

Tales of Two Revolutions: Love, Women and Anti-history in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Bai Hua's *There Was a Country of Women Far Away*

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ABSTRACT

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens and *There Was a Country of Women Far Away* by Bai Hua attempted to dramatize the reasons that the French Revolution and the Chinese Cultural Revolution would have failed to bring forth a historical leap forward as envisaged by the leaders of the two revolutions. In *A Tale*, Dickens suggested that it is perhaps the triumph of hatred over love that frustrated the French Revolution's struggle against historical determinism. In *Country of Women*, Bai Hua proposed that it is the suppression of love that defeated the ideals that the Cultural Revolution aimed to realize. For Dickens and Bai Hua, a revolution is too destructive to achieve a constructive end. In order to initiate a genuine social and historical progress, one must resort to the human capacity for love. In these two novels, whether a historical breakthrough can ultimately be achieved by a revolution or otherwise, women are going to play a determining role. This article demonstrates how Dickens and Bai Hua used their female characters in the histories of the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution to express their faith in love as a weapon to transcend the vicious cycle of history.

KEY WORDS

Charles Dickens
A Tales of Two Cities
dialectic development of history
French Revolution
anti-historical approach/reaction

Bai Hua
linear development of history
Cultural Revolution
historical approach/reaction



The French Revolution and the Chinese Cultural Revolution were two remarkable revolutions in the history of Europe and China. The French Revolution attempted to demolish the monarchical system with a view to establishing a democratic and ideal nation for France. The Cultural Revolution aimed to recast human nature by eliminating the negative elements therein so as to realize the communist end-state. Both revolutions started off with a promise of creating a historical breakthrough but ended up with chaos and terror.

There are hundreds of reasons why these two revolutions should have failed to bring forth the kind of social mutation needed to defeat the linear development of history. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Dickens suggested that it is perhaps the triumph of hatred over love that frustrated the French Revolution's struggle against historical determinism. In *There Was a Country of Women Far Away* (遠方有個女兒國 *Yuanfang you ge nüerguo*, 1989, hereafter "*Country of Women*"),¹ Bai Hua 白樺 proposed that it is the suppression of love that prevented the Cultural Revolution from realizing a historical leap forward.

For Dickens and Bai Hua, a revolution is too destructive to achieve a constructive end and therefore not always a feasible means to bring forth social and historical progress. In order to initiate genuine social and historical progress, one must resort to the human capacity for love. These two novels maintain that whether a historical breakthrough can ultimately be achieved by a revolution or otherwise, women are going to play a determining role. In this article, I shall demonstrate how Dickens and Bai Hua used their female characters in the histories of the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution to express their faith in love as a weapon to transcend the vicious cycle of history.

Although a very popular novel since it was first published, *A Tale*

of Two Cities is generally considered by critics as a failure, and the least “Dickensian” product.² Particularly annoying to the critics are the lack of round characters and lack of humor, which are considered as Dickens’s typical stocks-in-trade. Indeed, *A Tale of Two Cities* does not focus on characters but on the “highly charged setting in which the action takes place” (Glancy 9). According to Avrom Fleishman, the absence of round characters enables Dickens “to characterize and dramatize social groups as major carriers of the action” (123). That the characters represent social groups is particularly conspicuous in the French characters. Charles Darnay’s French surname, Evrémonde, suggests a sort of Everyman (Alter 138), or “a multi-lingual two-cities pun on ‘everyman’ or ‘all the world’” (Gilbert 259). The French revolutionists that come on the front stage are identified as Jacques One, Two, Three, the Judge, the Juryman etc., whereas Madame Defarge’s knitting companion has no individual name but is referred to as The Vengeance. It is submitted that the three French families also represent social groups, namely, the Evrémondes representing the nobility, the Marnettes, the middle class and the family of Madame Defarge, the lower class.

Dickens himself admitted in his prefaces to the novel that the work should be read not so much as fiction but as history of some kind. In a sense, Dickens was adopting the Romantic approach to history, in the sense that, “the Romantic movement aimed at a new history, narrative, live, picturesque, direct, full of particular detail and local color, alive with the touch and the atmosphere of the past, populated by individual characters, a history which is artistically effective, written through artistic identification and creating a sense of emotional identification in the reader” (Ben-Israel 42).

