Yan Fu 嚴復 between Tradition and Modernity

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Introduction

- 嚴復 (1853-1921) was classically trained yet translated influential Victorian texts of science, philosophy, and social science into elegant Classical Chinese.
- He was also trained in math and science, so his translations had scientific validity.
- The Classical Chinese made the texts acceptable to learned Chinese of the day. Also, Yan Fu thought Classical Chinese was the most suitable medium for rendering these acclaimed texts.
Introduction

• Other late Qing scholars (late 19\textsuperscript{th} & early 20\textsuperscript{th} cent) also discussed these new ideas, such as Darwinism, from the West, but Yan Fu was distinguished by his scientific training.

• Yan Fu reflected on the new ideas \textit{vis-à-vis} traditional ideas, especially Daoist ideas.

• At first, he regarded Daoism (Laozi) as proto-democratic but insufficiently progressive.

• Later, he came to appreciate Liezi’s & Zhuangzi’s, Daoist proto-notions of freedom
Introduction

• Yan’s reflections on John Stuart Mills’ *On Liberty vis-a-vis* the ideas of Zhuangzi and Liezi reveal precedents for the ideas of freedom and individualism in China—the Chinese gov denies this, viewing these ideas as imports.

• Subsequently, the horrors of World War I gave Yan Fu grave misgivings about the dark side of Victorian faith in progress and modern technology
Overview

• 1) Yan Fu was trained in the Chinese classics.
• 2) He studied modern math and science.
• 3) He saw similarities in human thought and issues across time and civilization, which allowed basic comparisons to be made.
• 4) He translated Victorian Western thought and science into elegant Classical Chinese.
Overview

5) Yan Fu later wrote reflective commentaries on the *Laozi* (評點老子 (1905)) & the *Zhuangzi* (莊子評點 (1916)).

6) Yan Fu viewed Herbert Spencer’s (1820-1903) notion of the “Unknowable” as very much like Laozi’s (fl. 6th cent. B.C.E.)’s ideas of *Dao* 道 and *Wu* 無.
Survey of Yan Fu’s Themes

- 1) Evolution and Ethics
- 2) Evolution and Dissolution
- 3) Origin of Democracy
- 4) Evolution and Democracy
- 5) *Laissez-faire* (n. 放任政策, adj. 放任主義的) and *Wu-wei* (無為, non-intentional action)
Yan Fu’s Themes

- 6) Freedom and Individualism
- 7) The Fruits of Freedom
- 8) The Roots of Freedom and the Moral Sense
- 9) Risks of Technology
Yan Fu’s Childhood

• Yan Fu was born in Fujian 福建 in 1853. Coastal culture.

• In childhood, he was educated in the Chinese classics, and came to stress Han learning 漢學 and Song learning 宋學.

• ‘Han learning’ 漢學 meant concentrating on factual truth, methodology, and mastering the cultural tradition. (Empirical induction.)
Childhood Classical Learning

- ‘Song learning’ 宋学 was synthetic, philosophic, ethical and generally social in approach. (Logical deduction.)
- These Han and Song approaches to learning provided Yan with a framework for grasping modern Western thought.
- Yan Fu’s classical learning would guide him in his life project of translating the new Victorian texts of British philosophy and social science.
Fujian Shipyards School

- Yan entered the Fuzhou Shipyards School in 1866.
- He placed first on the school entrance exam (for his essay on *filial piety* in Classical Chinese!).
- At the school, he studied English, arithmetic, geometry, algebra, analytic geometry, trigonometry, physics, mechanics, chemistry, geology, astronomy, navigation, etc.
- Yan was better educated in modern math and science than were the vast majority of late Qing intelligentsia.
Navigation and the UK

- In 1877, Yan Fu went to the UK on a special govt scholarship to study naval science in Portsmouth and later in Greenwich.
- At this time, he marveled at the UK’s development and power, and started to mull over the key factors that had contributed to make the UK such an advanced country.
- Yan decided to focus on the key texts of England’s philosophy, natural science, social science, & logic, & to translate some of them into Chinese.
From Study to Translation

