

**The Luminous Vista of History beyond “Revolution”:
On Evans Chan’s *Datong: The Great Society*
and *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei***

By
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For a long time, when people in the two Chinas across the Taiwan Strait reflected upon twentieth century Chinese history, “revolution” was held in the highest esteem, while the late Qing dynasty’s “[constitutional] reformers” were often criticized, their contribution to the emergence of the new Chinese nation-state dismissed. This perspective ascribed a sacred historical task to the various revolutions shaping modern China from the nineteenth century and the 1911 (Xinhai) Revolution 辛亥革命 through the “proletarian revolution” led by the Chinese Communist Party and beyond. Because of the dominance of this perspective, the revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866–1925) have always captured far more respect and positive historical assessment than the reformers led by Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929). In 1995, the publication of *Goodbye to Revolution* (*Gaobie gemin* 告別革命), a dialogue between philosopher Li Zehou 李澤厚 and literary theorist Liu Zaifu 劉再復, spurred historians of modern China into reevaluating the late Qing’s reform-versus-revolution debate. Since then, other voices re-assessing the “revolution” have slowly emerged. The year 2011 saw the centennial of the 1911 Revolution, which was celebrated by the political establishment, academic circles, and even artistic and literary groups in the global Sinophone community. Ritualistic commemorations, speeches, audio-visual performances, and multifarious exhibitions celebrate evolution and the new China born thereof. Such ritualistic invocations of 1911 invariably highlighted the conventional notions of the central role played by “Sun Yat-sen, revolution, and building the new Chinese nation.”

Just as most people were mobilizing the revolutionary perspective to celebrate the centennial of the 1911 Revolution, a film, *Datong: The Great Society* 《大同：康有為在瑞典》, was released the same year, featuring the reformist leader Kang Youwei as its protagonist. Evans Yiu Shing Chan 陳耀成, the New York-based Hong Kong director of the film, is himself a descendant of the Nanhai 南海 county of Guangdong 廣東, Kang’s birthplace. From a diasporic perspective, through examining the words and deeds of Kang Youwei, Chan has fashioned an unusual framework to examine modern Chinese history, or the tortuous journey of a century of Chinese lives, while offering an alternative point of view to the “revolution perspective.” Audiences were thus treated, via the life journeys of Kang Youwei, his daughter Kang Tung Pih 康同璧 (Kang Tongbi), and his disciple Liang Qichao, to luminous vistas beyond the “revolution.” As a “historical drama,” the film took on tremendous challenges. Yet the result is a narrative both vivacious and analytically shrewd, whilst enriched by profound metaphorical depth and meaning. Defined by the film’s producer, Peggy Chiao, as a “docu-drama,” *The Great Society*, through its hybridization of

documentary and theatre, comes across as a filmic discourse on history. Audiences can see the elements a conventional documentary has to offer, such as rare period photos, vintage footage, and interviews with some leading experts on China, including Arif Dirlik and Marianne Bastid-Bruguière. Yet the film has also used a small cast to reenact the lives of Kang Youwei (Liu Kai Chi 廖啟智), Kang Tung Pih (Lindzay Chan 陳令智), and Liang Qichao (Ben Yeung 楊尚斌). These historical personages are now given voices, which allow them to directly address the audience and enables the documentary to go beyond the conventional third person narration.¹ This unusual formal bricolage, aided by Chan's command of precise details and subtle maneuvering of perspectives, has created a rich and rewarding historical drama. In its essence, *Datong: The Great Society* is more than an artistic creation – by negotiating the many layers of historical issues, it has matched triumphantly “the truth of history” with “the beauty of art.”

One can say that three facets of history have been explored in *The Great Society*. And each of them is intertwined with Chan's thoughts about the present and his concerns about China's future, via the subversion and overturning of the revolutionary perspective. A historical narrative with Kang as its centre markedly departs from the mainstream narratives of history spun by both Taiwan and the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). In Taiwan, the Nationalist (*Guomindang*, aka *Kuomintang* 國民黨) mode of narrative emphasizes the travails and ultimate success of the Revive China Society (*Xingzhonghui* 興中會) and Chinese Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenhui* 同盟會) led by Sun Yat-sen, yet ignores the revolutionary camp's internal divisions, notably in their organizations in Hunan and the Yangze River delta. Similarly ignored is the constitutional reformers' major impact on the 1911 Revolution itself. On the Chinese mainland, the nucleus of its vision of history hinges on Revolution. Yet for the Chinese communists, 1911 was only a way-station *en route* to mission accomplished. They consider 1911 a *bourgeois* revolution; and its failure, as viewed through the Marxist dialectic of history, was necessary for the escalation of a more thorough, “proletarian” revolution, which unfurled the welcome mat for the arrival of Communist China. In practice, this revolution-centric narrative of history aims at servicing and legitimizing the pragmatic concerns of a ruling regime by homogenizing varying perspectives and smearing its opponents. Such political intervention has created problems for an understanding of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's lives and deeds. As an antidote to the limitations of the revolutionary perspective, Chan's film explores the history of the Chinese Empire Reform Association (or *Baohuanghui* 保皇會, lit. Protect the Emperor Society) founded by Kang and Liang, as well as their political ideals and reasoning as they came to opposed revolution. Thanks to Chan's cinematographic purvey, audiences learn that *Baohuanghui* once comprised more than 150 chapters and garnered enthusiastic support among the global Chinese communities. Tens of thousands of Overseas Chinese showed up for Kang and Liang's tours, generously making donations to support their cause. This is a picture of historical reality rarely unveiled in narratives dominated by Sun Yat-sen and the revolutionaries. To put it simply, *Datong: The Great Society* shatters the monolithic, revolutionary-dominant framework to discuss the advent of modern Chinese history in its many dimensions, thereby re-thinking our conventional evaluation of reform and revolution, conservatism, and progressivism.

