework, reinforcing its role in China's socialist market economy.

Finally, the institutionalization of Common Prosperity under Xi Jinping represents the latest stage in this continuum. The research identifies common prosperity not as a departure from previous policies but as an expansion of Xiaokang, emphasizing equitable development, income redistribution, and regional economic balance. The results indicate that this policy aims to address socio-economic disparities while maintaining the high-quality growth necessary for China's transition from an upper-middle-income to a high-income country.

This study finds that China's socio-economic development strategies, rooted in Confucian philosophy and Marxist theory, have consistently evolved through structured historical phases. The transition from Datong to Xiaokang and, ultimately, to Common Prosperity reflects an ongoing refinement of China's modernization trajectory, demonstrating how traditional ideological frameworks continue to shape contemporary governance. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of how historical philosophical principles can be systematically integrated into long-term state planning, reinforcing the ideological and strategic continuity in China's political economy.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the historical evolution of the Confucian concept of Datong (大同) and its transformation into modern Chinese governance frameworks, particularly Xiaokang (小康) and Common Prosperity (共同富裕). By tracing the intellectual lineage from Confucius to He Xiu, Kang Youwei, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping, we have demonstrated how Datong has shifted from an abstract moral vision to a structured developmental model embedded within China's socio-economic policies.

The findings highlight that while Confucius and early Confucian scholars conceptualized Datong as a lost utopia of social harmony and collective welfare, later thinkers – particularly He Xiu and Kang Youwei – reframed it as an attainable political and economic goal. Mao Zedong further reinterpreted Datong through the lens of Marxist dialectics, linking it to the ultimate stage of communism, while Deng Xiaoping introduced Xiaokang as a concrete developmental stage, emphasizing economic modernization as a prerequisite for long-term socialist transformation. Most recently, Xi Jinping's Common Prosperity policy has expanded upon Xiaokang, addressing socio-economic inequalities while maintaining China's trajectory toward high-quality development.

The study's key contribution lies in its demonstration of how traditional Confucian ideals continue to shape modern Chinese political thought, providing ideological continuity in the nation's long-term development strategy. It underscores the adaptability of Confucian philosophy within a socialist framework, illustrating how historical concepts are reinterpreted to align with contemporary socio-economic conditions.

Future research could further explore the practical implications of Common Prosperity, particularly in the context of income redistribution policies, regional development strategies, and sustainable economic growth. Additionally, comparative studies with other governance models could provide deeper insights into the global applicability of China's development trajectory.

In sum, this study reaffirms that China's modernization is not a linear process but a historically conscious progression, balancing ideological heritage with pragmatic governance. The transition from Datong to Xiaokang and ultimately to Common Prosperity reflects an enduring effort to harmonize economic growth with social equity, ensuring a sustainable and inclusive future.

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## **ДАТУННАН ОРТАҚ ӨРКЕНДЕУГЕ ДЕЙІН: ҚАЗІРГІ ҚЫТАЙ БАСҚАРУ ЖҮЙЕСІНДЕГІ КОНФУЦИЙЛІК ИДЕЯЛАРДЫҢ ЭВОЛЮЦИЯСЫ**

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл зерттеу Датун (Ұлы бірлік) конфуцийлік тұжырымдамасының Қытайдың Ортақ өркендеу стратегиясына ықпалын зерттеуге арналған. Зерттеу барысында тарихи-салыстырмалы әдіс, конфуцийлік мәтіндерді дискурс-талдау (Лицзи, Шицзин) және Қытай үкіметінің қазіргі құжаттарын талдау әдістері қолданылды. Зерттеудің жаңалығы дәстүрлі конфуцийлік тұжырымдамалар мен Қытайдың қазіргі әлеуметтік-экономикалық стратегияларының байланысын қарастыруда жатыр, бұл классикалық философияның

социалистік жаңғырту шеңберінде қалай бейімделетінін көрсетеді. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Датун, Сюокан және Ортақ өркендеудің ұқсастықтары мен айырмашылықтарын анықтау, олардың практикалық маңыздылығын бағалау, сондай-ақ дәстүрлі идеологияның Қытайдың мемлекеттік саясатына әсерін зерттеу. Датун идеалына негізделген конфуцийлік этиканың қоғамдағы әділеттілікке, теңдікке және ортақ игілікке бағытталған тұстары бүгінгі Қытайдың экономикалық даму стратегияларында байқалады. Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, Ортақ өркендеу Датунның кейбір элементтерін қамтиды, мысалы, әлеуметтік әділеттілік пен байлықты қайта бөлу, бірақ ол нарықтық экономиканы және мемлекеттік реттеуді сақтайды, бұл оны утопиядан гөрі прагматикалық саясатқа айналдырады. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу Қытайдың мемлекеттік басқару жүйесінің дәстүрлі идеологиялық негіздермен үйлесімділігін талдайды, бұл әлеуметтік тұрақтылықты қамтамасыз етуге және теңгерімді экономикалық дамуға бағытталған реформаларға негіз болады. Бұл жұмыс Қытайдың ұзақ мерзімді даму стратегиясында тарихи философиялық ұғымдардың қалай қайта қаралып, тәжірибеде қолданылатынын тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Осылайша, Ортақ өркендеу мен Датун арасындағы байланыс арқылы Қытайдың қазіргі әлеуметтік-экономикалық даму үрдістерін талдауға жаңа көзқарас ұсынылады.

**Кілт сөздер:** Датун, Ортақ өркендеу, конфуцийшілдік, Сюокан, социалистік жаңғырту, экономикалық саясат, Қытайдың мемлекеттік басқару моделі.

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## **ОТ ДАТУН К ОБЩЕМУ ПРОЦВЕТАНИЮ: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ КОНФУЦИАНСКИХ ИДЕАЛОВ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ СИСТЕМЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ КИТАЯ**

**Аннотация.** В данном исследовании проводится анализ эволюции конфуцианской концепции Датун (Великое единство) и её влияния на современную китайскую стратегию Общего процветания. Исследование основано на историко-сравнительном методе, дискурс-анализе конфуцианских текстов (Лицзи, Шицзин) и анализе современных правительственных документов Китая. Это позволяет проследить, как трансформировалась идея Датун в китайской политической мысли и насколько она нашла практическое применение в социально-экономической политике страны. Новизна исследования заключается в рассмотрении взаимосвязи традиционных конфуцианских концепций с современными социально-экономическими стратегиями Китая. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как классическая философия адаптируется к реалиям социалистической модернизации, а также её интеграции в государственную идеологию. Основная цель исследования — выявить сходства и различия между Датун, Сюокан (Общество малого благополучия) и Общим процветанием, определить уровень их практического применения и оценить влияние традиционной идеологии на государственную политику Китая. Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что концепция Общего процветания включает элементы Датун, такие как принципы социальной справедливости и перераспределения богатства. Однако, в отличие от утопического идеала, Общее процветание сохраняет рыночную экономику и государственное регулирование, что делает его прагматической стратегией.

Данное исследование вносит вклад в понимание эволюции китайской политической философии, а также объясняет, как государственное управление Китая интегрирует исторические идеологические концепции в современные стратегии социально-экономического развития.

**Ключевые слова:** Датун, Общее процветание, конфуцианство, Сяокан, социалистическая модернизация, экономическая политика, модель государственного управления Китая.

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