- In 1894, Yan Fu began to translate the basic books of modern British thought and science: *Evolution and Ethics* by T.H. Huxley (1898), *The Wealth of Nations* by A. Smith (1902), *On Liberty* by J.S. Mill (1903), *A History of Politics* by E. Jenks (1904), *Logic* by J.S. Mill (1905), *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu (1905-09) (probably from an English translation), etc.
Attitude to Learning

- Yan immediately felt close to Herbert Spencer because Spencer’s attitude to learning stated in *Principles of Sociology* reminded Yan Fu of the attitude expressed in the classics the *Great Learning* 大學 & the *Mean* 中庸:
Attitude to Learning

The *Great Learning & Doctrine of the Mean* affirm: “sincerity of purpose & upright mind 誠意正心” in learning 學問 and pursuit of knowledge 致知.

- Spencer stresses being “free of bias” and having “intellectual honesty “ in learning and the pursuit of knowledge
Yan Fu on Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* 1894-1895

- In *Ev & Ethics*, Huxley (1825-1895) contrasts altruistic human ethics vs. ruthless natural law.
- Yan Fu prefers Spencer’s ethics of self-interest, which is consistent with the law of evolution.
- Still, Yan Fu likes Huxley’s notion of a global intellectual history, and idea of trans-cultural unity of human thought.
- Yan Fu: The early philosophers around the world had faced the same basic human problems, hence he saw a basis for comparing them and for cross-cultural discussion on basic issues.
Yan on Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*

In his commentary on *Ev & Ethics*, Yan Fu identifies a link between the East and Spencer, noting that Spencer’s idea of the “Unknowable” (不可思議) resembles some ideas of *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Buddhism, & Advaita Vedanta).

- E.g., Yan Fu notes that the *Laozi* & the *Book of Change* 易經 both present things as arising from Non-being (無) while for Spencer the world emerges from the “Unknowable.”
Yan on Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*

Where Huxley criticizes the moral indifference of Spencer’s universe, Yan Fu defends Spencer by quoting Laozi, ch. 5:

- *Heaven and earth are not humane, they treat humanity as straw dogs;*
- *The wise are not humane, they treat humanity as straw dogs.*
Yan Fu on Huxley’s Ev & Ethics

• *Straw dogs were figures used respectfully in ceremonies -- but tossed aside and trampled under foot afterwards.

• Yan Fu: Laozi and Spencer didn’t mean that nature is simply heedless and brutal, just that nature is not biased (for the good or against the bad) and acts by impartial law (as should the sage/ruler who should treat all subjects equally and fairly).
Yan on Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*

- To Yan: Huxley’s idea of morality is artificial & limited; Spencer’s view is natural & broad.
- To Yan, Spencer’s law of Evolution explains the earth, the sky, and humankind.
- Spencer’s law of Evolution justifies the self-assertion and enlightened self interest of economic theory.
- Evolutionism thus supports social Darwinism – i.e., which would inaugurate a revolution in values in China at the time.
Yan Fu turns to the *Laozi*

- In 1903, Yan Fu was persuaded by a student to write down his critical comments in a critical edition the *Laozi* (評點老子, 1905).
- He had just translated most of John Stuart Mill’s (1806-1873) *Logic* and published Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* and Mill’s *On Liberty*.
- Given the connections between *Laozi*’s and Spencer’s thought, Yan Fu regarded *Laozi*’s thought as vital and timely.
Spencer and *Laozi*: philosophic parallels

- In *Synthetic Philosophy*, vol. I, *First Principles*, (1862), Spencer says a certain power stands behind the sensible phenomena: it is “the Unknowable” (Unk), whence comes the Law of Evolution.

- To Spencer, the Unknowable grounds science’s indefinable basic terms: Cause, Space, Time, Matter, Motion, & the Infinite, and it supports both the Absolute & the relative of knowledge.
Spencer and *Laozi*: philosophic parallels

- Spencer: phenomena (effects of the Unknowable) are discriminated and known by likeness and unlikeness, classified into vivid (objective) or faint (subjective), and assigned to categories of space, time, matter, motion, or force (resistance).

