

Late Qing Dreams of Modernity

– Evans Chan’s dialog with 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], which has become the inaugural movie to receive the Movie of the Year award presented by China’s reputedly assertive and progressive Southern Metropolitan Daily 南方都市報 for its Shenzhen/Hong Kong Humane Life Awards. The awards were first created in 2007 as Shenzhen Humane Life Awards 生活大獎. Last year SMD decided to encompass Hong Kong by reinventing the awards as Shenzhen/Hong Kong Humane Life Awards. 2011 marks the first year when the awards are presented in Hong Kong rather than Shenzhen. The Movie of the Year award was newly created in order to commend the significance of *The Great Society*, a docu-drama that tells the story of the controversial southern reformer/philosopher Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and to a great extent that of his second daughter Kang Tongbi (aka Kang Tung Pih, 1887-1969). The Hong Kong-New York filmmaker Evans Chan 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. The intriguing Swedish angle in particular was praised by Jonathan Spence as “an interesting and unusual way to bring Kang Youwei back to life.” According to Chinese film expert Chris Berry, this “very moving” film “resonates so strongly with the struggles of China’s diasporic intelligentsia today.” 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. Evans Chan calls *Datong: The Great Society* a “docu-drama,” since it is based on verifiable records, period photos, vintage footage, and interviews with Arif Dirlik, Marianne Bastid-Bruguère, Göran Malmqvist, Hung Ho-fung, and Chow Kai-wing, yet the material is 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).

What to make of Kang is still very much disputed by scholars, and there are many historical issues that no film can treat (just as there are many nuances that no historical monograph can do justice to). One task *The Great Society* performs admirably is to simultaneously show us a very different world through Kang’s eyes, while reminding us that Kang’s world is still in our world.

Evans Chan is also a cultural critic, playwright and the translator/editor of three books by Susan Sontag in Chinese. Michael Berry calls Chan “one of the most singularly innovative and diverse figures in the Chinese cultural world during the past fifteen years” (*Speaking in Images*, p. 510). Chan’s filmography includes 10 narrative and documentary features—*To Liv(e)* 浮世戀曲(1991), *Crossings* 錯愛 (1994), *Bauhinia* 紫荊(2002), *The Map of Sex and Love* 情色地圖 (2001), *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xin* 吳仲賢的故事 (2003), *Journey to Beijing* 北征(1998), *Adeus Macau* 澳門二千 (1999), *Makrokosmos I & II* (2004), *The Maverick Piano* (2007), and *Sorceress of the New Piano* 靈琴新韻 (2005). *Datong: The Great Society*, Chan’s latest film, is an independent, transnational production, with Taiwan’s Peggy Chiao as the

producer. Its Hong Kong preview earlier this year prompted influential local film critic Shek Kei to commend the film's "inventiveness" and "unique exploration of a Chinese century." *The Great Society* will have a theatrical, art-house release in Hong Kong and Taiwan in November. 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 dialog:

PZ: How did you come to think of working on Kang—and his time in Sweden in particular? Kang is not exactly a household name. To the best of my knowledge, while several literary figures from the early 20th century have received TV dramatization, Kang never has.

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 would say that Kang is essentially a household name in China—and indubitably in Hong Kong, which is part of Guangdong, of which Kang is one of its most famous sons. But my decision in making *The Great Society* as a reaction to these historical figures' level of exposure on film or TV was only relevant in the sense that I felt that I was onto aspects of Kang's life and career, notably its exilic phase—such as his Swedish sojourn and his two meetings with Theodore Roosevelt—not previously known to most Chinese anywhere. And 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.

Hannah Arendt often invoked the idea of the onset of modernity as "the break with tradition," with Marx, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as the pivotal figures. For me, Kang is their equivalent rolled-into-one. Of course, I'm not suggesting Kang's intellectual stature as comparable. But that may not be a meaningful comparison anyway. What I'm here suggesting is a "functional equivalent"—Kang did his utmost to mend China's break with its tradition by attempting to bridge the gap between the old empire and a modern nation-state, between monarchy and republicanism, and between Confucianism and the (Western) civic culture. Due to his valiant efforts to try to preserve and adapt the ancient Chinese civilization for a searingly traumatizing encounter with modernity, he is easily considered conservative, reactionary, and hence, a suspect. His political agenda went against the entire revolutionary foundation of modern China—from the 1911 Revolution to the 1949 Communist Revolution—and the two Chinas' officially sanctioned history, which accounts for him being a repressed figure.