Notwithstanding that Dickens wished his readers to read *A Tale of Two Cities* as a history of some sort, the episodes in the novel that are really drawn from history are only a few. Thus, it is not surprising that while Morton Zabel considers the work the most powerful historical novel of the nineteenth century (69), Georg Lukács maintains that as a historical novel *A Tale of Two Cities* is wanting because Dickens reduced the history of the French Revolution to a “romantic background”

for the drama of Lucie, Charles, Carton, and Dr Manette (468). Nicholas Rance argues that Dickens used the French Revolution only to promote “the most basic and at the same time most needed human activity: that based on the feeling of good and love” (83). Both Georg Lukács and Nicolas Rance failed to discern the significance of the romance of Lucie and Charles with respect to Dickens’s views of the French Revolution. It is submitted that the three French families to which the previously mentioned characters belong are a miniature of the French society itself. The macro picture of the French Revolution is dramatized in the interactions and relationships among these three French families.

In general, the rise of the French Revolution can be seen as a vicious cycle of oppression and revenge in that the French middle and lower classes revolted against the exploitation and oppression of the nobility. In theory, the tyranny of the ruling class could produce two kinds of reactions from the two inferior classes. The first possible reaction is predicted as a dialectic development of linear history: an action will provoke a corresponding reaction. When this takes place, history simply repeats itself: tyranny is answered by tyranny and no social progress is achieved. I shall call this reaction a historical reaction. In the French Revolution, the historical reaction is the immediate aftermath of the fall of Bastille, namely, a bloody revenge by means of the guillotine executions of the nobles as the formerly oppressed became new oppressors.

The second possible reaction is a transcendence of the dialectic development of history: exploitation and oppression is met by love and forgiveness. This I shall call an anti-historical reaction. In Dickens’s eyes, it is only when this anti-historical reaction defeats the historical reaction that history does not repeat itself and real social progress may ensue.

The oppression and exploitation of the French nobles is dramatized by a crime committed by the older generation of the Evrémondes. In order to possess Madame Defarge’s sister, the two twin brothers of old Evrémondes kill the woman’s husband, father and brother. Dr Manette, who learns of the incident, is imprisoned for an indefinite

term to keep him from exposing the crime. This incident epitomizes the reality of France before the Revolution: the nobles had their own way and could abuse their power as much as they liked.

The historical and anti-historical reactions are dramatized in the novel by the different approaches of Madame Defarge and Dr Manette toward their common enemy. Dr Manette adopts the anti-historical approach: he finally forgives the Evrémondes and allows Lucie to marry Charles Darnay. On the other hand, Madame Defarge follows the historical approach. She goes all the way and determines to take revenge on even the innocent second or third generations of the Evrémondes.

The Manettes (the middle class) alone cannot bring forth the anti-historical result without the cooperation of the Evrémondes (the noblemen). In other words, if the Evrémondes had remained as cruel and abusive as before, no matter how generous the Manettes are, there could not be any reconciliation possible. The seeds of love and compassion are first sowed by Charles Darnay's mother, who attempts at the outset to mitigate the effect of the crime of the old Evrémondes by offering some compensation to Madame Defarge. More importantly, she uses her love and influence to bring up Charles as a different man from his father and uncle, and makes him a worthy husband for Lucie. Her efforts finally bear fruit when Charles wins Lucie's hand, thereby eliminating the difference between the Evrémondes and Manettes.

Dr Manette's hatred against the Evrémondes is deep. With a view to exposing the Evrémonde brothers' brutality, he secretly makes a written account of their crime. The intensity of his hatred is testified in the conclusion of the account where he denounces the two Evrémonde brothers "and their descendants, to the last of their race" (*Tale* 327). When he first learns of Charles's real family name, Dr Manette struggles hard whether or not to let his daughter marry the son of his enemy. It is Lucie's "vigorous tenacity of love"³ which softens Dr Manette's heart, uplifts and keeps him from falling into the vicious cycle of oppression and revenge and thereby transcending the linear development of history. One may even say that it is Lucie and Charles's mother who really mend the relationship between the Evrémondes and the

Manettes.

Lucie is portrayed as an angelic figure. For Dr Manette, “she was the golden thread that united him to a Past beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his misery” (*Tale* 75). One should not forget that Sydney Carton sacrifices his life to save Charles only for the sake of Lucie.