Persistence of Force 氣 allows for the conservation of mass and energy, the balance and transformation of force, the necessity of cosmic rhythm, and the operations of Evolution and Dissolution.
Laozi & Spencer: philosophic parallels

- *Laozi*, ch. 1, famously reads:
- *The Dao (Way) that can be spoken of, is not the Dao (Way) itself.*
- *The name that can be given, is not the name itself.*
- *The Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth, the Named is the mother of the myriad things...*
Yan Fu on Laozi & Spencer

• Yan notes that, like Spencer’s Unknowable, *Dao* 道 (Way) is absolute and unconditional while phenomena are relative and conditioned.

Yan Fu: “’Dao itself’ and the ‘name itself’ are not relative or conditional. Thus, they cannot be explained directly in words. *That is why Dao is the Unknowable* (不可思議) .”
Aside

• Perhaps we can think of the *Dao* (Way) as “the course... “ as in “the course of nature/events/human events/the river,” etc.

• This helps to underscore that *Dao* is fluid and inherent in the flow of events and thus cannot be specified. It is not a set ‘way’ but a coursing flow of .... and has a verbal (vs.nominative) dimension

• Human beings can adopt courses of response to events, which can be spelled out, but they are of limited scope and applicability—and create side effects if not collateral damage...
Yan Fu on Laozi

• Yan Fu notes that Laozi’s myriad things 萬物 can be said to emerge from the inchoate Dao by the law of evolution, that human society evolves by the same law,

• and that the inexhaustible Dao hosts the evolution of the myriad things to ever higher levels of heterogeneity, complexity, and organization (though entropy ultimately always draws them back to dissolution).
Yan Fu on Laozi

• Aside:
• On Yan Fu’s Darwinian/Daoist analysis, he suggests that Confucianism attempts to violate the law of evolution by trying to freeze their favored archaic socio-political order (and thus stifling change and creativity).
Yan Fu on *Laozi*

- *Laozi*, ch. 2, presents the dilemma of human judgment, i.e., that the standards of human judgment are inherently relative: beauty, goodness, being, ease, length, height, etc...
- Paraphrase: When everyone agrees that beauty is beauty, then ugliness appears. When everyone agrees that goodness is goodness, then evil arises... (because such agreement prioritizes one form of beauty/goodness, thus nullifying other forms of beauty/goodness, etc.).
Yan Fu on Laozi

• For Yan Fu, the solution is to consciously “grasp emptiness, expand the mind, & widen one’s outlook,” in order to observe the transformations and things in their relativity.

人惟自知拘虛大其心擴其目以觀化而後見對待之物.

• (-- to view things in the perspective of Dao, as intimated in Laozi, ch. 1.)
Yan Fu on Laozi

• “In this way, one makes things equal (齊物). This is the point of enlightenment.” (See Zhuangzi, ch. 2, “齊物論 On Making Things Equal”).

• Spencer was unaware of this ancient Daoist approach to knowledge, which was based on meditation and the release of mind from the limited ordinary categories of thought.
Yan Fu on Laozi

Laozi ch. 5 reads:

- *Heaven and earth are not humane, they treat humanity as straw dogs;*
- *the wise are not humane, they treat humanity as straw dogs.*
- In his comments on this chapter, Yan Fu calls this the “Original statement of evolution. These four propositions cover Darwin’s theory perfectly. He who models nature would be the utmost ruler.”
Yan Fu on Laozi

- Laozi, ch. 40:
  - Reversal 反 is the action of Dao.
  - Compliance is the function of Dao.
  - The myriad things are produced from being;
  - Being is produced from non-being.”
Yan Fu on Laozi

- Yan Fu comments:
- Without reversal there can be no duration.
- Without compliance, there can be no fruition.
- Non-being in this sense is not absolute non-being (the Unk).
- -- Note: This is relative non-being. Non-being has these two levels in Daoism.
Laozi vis-a-vis Spencer

• Spencer notes two movements in nature:
• 1) Evolution (i.e., coagulation of matter with decreasing motion) and 2) Dissolution (with rising motion).
• To Yan Fu, Laozi recognizes both movements but stresses Dissolution (into potential) at the expense of Evolution (in complexity), like in ch. 40, in which, as we just saw, reversal is stressed—probably to counter the human tendency to expect endless development and progress,
Origin of Democracy

• On Laozi, ch. 37, Yan Fu notes that Montesquieu (1689-1755) says, “Democracies use morality, monarchies use ritual, while despotic governments rule by punishment.”