Finally, it is not that easy for contemporary Chinese to read Kang's classical prose. When I scripted the film, I often felt that I was a translator trying to transmit my archaeological findings into contemporary parlance and framework. In the film's last moment, what the audiences hear is not dialogue—but Kang's daughter Tongbi translating her father into English. Meanwhile, I was translating his classical prose into contemporary *lingua franca* in the Chinese subtitles.

I'd like to get your take on why there has so far been a dearth of interest among film and TV-makers on Kang. In your book, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (2005), your first chapter is on Kang. I guess that in itself says something about his, or your perception of his, importance. Is there a consensus, at least in recent decades, among Western historians on Kang's place in modern Chinese history? Do you feel that a Western historian's perspective may be different from that of a Chinese historian where Kang is concerned?

PZ: I think both Chinese and Western historians recognize Kang's importance, but they focus more on 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. Perhaps some Chinese scholars feel a special sense of identification with Kang and his modernization project. But 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. I do think one approach to the "Hundred Days" of 1898 is to see it very much as a missed opportunity: perhaps even the last chance for the

Qing to pursue reform before the revolutionary movement really got underway. It's hard to sort out the various branches of alternative histories that might have occurred if the Hundred Days had been successful, but it is certainly true that it was in the wake of its defeat and of the fiasco of the Boxer Uprising that a coherent revolutionary ideology began to be formed.

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*. 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? (Remember Kang, Liang, both reform advocates, and Sun Yatsen, the revolutionary leader, were all on the Qing government's Wanted List.) And even as an "insider," how can one's proposals be accepted and not face persecution? Liu Xiaobo has been compared by some Chinese commentators to Liang (and Kang) as a reformer/public intellectual who advocates a peaceful transformation of the political system. But the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize is still serving a long prison sentence, most likely because of his advocacy of reform. No, being a reformer doesn't guarantee a kinder and gentler treatment.

PZ: Kang's scholarship certainly isn't accessible, as you say. His utopian Datongshu is more accessible even in his classical Chinese, and my Western students have enjoyed the translation by Laurence G. Thompson (Ta T'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-wei, 1958). It's hard to know what to do with utopias, though. And as your film points out, Kang did not think the world was ready for his Datong. If one of the historian's tasks is to trace Kang's "influence," that is a really tricky question. On one level, even his closest disciple, Liang Qichao, threw off his influence. 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 The Great Society does 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, was simply delusional. Arif Dirlik has written a very illuminating description of nationalism as a collective mental process: "Nationalism, once it has emerged, tends to project itself over both space and time; homogenizing all differences across the territory occupied by the nation, and projecting itself back in time...so that all history becomes a history of national emergence" (*The Postcolonial Aura*, p. 113). With China it is a Han (or a covert-Han under the guise of *Zhonghua minzu*) nationalism in action. And I'd complement Dirlik's description with the characteristic of the modern national subject as insightfully defined by Prasenjit Duara—the national subject sees itself as both unchanging and progressing over time. 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: I would just add that from the court's point of view, the issue was not merely about sharing power with an ethnic Han population but new social forces that were demanding unprecedented rights of political participation. As for the 1911 revolution, I think Kang--and especially Liang--had the better arguments (indeed, arguments adopted wholesale by the revolutionaries) but that's not what counted in the end. A kind of anti-revolutionary nostalgia might suggest that 1898 was a missed opportunity--indeed it was, and the Qing's own reforms of 1902 highlight this historical irony. Actually, I think the Qing could have made the transition to national/constitutional monarchy (notwithstanding anti-Manchuism) as late as 1909, with the first elections. But it would have had to turn real power over to people like Zhang Jian. But in principle if the Windsors could do it for Britain, so could the Aisin-gioros for (Qing) China. Well, perhaps. Still, can I press you for a judgment on the revolution?

How and what about a revolution can one agree or disagree with? I hope revolution is not a fetish, meaning that it's automatically assumed good and desirable, despite its heavy human costs. I mean if it happens, it happens. It could be unsettling and even horrifying, but it can also be joyful and celebratory, because it generally denotes a new beginning. And no one can deny any people the right to take their own destiny into their own hands. But I'm not a Leninist who wishes things will get really bad so that a revolution can take place. And I suspect that Li Zehou's weariness of revolution seems more immediately triggered by the Cultural Revolution, rather than by revolution as such. I mean, the French creative appropriation notwithstanding, the Cultural Revolution might be the most "unnecessary" Chinese revolution of the past century.

