

# The man who could have changed China's history

---Mark O'Neill (South China Morning Post, Oct 31, 2011)

A new film performs a valuable service in slicing to death. He fled abroad, beginning an exile that took him to more than 30 countries, where he was treated like a head of state.

The story of Kang's extraordinary life and odyssey is told in a new film, *Datong, the Great Society*, by Hong Kong director Evans Chan, opening at IFC and Broadway Cinematheque in Yau Ma Tei on November 12.

It is part drama and part documentary, mixing scenes from Kang's life with interviews with scholars of history and scenes from Stockholm, where he bought an island that became a refuge during his exile.

The three main characters are Kang, his daughter Kang Tong-bi and Liang Chi-chao, his main disciple and right-hand man in the Hundred Days' Reform.

The film performs a valuable service in informing Chinese and foreigners about a key historical figure who has been largely forgotten in a year devoted to Sun, his bitter rival.

Many believe that if the Empress Dowager had died before 1898, Guangxu would have implemented the reforms and China's history would have been radically different.

"Before I started working on this film, I knew little about Kang," Chan said. "In 2007, I encountered his life in exile, as recounted in his Swedish journals. He was an important historical figure and ahead of his time on many issues, like rights for women, gays and Asian-Americans.

"His Protect the Emperor Society had 150 chapters around the world. He was like a prime minister of China in exile."

In June 1905, he twice met US president Theodore Roosevelt to argue against severe restrictions on immigration by Chinese. He was a far more effective lobbyist than any representative of the Qing government.

Some of the most poignant scenes of the film are in Sweden, narrated by Beijing actress and dancer Chiang Ching; she is, like Kang, an exile from her own country who bought an island close to Stockholm. She moved there 30 years ago after marrying an eminent Swedish biochemist, who died in 2008.

She describes Kang's life and achievements, the sadness of his exile and her own grief at the loss of her husband. For both, their island home was and is an escape from the terrifying politics of China.

Kang is tied to Sweden in other ways, too. He greatly admired its constitutional system. His diary was first published in Swedish in 1970 by that nation's most famous Sinologist, Gora Malmquist, 87.

Malmquist is one of the historians interviewed in the film. He also translated into Swedish the works of novelist Gao Xingjian, a major reason Gao won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000 - the first Chinese to receive this honour.

While Sun Yat-sen returned to China in triumph as the first president of the new republic, Kang's life became a tragedy. His movement lost its centre after the death in 1908 of Guangxu, aged 37, who was probably poisoned.

Kang was able to return to China but wielded no political influence. He died at his home in Qingdao on March 31, 1927, of something he had eaten. He, too, was probably poisoned.