In contrast to the two angelic figures, Madame Defarge has turned into a “tigress” by her vindictiveness and thereby falls into the cycle of “tyranny breeding tyranny.” Her revengeful passion against the Evrémondés is not very different from that of Dr Manette in the concluding lines of his account in the Bastille: “it is nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her that his wife was to be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live” (*Tale* 356). The only difference is that Dr Manette is cured by Lucie’s love and therefore able to transcend the cycle of history whereas Madame Defarge is overwhelmed by her vindictive instinct and is therefore trapped in same vicious cycle.

Compared with Lucie, Madame Defarge can be seen as a demonic figure. While Lucie is light and delicate, Madame Defarge is strong-featured and dark. Miss Poss calls her “the wife of Lucifer” from her appearance (*Tale* 361). Lucie exercises a benevolent enchantment on her father and the three young men Charles, Sydney and Stryver, which brings about the reconciliation of the Evrémondés and the Manettes. Madame Defarge, on the other hand, has some kind of “terrible enchantment” on such French revolutionists as her husband, the Vengeance, Jacques Three, the Road-mender turned Wood-sawyer, and the Juryman. Once the Bastille falls down, Madame Defarge somehow takes charge of the revolution’s direction and uses her enchantment to manipulate her comrades for her own revengeful end. It is her kind of ferocious hatred against the nobles that prevented a real historical breakthrough within the French Revolution. The French Revolutionists defeated the nobles but only to replace them as the new oppressors.

Before leaving the female characters in *A Tale of Two Cities*, one

must not forget the roles of Madame Defarge's sister and Miss Poss. Although powerless before the Evrémonde brothers, Madame Defarge's sister can be seen as a fatal woman who triggers the entire action of the story. On the one hand, it is partly because of her that Madame Defarge becomes overwhelmed by her pitiless and vindictive passion. On the other hand, it is remarkable that the relentless Madame Defarge is defeated by Miss Poss, a symbol of love and loyalty. Miss Poss as sister of John Barsad also plays an important role in the rescue of Charles. Thus, it is not altogether presumptuous to say that it is the female members of the three families who shape the development of history in the novel.

It is not by means of a bloody revolution but by love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice that Dickens perceives as the instruments to transcend the curse of linear history. As Michael Timko puts it, the novel is a revolt against the pessimistic views in Carlyle's *The French Revolution* by highlighting human beings' potential and capacity for love. The resurrection of a heavenly Paris as envisaged by the dying Carton therefore symbolizes the love and self-sacrifice necessary for the realization of a genuine utopia. Hope is placed more on women than on men to put society on the anti-historical route.

Bai Hua in *Country of Women* also advocates a sort of universal love instead of a revolution as a solution to Chinese social problems. But this kind of universal love can be achieved only by anti-historical means, namely, using the past as a model for emulation.

As though unfolding a tale of two worlds, *Country of Women* juxtaposes the modern and primitive worlds for the reader to compare and contrast. The action of the story also jumps between these two worlds. The modern and civilized world is represented by Chinese society under the Cultural Revolution, whereas the primitive world is represented by a minority community, Mosuo, which inhabits an area along the border of the Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.

It is perhaps not possible to fathom the real intention of Mao Zedong (毛澤東 1893-1976) when he initiated the Cultural Revolution. Amidst the overwhelming propaganda literature of that period, it is possible to find support for the interpretation that the Cultural Revolu-

tion was (at least initially) an attempt to realize the communist end-state in China. According to orthodox Marxist theory, social advancement is determined by elements of the basic structure such as economic growth and productivity. The Cultural Revolution, by definition, however, tried to change society through a revolution at the level of the superstructure (culture), a departure from orthodox Marxist social theory. This attempt therefore can be seen as an iconoclastic approach and in this sense the Cultural Revolution represents a utopian revolution.⁴ Of course, Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution has not reached the final utopian stage. At the most, it represents that of the transition from the mundane to the utopian. The fact that the Cultural Revolution failed to attain the communist end-state implies that this utopian revolution was not practical. Thus *Country of Women* dramatizes how impractical the Cultural Revolution was.

The matriarchal Mosuo society, on the other hand, stands for a primitive or uncivilized form of utopia. For hundreds of years, the Mosuo people have led their lives according to their own cultural traditions and have not been significantly influenced by the surrounding patriarchal societies. Starting from the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), the “central Chinese governments” of different dynasties had sent their officials to rule the community with a view to converting it into a patriarchal society but had never succeeded. The community has become an anti-historical symbol: a human society that is immune from the linear development of history.