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

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 *xiao kang*, 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 looking at the rise of radical thought in the late Qing, one thing I missed in your film was Kang's great achievement in the late 1880s and early 1890s, which was to use Confucian cosmology to explain and justify linear social-political progress, nor did you explain that his very radical "Confucius was a reformer" idea was based on intense textual exegesis, which in turn made Kang the ultimate Chinese scholar that he was.

The new-scripture vs old-scripture debate was essential to Kang's intellectual path but really convoluted to get across. The film would have to devote 10 to 15 minutes to sort it out and contextualize it. My paramount concern was—what is its relevance for Kang and for us today? My approach was simply to "translate" Kang's position in today's parlance about political repression and liberation. As I understand it, Kang's textual exegesis has been seriously disputed from the beginning, starting from Liang Qichao. Goran Malmqvist, citing his teacher Bernhard Karlgren, blasted Kang as a lousy philologist to the camera, which I didn't use, because of the lack of space for this debate. Very early on, I opted for Kung-chuan Hsiao's assessment: Kang is not really a conventional philologist. "[His] treatment of the classics admittedly was not objective...For while lack of objectivity is an unpardonable sin in a historian, it is not in a philosopher...Kang's study of the classics afforded him the basis of a general social philosophy and...an ideological justification for his reform movement" (*A Modern China and a New World*, pp. 94-97). Again, I personally find it an interesting coincidence that Kang's scholarly background is similar to that of Nietzsche's. Both attempted to "transform all values" for their times.

Meanwhile, even if I don't dispute the "inevitability" of the 1911 revolution, I found it regrettable that some serious nation-building issues were seemingly swept under the rug by the revolution. One important debate I try to retrieve was the one between the reformers and the revolutionaries over the necessity of a civic-based, versus an ethnicity-based, nationhood for the new nation-state, the forgetting of which has haunted China to this date.

PZ: I fundamentally agree with you, though even on this issue there was a lot of overlap between the late Qing reformers and revolutionaries. Though never engaging in the racist name-calling that the revolutionaries were sometimes prone to, Liang Qichao thought in terms of racial categories, which was part of the intellectual substructure of the day. And conversely, the revolutionaries were not unaware of the need to establish republican institutions on the basis of legal citizenship. What I think Kang had brought to this

debate was a sense that neither a state based entirely on citizenship nor one based on a myth of racial purity would work. A common culture was necessary, hence his efforts to promote Confucianism upon his return to China in 1912. But few people were interested. Not only the New Culture radicals had little use for Kang, but the scholars who would soon found the New Confucian movement kept their intellectual distance.

EC: My film doesn't talk about either the Confucian Association, or Kang's efforts to turn Confucianism into a religion, because I feel that his use of Confucianism in this respect was entirely utilitarian. Yet such enterprise nonetheless indicates Kang's sensitivity to what Walter Benjamin called the "cultic" aspect of human society, or nationhood, which you'd probably call the "ritualistic" aspect of governance, as in your discussion of Yuan Shikai. Both religion and monarchy were central to Kang's idea of holding the pre-modern Chinese nation together as it transited into the modern nation-state system. And finally, it was a Manchu/non-Han monarchy that Kang favored because of its ability to appeal to China's various minority constituents acquired by the Manchus.

What I chose to present in the film was the context and the gist of Kang's Confucius. Kang was, indeed, a conservative, a radical, and a revolutionary—radical and revolutionary in thought, but conservative in his aversion to a bloody overthrowing of the *ancien regime*, which would have exposed a self-wounding China to imperialism. I'd say the radical/revolutionary streak of Kang, which you call "radical Confucianism," is the facet of him which exerts its greatest impact today—on me and the Chinese audiences of *The Great Society* during previews. A Chinese American programmer in New York told me that the film resonates with what's happening with the Arab Spring. Some young Chinese told me that they found the scene, in which Kang presents *Confucius as a Reformer* to the emperor, most powerful. Lest we forget, Confucius has been revived by the PRC as an authoritarian figure who demands loyalty and obedience. But that's the brand of Confucian "governmentality"—in the Foucaultian sense—that Kang fought in order to resurrect an idea of a lost Confucius, i.e., Confucius as an Emancipator.