¹ The film also uses Chiang Ching 江青, Swedish-based actress/choreographer, as a narrator, who also injects her own life story into the narrative.

After shifting the perspective in this way, Chan takes the next step in analyzing the nature of the Manchu empire and the matter of ethnic unity toward the end of China's imperial era. This discussion centers on the ethnic issues of the Zhonghua (China) Empire since the founding of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1644. One message reiterated more than once in *The Great Society* involves the fact that China became a multi-ethnic empire, made up of the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Muslim, Tibetan and other ethnic groups during the Qing dynasty. Because of that, 1911's revolutionary slogan – “Expel the barbarian Tartars, Restore [Han] Zhonghua 驅除韃虜，恢復中華” – seemed overcharged with ethnic/racial hatred and too monolithically restrictive for restructuring the empire. In retrospect, the biggest challenge for the late Qing regime was to reconstitute this Greater Zhonghua Empire and modernize the economic and political realms. And these are challenging issues to which Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao had given deep thought. Between 1904 and 1907, *Citizens' Journal* (*Minbao* 民報) and *New Citizens' Journal* (*Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報), respectively the Sunist revolutionary and Kang-Liang reformist press outlets, were engaged in a fierce debate, espousing divergent opinions on the conflicts between Han Chinese and Manchus, and on economic development plans, as well as ideas of social justice. The sharpest exchanges between the two camps revolved around the mobilization of anti-Manchuism, and the wholesale construction of a Han-led, hegemonic rule for building a new Chinese nation-state. As Marianne Bastid-Bruguière observes in the film, Sun Yat-sen, unlike Kang and Liang, seemed unconcerned about the borderland issues, and somewhat indifferent to the possibility of losing Manchuria, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Yet until the present time, sovereignty disputes, ethnic conflicts, and the practice of religion in the Chinese borderlands have doggedly besieged the central government. This ongoing situation suggests that the debates between reformists and revolutionaries about how to achieve peaceful co-existence among multi ethnic communities, though taking place a century ago, are worth reconsideration today.

The second focus of the film explores the Chinese diaspora and exile. After the failure of the Hundred Days reform of 1898, Kang and his family spent about four years in Sweden (of the total of his sixteen years of exile). On the Swedish islet where he lived, Kang Youwei never stopped mulling over China's future. And his experience of homelessness and exile during the late Qing epoch was still haunting the Chinese intelligentsia toward the end of the twentieth century and beyond. After the Tian'anmen episode of June 4, 1989, a significant number of elite Chinese intellectuals went into exile. Many of them, just like Kang Youwei, continued to reflect on the many issues China is faced with, about which they have offered critique and constructive discussion. Apparently that exilic condition is also applicable to the Guangdong-born, Hong Kong-raised Evans Chan himself, who has lived in New York for more than two decades. For the diasporic Chinese, including those who live in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, the PRC is more than the landmass inhabited by the mainlanders: it is also the abode of their dreams and yearnings. The several diasporic generations across this past century might have been dealing with very different situations in their specific times and places, yet their concerns about and their hankering for their native soil is consistently the same. What seems relevant to contemporary circumstances is -- how do these diasporic Chinese, both the voluntary and involuntary exilic ones, engage with this rising China? And how does China cope with these pluralistic voices overseas? Kang Youwei was rejected first by the late Qing government and then by the revolutionaries during the early republic, much as the dissidents are rejected by the Chinese Communist government today.