According to the editorial of the *People's Daily*, June 1, 1966, the Cultural Revolution was said to be a war between the bourgeois ruling class and the proletarians. The ultimate aim of this war is to “abolish all the old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits created by the exploiting class, which had contaminated the proletarians for several thousand years.” One of the various ways to achieve that ultimate aim is through the study of politics and economics whereby one can “summon the most furious and disgusting emotions of human being and the roots of hatred that represent self-interest to the battlefield for them to be opposed” (1). Ironically, in order to get rid of the roots of hatred, the Cultural Revolutionists have to suppress their instinct of love. In

Country of Women, however, it is dramatized that even the Cultural Revolution, being “the great revolution that touches deep inside man’s soul,”⁵ finds itself completely inadequate to deal with the enemies that the Revolution aims to summon and oppose. At the same time, when love was suppressed, human relationship deteriorated under the domination of self-interest.

Although the story of *Country of Women* covers nearly the entire period of the Cultural Revolution, it has not faithfully recorded actual historical incidents taking place during those ten years. Just like Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Bai Hua did not intend to write a faithful history of a particular uprising, but to unfold the history from a special perspective. Inspired by the official purpose of the Cultural Revolution, Bai Hua focuses his attention on manifestations of human nature in the ten years in which it took place. In so doing, his novel presents an inventory of human relationships, especially those between man and woman in China under particular conditions of the Cultural Revolution whereby he reflects on how human nature remains unimproved despite that vigorous and formidable political movement.

The novel is composed of a series of stories about relationships between man and woman when love is absent. The characters coming to the front stage include unfaithful wives, wives who sell their bodies for the sake of their husbands, high officials who take advantage of their positions to obtain sexual gain, and prisoners who dare to engage in sexual intercourse with other prisoners even though under close supervision and subject to examination during custody. These characters may come from different backgrounds and social classes but they all fall prey to their own or others’ sex instincts.

Gu Shuxian and Liu Tiemei are examples of “unorthodox” wives. They do not love their husbands nor do their husbands love them. Instead of sensibly agreeing to a divorce, they add grievances and exacerbate the hostilities in their husband-wife relationship by preventing their husbands from developing extra-marital love affair while freely indulging their own sexual desires.

Gu Shuxian is vice captain of the Work Team appointed by the Chinese central government to implement the Cultural Revolution in

Mosuo. Her husband married her not for love but for sexual need. Early in her political career, she was appointed as the government representative in a subsidiary school of the army as recognition for her achievement in investigating and uncovering the infidelities of her fellow students. Although she is famous for her ability to defend the institution of marriage, she finds herself totally helpless before the Mosuo women. Despite the vigorous and intensive “revolutionary” programs, her attempt to establish the modern conception of monogamy in the community is totally futile. She is instead influenced by the “shameless women” and finds her long suppressed sexual desire being aroused. In the process of leaving the Mosuo community, she “suddenly realizes that she has a certain psychological inclination of envying [the Musuo women] . . . She is startled that the [sexual] desire she experienced years ago suddenly would overwhelm her entire body and mind.” She loses all her self-discipline and cannot help grasping the hands of the young guard sitting besides her and “pulls it towards her body while rubbing it with force . . .” (*Country of Women* 26).

Bai Hua uses ellipsis to suggest the actions following this scene, but he overtly dramatizes the manner in which Liu Tiemei commits adultery. Although Liu guards her husband jealously lest he engage in an exterior love affair, she seduces her colleague and even kills his wife so that she can possess the young man all by herself.

Contrasting Gu and Liu are two unnamed wives who represent totally submissive spouses. The first is married to an old and crippled “revolutionary hero.” In order to satisfy her husband’s urge to have sex with a woman of western origin, she assists her husband to hold an Eurasian woman down so that he can rape the latter in her presence. The second wife’s husband is an inmate in a prison-farm. She offers herself to gratify the sexual desires of the head of the prison-farm in return for some special treatments for her husband. It is not clear whether these two wives act as they do in order to express their love for their mates. It is certain, however, that their husbands make use of their wives for their own self-satisfaction.