PZ: It is interesting that preview audiences have been so receptive to utopian vision. I think of this age as disillusioned both with revolution and with utopianism, but perhaps that is wrong. 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: In a forthcoming paper, Danish film critic Mette Hjort has this to say about my choice of Chiang Ching as the narrator for the film: "Shaped by exceptional talent, tenacity, and sensitivity, as well as by many of the larger historical forces at work in China's triumphant revolutionary modernity, Chiang Ching's life story is well worth telling. But the genius of Chan's decision has to do not only with the tellability of this extraordinary woman's life, but with the deep cultural connections that exist between her and Kang Youwei across a turbulent century."

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. What documentary evidence did you have to base her character on?

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. Zhang's memoir hails Tongbi and her daughter as "the last aristocrats" 最後的貴族. In Zhang Yihe's reminiscence, Tongbi comes across very much like a courageous and compassionate goddess—negotiating the peaceful liberation of Beijing with the CCP before the end of the civil war, bringing food to the dying and starving folks by the city wall, and defying Mao to befriend Zhang Yihe's father, Zhang Baijun 章伯鈞, shortly after he was branded the Number One rightist by Mao in 1958. Eventually Tongbi offered whatever protection she could offer to Yihe herself, then a teenager, in one of the darkest chapters of modern Chinese history.

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.* (*Journey to the West* is, I'm sure you know, China's beloved classic about the mythical search for (Buddhist) enlightenment by the monk Xuanzang and his disciple/guardian Monkey King.) Apparently, those lines caused Zhang's "non-fiction" memoir to slip, probably unconsciously, into mythologizing by claiming that Tongbi, at age 19, cross-dressed as a young man to walk alone on the Silk Road to join Kang in India (how many months would that have taken?), when in reality Tongbi took a boat to travel from Hong Kong to Malaysia and had probably never cross-dressed. However, given the time and place, that prosaic boat trip was courageous enough to have greatly impressed Kang, and Liang Qichao, who wrote about that event with tremendous excitement.

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*. Yet, she was in fact a student at Barnard/Columbia. She was known to have gone to India and probably studied Hindi, which I suspect meant Sanskrit, because Buddhism had an important influence on Kang's thoughts. 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. Written in 1901, *A Dream Play* received its world premiere in Sweden in 1907, the year Tongbi enrolled at Barnard College/Columbia University in New York. 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.

The film's *Dream Play* structure was partly inspired by that daring trip of Tongbi's, and partly by a passage from Kang's "Talks on the Many Heavens," which is scripted into the last scene in the film, in my invented scene in the mode of *Dream Play*. Those are the words—about human divinity and dignity—that Tongbi, in her 1962 memorial essay about Kang, wanted the world to remember her father by. In the film, Lindzay Chan, playing Tongbi, translates the passage into English for the contemporary audiences.

The *Dream Play* scenes became the aesthetic foundation of the movie, allowing me to theatricalize certain actions and debates. Factually, Tongbi was known to be an interpreter for her father for many occasions. The *New York Evening Mail* interview with her about woman's suffrage was taken verbatim from news clippings. After the death of Liang Qichao and other students close to Kang, Tongbi took it upon herself to become her father's literary editor/executor/biographer, and this was her stated reason to remain in China in her widowhood when her son Jung-Pang Lo was a professor of history at the University of California-Davis. Her "delirious" death bed scenes, however, combine the experiences of both her and her daughter during the Anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution, as recorded in Zhang Yihe's memoir.

Meanwhile, it may or may not be due to the appearance of Zhang's memoir that Barnard College began to trumpet this unusual alumna, Tongbi was Barnard's first Asian student. She was featured prominently in its Notable Alumnae webpage (<http://barnard.edu/archives/history/notable>), which has uncovered new info about her. In 2009, Barnard/Columbia organized a conference in Beijing in her honour, the first of its kind anywhere. Even the proposed National Women's History Museum in DC highlighted Tongbi in its online exhibition about the educational advancement of Chinese women (<http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/chinese/33.html>).

