

Against the the Xinhai Revolution Mainstream: On Evans Chan's "Datong: The Great Society"

Leo Ou Fan Lee (*Asiaweek*, Oct 30, 2011)

In this centennial year of the Xinhai revolution of 1911 [during which China's millennial monarchy was overthrown], there have been sweeping commemorating events, from music to performances to exhibitions. Quite an embarrassment of riches!

Yet the question remains: Other than celebrating and admiring the 1911 Revolution, how do we assess the historical experience of this Chinese century? I had a chance to see "Datong: The Great Society," a film that focuses on Kang Youwei, who advocated reform in place of the revolution championed by Dr. Sun Yatsen. The film's director is Evans Chan, a New York-based filmmaker originally from Hong Kong. It was quite an affecting viewing experience. According to Chan, the film has been up against tremendous odds: Its submission to Taiwan's Golden Horse Award/Festival was rejected. And the Hong Kong International Film Festival has passed it up. Had it been a lousy film, I wouldn't have bothered. But I found it an outstanding film that stands tall among all the documentaries I've ever seen. It is absolutely first-rate, and distinguished by considerable originality. Why should it suffer such neglect? With some resignation, Evans Chan said: "Maybe because the film appears to be untimely." Even if he is right, we should at least try to make the film's artistic merits recognized, and allow it to spur discussions in the cultural world of the three Chinas of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the mainland. Such is my intention in writing this piece.

The title of this film is "Datong," obviously referring to Kang's "Book of Datong," commonly considered Kang's *magnum opus* among China scholars. This is a strange book -- ahead of its time, its utopian vision remains out of reach in today's world. Yet Kang soared into the future; his presence was comparable to Fourier, the father of utopian socialism. That Evans Chan has chosen to use "Datong" as the title of his film doesn't mean that he is concocting a hagiographic film about Kang or his book; rather it presents an *alternative vision*: As the founder of *Baohuanghui* (Protect the Emperor Society, 1899-1908), Kang has always been considered a conservative, even a reactionary. Yet the film opens with the comments by Arif Dirlik, well-known Chinese historiographer, saying that as contrasted to Dr. Sun Yatsen, who is "an outsider trying to come in, Kang is a dissident within the system." And Kang's political vision was, in his way, radical.

The subject of Evans Chan's film is Kang's radical-ness, as well as his political journey across dozens of countries. Kang might want to preserve the monarchy, but he was also attempting to change China. Embracing constitutional monarchy, he referenced the British, Japanese and Swedish systems. Within the fold of Qing dynasty's Manchu royalty, he advanced the idea of "five-race [multi-ethnic] harmony" for a modern China. Most interestingly, as a surviving official of a dying dynasty, he fell in love with the faraway country of Sweden, bought an island, and even toyed with the idea of living out

in this “Shangri-la,” sheltering himself from the political catastrophe of his times. That’s why the Chinese subtitle of the film is “Kang Youwei in Sweden.”

Chan’s film unveils the series of contradictions of Kang’s life. Its form is a complex hybrid: A documentary utilizing historic photos and vintage footage, it avoids the conventional third person, detached narration. And Chan used a small cast to play the three protagonists – Kang, Kang’s daughter Tung Pih (aka Tongbi), and his famous disciple Liang Qichao -- in theatrical sequences. Chan paraded other important historical personages by excerpting Zhu Shilin’s “Sorrows of the Forbidden City” (Qingong mishi, 1948). The result is a formal inventiveness that has created networks of allusion and intertextuality. It also sheds light on the reasons behind Mao’s apocalyptic critique of Zhu’s film [during the Cultural Revolution]. Hence, so much of Kang’s contemporary relevance unfolds.

More than a decade ago, a huge controversy among Chinese intellectuals broke out over a book co-written by Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, “Goodbye to Revolution” (1995). The debate was over which would have been the better option for China’s transition into modernity at a critical juncture – reform or revolution? Which way would have yielded more political benefits? Li and Liu apparently belong to the pro-reform camp, bidding farewell to the revolutionary tradition. (Prof. Yu Ying-shih has recently given an interview about the meaning of the 1911 Revolution; and it is bound to stir up controversy as well.) The source of the reform vision of course came from Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao.

Always an admirer of Liang Qichao, I’ve rarely paid attention to Kang, Liang’s master, though I’ve taught excerpts from Kang’s “Book of Datong.” Chan’s film has opened my eyes to Kang, especially his Swedish experience. And it has touched me deeply. I was struck by the fact that the stressful fate of so many twentieth-century intellectuals, i.e. exile, had already found its embodiment in Kang Youwei. His journey of exile was different from that of Dr. Sun’s. Because of his ultimate failure to reach his political goal, Kang died of sorrow. One could call it a tragedy.

The person who recounts Kang’s life of exile in Chan’s film is a well-known artist in her own right – Chiang Ching, who shares the same Chinese name with Madame Mao. Chiang is also a longtime diasporic artist living in Sweden. Married to a Swede, Chiang and her husband also owned a Swedish isle, where over the years they have entertained many friends, including (in full disclosure) myself.

Using Chiang as the narrator, who also co-wrote her narration, is not only an unexpected delight, it has introduced a different vein of subjectivity to the film. This narrator’s sympathy may not have rested with Kang, but with his daughter Kang Tung Pih, an enormously talented pioneer of Chinese women’s rights, and probably China’s first female suffragist and political organizer. This feminist perspective has enriched the film, lending it warmth and humanity. That’s why I don’t think that the film’s main thrust is to reaffirm Kang’s political views – Chan’s political views and Kang’s are not identical. “Datong: The Great Society” should be seen as an unconventional biographical film. It is

realistic as a documentary, yet also “theatrical.” The film opens with Kang Tung Pih’s dream and her dream-play, a tale of Indian mythology, adapted from August Strindberg’s “A Dream Play.” The film’s proto-montage approach, involving overlapping themes and ideas, invites further investigation. No wonder the film’s producer Peggy Chiao, also a noted critic in Taiwan, has described this unclassifiable film as a “docu-drama,” a product of high, cosmopolitan culture.

Meanwhile, interviewees in the film are all notable experts in Europe, America & elsewhere, including Goran Malmqvist of the Swedish Academy; their participation alone warrants interest in the field of Chinese studies. Well-known historians of modern China, such as Jonathan Spence and Peter Zarrow have both praised the film as well. I must say this is not so much a piece written from the perspective of a scholar, than a piece penned by some one who wants to “redress an injustice” done to this film. I believe that in the public realm, the more alternative a vision, the more it deserves attention. I sincerely hope that when “Datong: The Great Society” is released commercially, more people will be involved in further discussions.

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