• Yan Fu: Laozi also has the idea of democracy, but China did not have democratic rule, so Laozi could not see any concrete example/model for implementing democracy.
Origin of Democracy

• *Laozi* seeks a root for *moral rule* in monarchy. But, since the feudal monarchies invariably were corrupt, he has to imagine an archaic age when rulers did not overly elevate themselves or debase the common people.
• To *Laozi*, such an age would have the stirrings of democracy.
• So much for Confucius’ beloved sage kings.
Origin of Democracy

- *Laozi ch. 39* reads: “The precious is rooted in the common, the lofty is based on the lowly.”
  Yan: Thus, the relationship between ruler and ruled should be based on equality and trust.
- Yan adds, a worthy ruler should adopt *laissez-faire* policies, like non-intentional action 無為, so the common people could enjoy a fulfilling life-- like that depicted in *Laozi*, ch. 80. (More on *laissez-faire* later.)
Origin of Democracy

- *Laozi*, ch. 80: In archaic times, ‘states were small and lightly populated,’ where people enjoyed ‘simple delicacies,’ ‘elegant dress,’ ‘happy... residences,’ and ‘pleasant customs.’

- “Even though the next state was in sight and its crowing cocks and barking dogs could be heard, the people did not travel to & fro in their lives.”

- To Yan Fu, this was like the image of archaic democracy sketched by Montesquieu. “Indeed, the *Laozi* text might be used for democratic governance!” (He is probably thinking of a vague 民主 popular rule without elections necessarily.)
Evolution and Democracy

• Yan Fu: *Laozi* understands evolution and democracy, but he doesn’t unite these two ideas. He doesn’t embrace progress, but counsels primitivism & dismisses knowledge.

• For example, *Laozi* ch. 37 advises people to seek to restrain the transformations of the myriad things by a “nameless simplicity” 無名之樸, i.e., *Dao*.

• Yan Fu compares this sort of restraint to Rousseau’s thought: “*Laozi* wants to stifle change *via* a nameless simplicity. This was Rousseau’s idea.”
Yan Fu: the teachings in *Laozi*, chs. 18-20 contrast sharply with evolutionary thought:

- In ch. 18, the *Laozi* claims humanity 仁, appropriateness 義, loyalty 忠, & filiality 孝 arise only after people have deviated from *Dao*.
- Ch. 19 says that by “cutting off sagacity and abandoning wisdom,” the people’s life will improve. And, ch. 20 says that by dismissing learning, one may free oneself of fear of disaster.
Laozi’s Primitivism

For Laozi: Good rule would return society to a primitive state, by getting rid of complex forms of life and returning to simplicity.

Yan Fu criticizes Laozi’s dismissal of knowledge: “The sort of freedom that comes from dismissing learning is not true freedom from care.... When chased, the African ostrich buries its head in the sand in order not to see the harm which may come. Isn’t this like the Laozi’s dismissal of knowledge?”
Laozi’s Primitivism

- To Yan Fu, the *Laozi* denies advanced human culture even before it even had gotten started!!
- In fact, human culture naturally evolves from plain to elegant, from pure to mixed, just as heaven & earth produce a multifaceted world.
- A return to the simple and pure would be like trying to force the waters of a stream back to the source in the mountain. Impossible.
- Ironically, such thinking “contravenes nature” (ch. 48).
Not Primitivism: Freedom

- Yan Fu: Good rule would let human affairs flow naturally, & not seek to restrict this flow by nameless simplicity or attempt to force it backwards.
- Freedom would allow for progress and improvement of people’s lives. “Thus, for all sorts of modern rule, nothing is more precious than freedom.”
- Under conditions of freedom, creatures obtain their perfection; under natural selection, it is the most well-adapted that survive.
- Under such conditions, the age of Great Peace would arrive of its own accord.
Zhuangzi and Freedom