I drew upon all the sources mentioned above as well as Tongbi's scattered writings, including her Chinese introduction intended for the Swedish edition of Kang's *Swedish Journals*, and her supplement to her father's *Chronological Autobiography*. Jung-Pang Lo has edited/written a book about Kang, *Kang Yu-wei: A Biography and A Symposium*, in which he published his own *Sequel to the Chronological Autobiography* of his grandfather, which is very different from the one written by his mother. And I've used both for my background research. Additionally, three decades ago, Robert Worden

wrote a fascinating dissertation titled "A Chinese Reformer in Exile: The North American Phase of the Travels of Kang Yu-wei" (Georgetown University, 1972), in which one could find interesting tidbits on Tongbi as well. Of course, in my film, Goran Malmqvist talks about his own brief encounter with Tongbi.

Kang recognized his daughter's unique courage and moral probity. His plan to send her to "study" in the US was part of his plan to have her organize—and organize overseas Chinese women in the early twentieth century to boot—for his *Baohuanghui* (Preserve the Emperor Society). Understandably, she could enter the U.S. only as a student (not as an organizer), which exempted her from the Chinese Exclusion Act, the law that barred Kang himself from entering the U.S. until 1905. Both father and daughter, however, were both keenly aware of the fledgeling women's movement and Tongbi's trail-blazing role. In a poem written for Tongbi before sending her on her American adventure, Kang said:

Thousands of miles to America and Europe
A young girl makes the trip alone...

....

[China's] initial step toward women's rights—
A great task you now assume.

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 conservator of culture and an indomitable moral force. The two lines from Tung Pih'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. At times her loyalty to her father comes across as fiercely maternal, revealing a complex dynamic between this unusual duo at that particular juncture of Chinese history. Kang was a liberator of women – from his nation-wide effort to unbind women's feet to his providing modern education to his own daughters. Yet between Kang and Tongbi, one almost wonders, Where is the line between the liberator and the liberated, the protector and the protected? There is something poignant and inspiring about that powerful bond and how both of them struggled mightily with their eras and paid dearly, and apparently unrepentantly, for it.

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. Perhaps that's how he was with Tongbi, but I've always pictured him as stern and commanding. Your Kang mentions at the end of his life that he was too arrogant—but we never really see his arrogance in the film. If Kang's judgments were sometimes arbitrary, they were certainly bold, and this took more nerve than a nice guy could ever summon up. Also, I've always suspected that his charisma—attracting the devotion of young men like Liang Qichao, only the most accomplished of many—was based on a kind of megalomania.

Peggy Chiao, my producer, and Mary Stephen, my editor, both warned me not to go above the two-hour mark. Now the film runs just slightly below two hours. 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 -- Baohuanghui's financial mess; Marianne Bastid-Bruguier calling him a liar. 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.

PZ: I love the idea of a mini-series. But my final question is simply, how does “The Great Society” related to your previous work as a film-maker?

The Great Society appeared to be a culmination of various strands of my works. My first film, *To Liv(e)*, a narrative feature, inadvertently made a China-Scandinavia connection since it was structured around a series of letters to Liv Ullmann from post-Tiananmen Hong Kong, where the great Norwegian/Ingmar Bergman actress visited in 1990 to condemn the deportation of Vietnamese refugees.

Then my two-part *China Decolonized* documentaries on the handovers of Hong Kong and Macau—*Journey to Beijing* (1998) and *Adeus Macau* (2000)—were concerned with issues of human and political rights and their implication for China.

Finally, *The Life and times of Wu Zhongxian* (2003), based on a play by Mok Chiu Yu, was a docu-drama that could be considered a forerunner for “The Great Society”. Back then, Michael Berry asked me some intriguing questions about this film: Is it a documentary or narrative feature? If it is a documentary, then of what? The subject of the existant play, Wu Zhongxian, or the play itself?—when the play was actually re-staged by me for the purpose of filming. Wu was a little-known but pioneering human rights activist in Hong Kong and China between the 1970s-1990's. He might be a dissident in tiny Hong Kong, yet his struggles echo that of Kang, who was a major dissident, along side Sun Yat-sen and Liang Qichao, at the dawn of Chinese modernity.

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 choc-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.

Alternatively, I'd have had to raise millions of dollars in order to reconstruct the period details for a narrative feature. That wasn't an option. Hence, the docu-dramatic form became the only viable route for me to go. The challenge became, How to transform scholarship into narrative (art)?

Many, many thanks for giving me an opportunity to present my views on *The Great Society*, Kang and a bunch of related topics, which I could not include in the film.