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Late Qing Dreams of Modernity

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By Peter Zarrow



I would like to alert China Beat readers to a new film, *Datong: The Great Society* [Chinese title: 大同：康有為在瑞典]. This docu-drama tells the story of Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and to a great extent that of his second daughter Kang Tongbi (aka Kang Tung Pih, 1887-1969).

I found the film a powerful and affecting evocation of a philosopher's life, and found myself challenged to consider what we make of the past and what it makes of us. The film-maker, Evans Chan, calls *Datong: The Great Society* a “docu-drama,” since it is based on verifiable records, period photos, and vintage footage—as well as interviews with scholars—all woven into a tapestry of theatricalization involving dance and re-enacted scenes by the Hong Kong actors Liu Kai Chi (as Kang) and Lindzay Chan (as Tongbi). The film also features the well-known and very-much-living actress/choreographer Chiang Ching as the narrator who “plays” herself (more on which below).

The Hong Kong-New York filmmaker Evans Chan 陳耀成 here tackles themes central to modern China, ranging from reform/revolution to sexuality, gender and ethnic relations, and he also tells a transnational story with Kang's exile in Sweden at the center. Evans Chan is also a cultural critic, playwright and the translator/editor of three books by Susan Sontag in Chinese.

Datong: The Great Society, currently playing in the former British colony, will become the inaugural film to receive the Movie of the Year Award to be presented by Southern Metropolitan Daily (南方都市報) as part of its Humane Life Awards (生活大獎).

After seeing a preview of *The Great Society* in Taipei, I asked Evans Chan if he would answer some of my questions, and this is an edited version of our email dialogue. The complete version

of this interview along with other information about the film may be found at Evans' website: Evanschan.com.

* * *

PZ: How did you come to think of working on Kang—and his time in Sweden in particular?

EC: The immediate—Swedish—angle of this film was a result of my stumbling upon the newly published Chinese edition of Kang Youwei's *Swedish Journals* in Hong Kong in 2007, eighty years after his death. Annotated and edited by Goran Malmqvist, Sinologist and member of the Swedish Academy, this edition came out almost 40 years after its Swedish edition. But it rang a bell, since I had come across a quirky reference to Kang's owning a Swedish isle in Jonathan Spence's *The Search for Modern China* (1991).

However, I'd been unwittingly approaching Kang, and aware of a film project possibility. Before encountering the *Swedish Journals*, I'd been researching a book about ethno (Han-centric) nationalism and Chinese cinema—about what I called Han Chinese cinema's "trans-ethnic/-racial" representation of minorities, including Tibetans and Manchus—which led me to Zhu Shilin's *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (清宫秘史, aka *The Secret History of the Qing Court*, 1948), the first important film made by a Han Chinese director about the Qing/Manchu court set during the Hundred Days' Reform. Kang was, of course, a key player in that momentous event. However, Zhu Shilin's film recasts the conflict as a familial melodrama involving the Empress Dowager and Emperor Guangxu's favorite consort, Zhen Fei. In *The Great Society*, I've excerpted *Sorrows* extensively, at times having Liu Kai Chi, who plays Kang, acting against the projected film. You can say it's my way of "remaking" *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*.

I also feel quite strongly that Kang's historical role deserves a reconsideration in light of contemporary scholarship and postmodern politics. Kang isn't as accessible as other modern figures mainly because he stood at the tipping point of Chinese modernity. If both Kang and Liang Qichao are considered the inaugurators of Chinese modernity, Kang was the last major intellectual of the classical millennia, while Liang was the first one blazing his way into the vernacular present. Since the shift turned out to be almost as major a shift as from Latin to the vernacular in Europe, Liang and the notable figures who followed him are more of a presence in Chinese modernity than Kang. Liang has been considered a figure who has "outshone" his master, no doubt partly due to this significant cultural/linguistic shift, even though Liang, "the ultimate fox" in your words, once lamented that he was not as an original thinker as his master.

PZ: Chinese and Western historians primarily recognize Kang for his role in the political reforms of 1898—which failed—and do not pay much attention to his utopianism and certainly don't respect his scholarship. As long as we cannot get away from some kind of "narrative of revolution"—and I'm not saying we should—it is hard to fit both Kang's radicalism and his antipathy to revolution into the plot.

EC: I agree with you that Kang doesn't fit readily into the revolutionary narrative of Chinese historiography. But even if he is mainly remembered for the Hundred Days, he has cast a long shadow over modern China. Recently, the Hundred Days was evoked by "Charter 08" as a

shattering event for an abortive Chinese modernity, owing to which I'd argue that the Hundred Days was the original, archetypal event of a fierce intellectual contest and a bloody conflict preceding Tian'anmen 89—a traumatic experience for Liu Xiaobo's generation.