• On Zhuangzi 莊子, ch. 11, “Let It Be, Leave it Alone,” Yan Fu comments (1916):

• “Before the French Revolution, there were some theories like “Let it be, Leave it alone,” such as laissez-faire et laissez passer taught by François Quesnay (1694-1774). Rousseau (1712-1778) was not the only one who urged abandoning laws and regulations and returning to primitive origins to establish freedom and equality. Their ideas are like the those of the scholar of the Lacquer Garden, Zhuangzi.”
Laizze-faire and Wu-wei 無為

- In notes on *The Wealth of Nations* (Yuan Fu 原富), Yan Fu agrees with Adam Smith: when freed of intervention, domestic economic activity and international trade will lead to increased prosperity and stability.
- Yan Fu relates this theory to Zhuangzi’s teaching of non-action 無為 in ch. 11: This idea appeared in 18th century France and was called *laissez-faire* and *laissez-passer*, freedom without restrictions. François Quesnay (known as Europe’s Confucius) called this “the supreme principle.”
Laizze-faire and Wu-wei 無為

• Yan: According to laissez-faire (wu-wei), since each man is the best judge of his own interest, the best way secure happiness for the largest number of citizens would be to lessen restrictions on their efforts and initiatives. Gov’s best policy would be to not interfere with the natural operations of economic activities.
Wu-wei into Laizze-faire

- Interestingly, Quesnay’s revolutionary idea of 
  *laissez-faire* (which influenced Adam Smith’s free-market theory) was itself derived from the old Chinese idea of *wu-wei*. Indeed, *laissez-faire* was the French translation of *wu-wei*, which had appeared in China before 300 B.C.E.

- The eminent Zhuangzi commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312 C.E.) explains that *wu-wei* means letting everything do what it naturally does, so its nature will be satisfied.
Freedom and Individualism

Yan Fu holds that Western Freedom (a la John Stuart Mill) includes two aspects:

1) Respect for the freedom of others,
2) Maintaining the integrity of self.

• To Yan Fu, 1) corresponds to Zhuangzi’s idea of zai-you 在宥 (independent spirit), and
• 2) Yang Zhu 楊朱’s (ca. 440- 360 B.C.E.) idea of wei-wo 為我 (acting to benefit/ maintain oneself).
Yan Fu: Freedom as zai-you in Zhuangzi means an ‘independent spirit’ (vs. dai-you 待宥 dependent).

Yan notes two meanings of Zai-you: 1) a personal meaning: a spirit free of dualities and restraints—beyond life and death, beauty and ugliness, etc. 2) a political-economic meaning: laissez-faire:

A Daoist ruler would use laissez-faire policies granting people the freedom to develop. Thus entrusted, the people would cultivate a sense of duty and obligation, and be responsible.
Recently it was asked if these Chinese notions of freedom could be classified according to I. Berlin’s positive freedom (to) and negative freedom (from): Zhuangzi’s ‘independent spirit’ and Yang Zhu’s ‘working for oneself’ appear to fall under the category of positive freedom, and *wu-wei* with respect to administration seems to fall under negative freedom.
Zhuangzi and Freedom

• On Zhuangzi, ch. 7, “Fit for Emperors and Kings,” Yan Fu says: Zhuangzi holds that a ruler should let the people be free and have the chance to cultivate themselves... Guo Xiang says,

• “Enlightened rulers who let the people improve themselves are deserving to be emperors.”

• To Yan Fu, this view is consistent with recent European political theory. All leaders should let their people be free, for then they will do their duty and meet their obligations. Their livelihoods will thus improve.
Yang Zhu and Individualism

- Yan Fu regards Yang Zhu’s idea of *wei-wo* 為我 as an expression of individualism.
- He values Yang Zhu’s theory and disagrees sharply with Mencius’ 孟子 (371-289 B.C.E.) criticism that “Yang Zhu would not sacrifice a hair from his body to save the empire.”
- To Yan Fu, Mencius distorts Yang Zhu’s view and conceals its original meaning.
Yang Zhu and Individualism

• Yan Fu: If people were to pursue Yang Zhu’s ideal of *wei-wo* while cultivating themselves, the world would become orderly of itself.