The docu-drama's third level of inquiry, also its deepest and profoundest, is the film's

eponymous focus: Datong 大同. The idea of Datong originated from *The Movement of Rites* (*Liyun* 禮運) chapter of *The Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記),² which describes the ideal society that the Chinese intelligentsia has been in search of throughout the past two millennia. In more recent centuries, from the Taiping rebels' notions of communal land ownership and the role of women³ to the complete blueprint for an utopian society as laid out by Kang Youwei in his *Book of Datong* (*Datong shu* 大同書),⁴ the ancient concept of Datong has been variously adapted and projected into the present. Essentially, thinkers and political actors such as Kang, grounded upon the foundation of Chinese tradition, were praying for an equitable, commonly owned and shared world – achieving economic prosperity while still striving toward the humane vision of, as stated in *Liyun*, “a world for all...in which other peoples' relatives and children will be treated as one's own.” (「天下為公...人不獨親其親、不獨子其子」) This utopian vision was not realizable in Kang Youwei's time, nor with the construction of the new republic. Audiences can see that in *The Great Society*, Evans Chan traces the modern quest of Datong from Kang Youwei through Mao Zedong 毛澤東, via the Cultural Revolution and the very ideal of socialism itself. This is a pivotal, paradigm-shifting approach. In the past, academic studies about the Chinese Communist Party or Socialist thought focused mainly on the connection between Soviet Marxism and Chinese Marxism. Rarely has the spotlight been directed to the influence of the resources of Chinese traditional thoughts on the Sinification of this strand of Western thinking. And the implication [of Chan's perspective] is precisely that the imaginary of Datong among the traditional literati was a vital factor in shaping utopian thought from late Qing through 1949. Looking back over the last century, we could say that generations of Chinese have paid a devastating price for pursuing a modern form of Datong. Yet where is Datong today?

As compared to *Datong: The Great Society*, which traces the origin of Chinese utopian thought, Chan's *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei* 《康有為二三事》, his complementary documentary to *The Great Society*, reflects upon how contemporary China should rethink the meaning of Datong. There is a shot in the film that shows an iPhone getting closer and bigger, blotting out an outer wall of the Forbidden City, and accompanied by a voice-over comment by the film's narrator Chiang Ching: “Its socialism absorbed into global capitalism, China is now the workshop of the world, the biggest supplier to Apple Computer Inc.” [中國的社會主義被全球的資本主義吸收。中國成為世界最大的工場、最重要的美國蘋果電腦公司的供應商。] In other words, the predominant objective of China today is the pragmatic, limitless expansion of its military strength and economic might. Unquestionably, “achieving prosperity and strength” has been a central concern of Chinese modernity – already ubiquitous among both revolutionaries and reformists by the beginning of the twentieth century. (Kang Youwei once wrote an essay titled “Save the Nation through Materialism”.) The question remains: after one is well-clothed and well-fed, how to acquire

² *The Book of Rites* was originally rewritten and edited by Confucius' disciples after 213 BCE, and subsequently redacted and reworked by various Confucian scholar. Its present edition dated back to the late Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).

³ The heterodox Christian convert Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全, who established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom 太平天國 with its capital at Nanjing, started the Taiping Rebellion against the Qing dynasty's Manchu ruling class. The result was a widespread civil war in southern China between 1850 and 1864.

⁴ Kang Youwei's *Datong Shu* (*The Book of Datong*, or literally *The Book of Great Unity*) is commonly considered modern China's first major utopian tract. Only two chapters of the book were published in Kang's lifetime. His students published the book in its entirety in 1935, seven years after his death.

a sense of honor and shame? From the vantage point of Datong, Kang Youwei looked for a unity embracing spirituality, the arts, humaneness, and material sustenance. Yet contemporary China has become alienated from itself, morphing into a place where the Datong-ian notions of equality, true mutual benefit, and brotherhood have slowly been jettisoned. Are the ideals once upheld by the Chinese Marxists still worth striving for today? How can we – while trying to make the state and its people prosper economically – resist the logic of capitalism? Another voice-over rhetorical question in *Two or Three Things* asks: “If China today is entering the Age of Little Wealth, should it and can it enter the Age of Datong? Does 21st-century China still have utopias?” [今天，日漸進入小康的中國，可以，或者應該進入大同嗎？廿一世紀的中國，還有烏托邦嗎？] *Apropos* this question, in a post-screening discussion at Academia Sinica in May of 2012, Evans Chan thus elaborated: “As a civilizational ideal, does Datong still give us any meaning today? And at this particular juncture -- as one has witnessed the gargantuan collapse and catastrophes of Utopian experiments in the twentieth century -- how can we keep going with our search for Datong?” [「大同作為一個理想，它還有怎樣的義涵，尤其在經歷整個二十世紀烏托邦實驗的挫敗及災難之後，我們該如何再去追求『大同』？」]

Quite a few people told me that they were moved to tears while watching *The Great Society*. They were moved by historical reflections emanating from Kang Youwei’s life, tribulations, dreams. Of course, from the Datong of Chinese traditional thought, and Kang Youwei’s revival of it, to Marx’s humanist concerns, utopian dreams have proved both seductive and dangerous. By using the cinematographic lens of “Datong,” Evans Chan has enabled us to look at a luminous vista of history beyond “revolution.” It forces us to reexamine Kang Youwei’s thoughts and the crises he faced, as well as the idealism and disillusionment that the Chinese people have experienced during the past century. Kang Youwei is like a mirror, making it possible for us to scrutinize those shady domains where history and reality meet.

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