Memories of the crushed Hundred Days have survived in Hong Kong mostly through Li Han-hisang's series of films on Empress Dowager Cixi. And I remember a placard on Tian'anmen Square during the 1989 democratic uprising (I was there in late May during my very first trip to China!) that showed a cartoon depicting Deng Xiaoping as Cixi "ruling behind the curtain." The lineage of this struggle for Chinese modernity dawned on me as I encountered some revisionist history in the PRC, including the mini-series *Approaching the Republic* (走向共和). Specifically, Cixi, who put a price on Kang's head, is depicted as having a more progressive vision than Kang. But she crushed Kang's reform only because her good sense told her that China should only "move forward in economic, but not political, terms."

Hasn't Cixi been fused with Deng!? If my film has shown a perspective in which the boundary between reform and revolution has been blurred, it's because the perspective of dissidence has come to the fore through the filter of time. The question has become—how to effect political change? And as an insider or an outsider?

PZ: The film emphasizes Kang's utopian longings and his utopian scheme, *Datongshu*. As your film points out, Kang did not think the world was ready for his Datong. At the same time, I don't doubt Kang's impact on Mao Zedong, though I also take Mao's Marxism seriously, which is to say Mao somehow blended Kang's Datong vision with Marxism.

EC: Kang's legacy is complex. If his reform efforts failed during the 1911 Revolution, but have survived as an illusory path not taken by "China," his speculative utopian program was realized to a fault in revolutionary China during the Great Leap Forward. Mao's relationship with Kang, fraught with respect and rivalry, was one of the most astonishing things I uncovered during my research. Apparently, Mao found his initial calling after reading Kang's *Datongshu* in 1917, when he was 24. He wrote to a friend stating Datong to be his political goal, while citing the Confucian evolutionist paradigm developed by Kang. Understandably, that has been suppressed throughout his career, probably because of his insistence on his originality, but apparently also due to an urge to hide his original calling's Confucian underpinning in the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary rat race, in both his theoretical one-upmanship within the party, and later in his state-building rivalry with the Soviet Union. But Kang cannot be blamed for the Great Leap Forward's barbarous atrocities by design or ignorance, because of his own leeriness of a forcible utopianism.

PZ: Not blaming Kang, but *Datong* seems offer a kind of critique of revolution, and especially the chaos of the Maoist years—and for that matter today's cruel urban renewal. Were you joining those who want to say goodbye to revolution?

EC: More recently Li Zehou 李泽厚 hailed Kang as the greatest modern Chinese philosopher. And he made a strong case for rehabilitating Kang politically in his book *Goodbye to Revolution* (告别革命, 1995) by maintaining that Kang's might have been a better option for China. A number of viewers seem to feel that that is my film's position. I can only say that to imagine

there was a choice between “reform” and “revolution,” as though there was a rational decision similar to taking a national referendum, is simply delusional. In contemporary China, we have a Han nationalist subject projecting itself back to an immemorial origin such as the mythical Yellow Emperor. But its “unchangingness” is illusory, since there was a disruption and gigantic schism in 1911, which it has consciously or unconsciously overlooked. Simply put, the pre-1911 national subject wasn’t a Han subject, but a Manchu subject confronting its destiny. Qing China was different from China as such—and Kang was accused by the court of trying merely to save “China,” but not the “Qing/Manchu China.” Hence, revolution was as much indirectly a short-circuiting of the Han reform efforts, as directly the consequence of Manchu China’s failure to reform itself to meet the racial/ethnic challenge posed by the new-fangled Han subject. Kang’s endeavours simply exposed the Manchu government’s resistance to and insincerity about sharing power with the Han majority, i.e., adapting itself to a polity increasingly charged by ethnic awareness. The Qing government’s anti-reform drive to recentralize power through setting up its notorious Royal Chamber in 1909 definitely hastened the revolution. I want to emphasize the above because my film wasn’t the best platform to discuss in details my view on the 1911 Revolution.

PZ: Indeed, simple condemnation of historical revolutions would be fatuous. Nonetheless, *The Great Society* seems to contrast the desperate chaos of modern China with Sweden’s pastoral beauty and stately architecture. Was that your intention?

EC: My depiction of Sweden wasn’t meant to condemn or put down China at any stage. But if it contrasts so starkly with what you described as contemporary China’s “cruel urban renewal,” it is not without reason. Goran Malmqvist believes that Sweden’s burgeoning welfare state in 1904 appeared to Kang as a microcosm of the Datong society he envisioned; and Malmqvist is probably right.

My one modest hope in reviving Kang is to revive, not his political program, but the idea of the Confucian utopia, which, we now learn, had been dressed up by Mao with Marxist trappings for China’s revolutionary modernity. Yet this traumatic revolutionary modernity has now been undone by an unsettling restorationist modernity—a phenomenon experienced by the toiling masses as the building of the great Firewall and Economic Wall of China, meant to inhibit dissent from within, and interference from without by any Western nation that subscribes to a universal concept of human rights. And the building of this economic Great Wall was cheered on by *xiaokang* 小康, Deng’s slogan for the economic opening of China in the 1980’s. In Kang’s scheme, *xiaokang*, meaning small peace/wealth, was a characteristic of the Age of Rising Peace, before the world reaches Datong, the Age of Great Peace. But the present Chinese nation seems stuck in the purgatory of a polarizing *xiaokang*, which manifests mostly as wealth accumulated within a small elite class. It is time for the return of Datong, the Great Commonwealth, as the native dream for China’s (post)modernity.