• As Guo Xiang said in 300 C.E., if people were to focus on their own cultivation and not think about putting the world in order, the world would naturally become orderly.
Yang Zhu and Individualism

• Yan explains: Self-cultivation means acting to benefit oneself. If people understood this, they would all cultivate themselves, take care of themselves, and be happy about their lives.
• Yan: Mencius’ criticism of Yang Zhu reveals his own shallowness.
In Yan Fu’s view, Yang Zhu’s and Zhuangzi’s call to let the people be free to do as they please would grant them freedom of choice and action.

It would also bring Confucian hypocrisy to an end and open the door to a new, sincere humanity 仁 and appropriateness 義.
As noted, for Yan Fu, true freedom should stand on self-cultivation and sympathy (altruism).

A truly free person would cultivate himself while controlling himself and respecting others.

At times, a free person would willingly make sacrifices in order to uphold humanity 仁 and appropriateness 義.

Hence, true freedom would support Confucius’ core values, which Yan regards as trans-cultural truths.
Roots of True Freedom

• Here, again, the Unknowable comes into play.
• One’s inner life is root of one’s moral sense & a refuge from suffering. To Yan, one’s inner life should be grounded in the Unknowable.
• Such a grounded inner life would ensure that one doesn’t just follow the winds of society and other external forces -- but follows one’s conscience.
• Since the Unknowable is deeper than causality, it also grounds the possibility of freedom.
Risks of Technology

• During World War I, Yan Fu felt deeply distressed by the brutal violence of the so-called advanced modern nations.

• He accepted the Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s critique of the exploitive and destructive potential of technology, for horrors truly had come to pass in the brave new world of mechanized warfare: tanks, machine guns, trench warfare, gas attacks, aerial bombardments, massive warships, etc.
Risks of Technology

- What’s worse, the new military tactics were aimed at not just defeating the enemy’s army but at scorching the enemy’s lands and savagely decimating his or her people.

- Zhuangzi’s old critique of clever sages who used “calculative thinking” to devise locks and chains became a mirror for Yan Fu to reflect on the destructive military power that had since been unleashed by modern science. (ref ZZ, ch. 10, “Rifling Trunks.” Others?)
Risks of Technology

- In later life, Yan Fu realized the dark side of science and technology and lost his early confidence in evolution and progress.
- He increasingly accepted *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*’s Daoist perspective— and retired in seclusion.
- At the end of his life, he wrote, “Idling in my pavilion, I watch the clouds and listen to the rain... or kill time by practicing calligraphy... I rest here like dry wood and dead ash... I nearly departed...” (1921).
Contemporary Messages

• Yan Fu’s warning about the dark side of progress and modern science and technology is all the more prescient in this day of -- not only government spying and military drones but climate change, air, water, and land pollution, dwindling fresh water, deforestation, rising extinctions, you name it.... In a word, better living through chemistry...
Contemporary Messages

• There is the related, further Daoist warning about the rise of the narrow, linear, goal-oriented mindset that uses calculative thinking to pursue progress and heedlessly push this science and technology for their own sake...

• Such “device-mindedness” (*jixin* 機心) only sees things/human beings in instrumental perspective -- and does not appreciate them holistically in their ecological nexus.
Contemporary Messages

• Yan Fu’s reminder that the ancient Daoists discussed ideas of freedom reveals that the idea of freedom is not just a Western import but is deeply rooted traditional Chinese philosophy and culture.
Contemporary Messages

• Yan Fu’s message, following Laozi and Zhuangzi, of emptying one’s mind and spirit in order to see meditatively the arising of phenomena (natural and human) and the formation of other perspectives-- while upholding humanity and appropriateness -- offers a prolegomena to the practice of sensitive, fruitful intercourse and dialogue in this age of rapid globalization.
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