There are two more wives who deserve special attention. The first is the wife of a deputy mayor. Early in the Cultural Revolution, she

leaves her husband in response to the Revolution. In the rally for denouncing her husband, she comes forward and discloses all her husband's "counter-revolutionary" sayings and behavior. As a result, she earns the reputation of a woman warrior of firm will. But after the Cultural Revolution concludes, she simply comes back and resumes her former position as the lady of the deputy mayor who has gained back his reputation and position.

The second wife is another outstanding woman warrior who has made impressive performances in all the important political movements in the history of the PRC. This woman warrior, however, forces a prisoner to marry her because the prisoner, as a famous scientist with distinguished overseas connections, is given a cozy house for the purpose of receiving foreign visitors. For these two woman warriors, the relationship between husband and wife is simply a matter of convenience.

When a history of the Cultural Revolution is dominated by these woman characters, it implies that the Chinese society at large during the Cultural Revolution has become a "Country of Women." This is a "Country of Women" in which love is absent. In a sense, the Cultural Revolution at least succeeds in bringing about a cultural breakthrough. Love, however, the most fundamental element of a good relationship between man and woman, is eliminated by the Cultural Revolution. As a result, such traditional notions as "husband/man comes before wife/woman," "husband/man and wife/woman should be complementary and in harmony," are overturned. But the new ideology that replaces them is not any loftier but serves only to reduce the husband-wife or man-woman relationships to a matter of animal sex or mere benefit.

Like the modern Country of Women as represented during the Cultural Revolution, Mosuo society is also dominated by women, except that under the institution of polyandry "there is no marriage but only love" (*Country of Women* 287). There exist no family tragedies, no adultery or raping, no sex in exchange for benefit, no self-interest in the name of love as we find in the civilized world. It is true that sexual relationships in the Mosuo society might be even looser, but they are nevertheless fair. Every man and woman enjoys the same fair chance as

anyone else to obtain his or her choice of sexual partner. Compared with the ugly aspects of man-woman relationships in the modern Country of Women, Mosuo society can be seen as a living utopia. It is a place where “all the old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits created by the exploiting class, which had contaminated the proletarians for several thousand years” are absent. The inhabitants do not have “the most furious and disgusting emotions of human being and the roots of hatred that represent self-interest” that Cultural Revolutionists aimed to summon to the social battlefield. Above all, the man-woman relationship is purely a matter of love without any other considerations.

While domestic love was seen as a matter of bourgeois sentiment and therefore an obstacle to the purposes of the Cultural Revolution, Bai Hua seemed to suggest that more love is needed by the people of modern China. Bai Hua demonstrated that when love is displaced from human nature, the female species could be even more aggressive and destructive than the male counterpart. Thus, the Mosuo kind of “universal love” is perhaps a better alternative than any revolution to improve human nature. Instead of looking forward to an unknown communist end-state, China should look back to the past and the indigenous Chinese culture for solutions to its problems.

Alternatively, the Mosuo society is perhaps the true reflection of the communist end-state when “all the old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits created by the exploiting class” are eliminated. As such, love but not the Cultural Revolution can lead China to this “communist end-state.”

Dickens’s novel seems to end happily. But Lucie and Charles are retiring into Soho which is itself a product of the cycle of history. The anti-historical reaction takes effect only at the micro level of their own families. The kind of social injustice and oppression common in France before the French Revolution existed as well in England. Perhaps the only real escape from history is Carton’s way to the “better land” where there is “no Time” and “no trouble” (*Tale* 369). Similarly, the Mosuo society provides no real solution for China. The fact that the hero of the story fails to accept the practice of “common lover/wife” thereby fail-

ing to integrate himself into the society suggests that this anti-historical approach is not attainable unless and until another "Cultural Revolution" succeeds in reshaping our concept of love into one of the Mosuo kind.

NOTES

¹ The novel was first published in *Haineiwai wenxue (Literature: Local and Abroad)*, vol. 1 (Feb. 1988) 4-111.

² For a summary of critical reception of *A Tale of Two Cities*, see Ruth Glancy, *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, 11-18.

³ The expression is originally used to describe Miss Poss when she tries to stop Madame Defarge from striking herself. See *Tale* 363.

⁴ J. M. Patrick defines utopia as its author's iconoclastic criticism of reality, see his "Iconoclasm, the Complement of Utopianism."

⁵ See the Editorial of *Remin ribao*, June 2, 1966, 1.

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