PZ: In the film, another presence is that of Chiang Ching, who serves and narrator and...what? I wasn’t sure what she was doing in the film, though I could see she represents emancipation in some sense.

EC: Chiang Ching is the contemporary piece in the film's tripartite (Kang, Tongbi, and Chiang Ching) narrative structure that attempts to chart the China experience over a century—diaspora, homelessness and the uncertain advancement or setback of women's and minority rights. As a Sweden-based pioneering Chinese modern dance exponent, Chiang Ching is a significant beneficiary of Kang's unbound feet movement. Chiang Ching is—and she herself is aware of being—a spiritual daughter of Kang's. But this was a bit too much for her to say in the film without sounding pretentious. What also unites her and Kang is their love of Sweden, and their being the master/mistress of their respective Swedish isles, i.e., the joy and pathos of finding one's paradise and still having to confront losses—losses ineluctably caused by our ephemeral life, and the impersonal forces of history.

PZ: I particularly liked learning more about Kang Tongbi (Tung-pih) and her relationship with her father. She is strangely neglected in studies of the Chinese women's movement.

EC: The current revival of Kang Tongbi could have been inaugurated by Zhang Yihe 章詒和's moving and beautifully written memoir of the Anti-Rightist Campaign 反右派運動, *The Past Didn't Go Up In Smoke* 往事並不如煙 (2004), which is still banned in China. What stayed with me was Tongbi's self-mythologizing in her poem about her trip with Kang to India's Buddhist holy sites: *As a woman who journeyed west, I am the first Chinese*. Tongbi is the character in *The Great Society* that I fictionalize most. To begin with, she was not known to have appeared in August Strindberg's magnificent *A Dream Play*, as she does in my film. Yet, she was in fact a student at Barnard/Columbia and probably studied Sanskrit. Strindberg's *A Dream Play* is, interestingly enough, his "Journey to the East," in which he imagined the Hindi/Buddhist God Indra's daughter descending into the human world to understand the cause of human suffering, or grievances. At one point, Strindberg said that "the Indian religion showed me the meaning of my *Dream Play*." I also learnt that Strindberg taught himself Chinese in order to help catalogue the Chinese books at the Royal Library in Stockholm. To bring Kang and Tongbi into *A Dream Play* is my attempt to chart the connection between world (East-meets-West) cultures, which is very much Kang's undertaking in his *Datongshu*, which I translated as *The Great Society* for the English title of the film.

Tongbi may well be China's first female suffragist and political organizer. When she arrived in the US in 1903, she quickly founded and headed *Baohuanghui's* women's chapters in various parts of the U.S. and Canada. Though not quite an intellectual force as Kang or Liang, Tongbi's human stature is to me unquestionable. She was a dauntless conserver of culture and an indomitable moral force. The two lines from Tongbi's own poem *As a woman who journeyed west, I am the first Chinese*, which Mao would recite to her one day, seemed actually a declaration by her of being the first modern Chinese woman.

PZ: If I have a historian's objection to *The Great Society*, it is not about this or that detail, but your portrait of Kang as such a nice guy. I've always pictured him as stern and commanding. I suspect that Kang's charisma—attracting the devotion of young men like Liang Qichao—was based on a kind of megalomania.

EC: Constrained by the length of the film, I can only develop the narrative based on what I consider to be most worth redeeming from Kang's life and thoughts. These are attributes that

tend to make one “nice.” How can one object to Kang’s position on women’s rights, gay rights, minority rights, and even Asian American rights? There are stories of him throwing a book at Liang, or asking Dr. Sun to become his student before he’d talk to him. He had to be arrogant and spunky. But that kind of approach may only be possible in a full-fledged narrative feature, or a mini-series. I could only indicate the problems of his personality in comments here and there. Certainly calling himself Kang-cius is a telling hint. Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* asked “Why Am I So Wise?” and “Why I Write Such Good Books?” One can easily imagine Kang asking such questions. They were megalomaniacs. However, Liang Qichao asserted that without that megalomania, Kang couldn’t have accomplished what he did.

I do want to point out one premise of this project. No straightforward documentary can be made about Kang, simply because of the dearth of contemporaneous visual material. Or I’d have to make a docu chock-full of talking heads. Then, even talking heads were not that easy to find. I was lucky to have rounded up those I was able to interview at the time. Quite a few Chinese Kang experts—I won’t name names here—shied away from being interviewed. Some said Yes, then disappeared. Some gave implausible excuses to get out of their initial promise. Obviously, Kang is still an unsafe topic almost a century after his death.

Peter Zarrow is research fellow and vice-director of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sincia. He is the author of China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949 (Routledge, 2005) and the forthcoming After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924 (Stanford, 2012).