Bringing the World Home

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CHAPTER 2

Appropriations
Another Look at Yan Fu and Western Ideas

He who unconsciously designates himself as a native-place writer has, in fact, been driven into exile by his native place before he even begins to take up his pen to write native-place literature. Life having driven him to an alien location, all the writer can do is recall his "father’s garden," although it is a garden that no longer exists. He recalls the things of his native place that no longer exist, because they are more comforting to him than those things that clearly do exist, but to which he can no longer have access.

Lu Xun, “Dao yan” (Introduction) to “Xiaoshuo erji” (The second anthology of fiction)

It isn’t easy to turn your back on the past. It isn’t something you can decide to do just like that. It is something you have to arm yourself for, or grief will ambush and destroy you. That is why I hold on to the image of the garden trampled until it becomes ground—it is a small thing, but it helps.

Indar in V. S. Naipaul’s A Bend in the River

Writing in the period between 1902 and 1904, Jin Songcen (1873–1947) and Zeng Pu (1871–1935) began the third chapter of Niehai hua (Flower in a sea of retribution), which is populated throughout with transparently disguised historical figures, with this piece of bitter self-reflection about the relative status of Chinese and Western learning:

Those gathered at the table talked of many things, most of which concerned politics and learning in the West. Wenqing sat to one side and listened silently, with no clue whatsoever as to how to enter the conversation. He was inwardly ashamed, and thought to himself: “Although I
attained the very top degree in the imperial examination and would have thought that my fame would resound through the realm, who could have predicted that I would come here [to Shanghai] and be surrounded by talk of foreign learning? I really never even dreamt such a thing could happen! If I look at things from this new perspective, I can’t count on my official degree at all, so I’d better learn something about the West and get involved with foreign learning. . . .”

Thus the authors introduce their highly educated protagonist, Jin Wenqing, to what they claim to be the Shanghai of 1868. That is the year in which, Hong Jun (1840–1893), on whom the character Jin is based, placed first in the palace examination, gaining the coveted title of *zhuangyuan* (*optimus*, or first place in the triennial metropolitan examinations). Because of his new celebrity, Jin is invited by a reform official (a thinly disguised Xue Fucheng) to dinner at the famous Shanghai restaurant Yipinxiang. There Jin is introduced to the other diners, who include such eminent Yangwu personages as Li Shuchang (1837–1897) and Ma Jianzhong (1844–1900). Jin quickly realizes, *zhuangyuan* notwithstanding, that he is out of his depth in this company. The astringent tone of Jin’s meditation on his inadequacies, however, no doubt more closely reflects the period in which the novel was actually written, more than thirty years after the events depicted were supposed to have taken place. By the time of this later period, even those who had received the most careful instruction in the orthodox tradition had increasingly come to question the authority of Chinese learning. The contrasting, yet oddly consonant, epigraphs above from Lu Xun and V. S. Naipaul together provide a vivid sense of the resulting tension. It is a tension between the ultimately futile wish to restore one’s old situation, on the one hand, and the equally powerful need to snuff out its very memory, precisely because of the pain entailed in imagining that which can never be restored.

Jin’s feelings of inadequacy, essentially an anxiety about the extent of the range of new possibilities, reflects a persisting paradox about the status of Western learning within China. Certainly by the period after 1895 there was widespread recognition that Western learning would somehow have to be incorporated into the repertoire of knowledge available to every educated person. The generation of Yangwu thinkers prior to 1895 had been content to claim Chinese origins as a kind of import license for Western ideas. Wang Tao’s change of heart on the legitimacy of these claims in his late years (mentioned in chapter 1), however, indicates just how threadbare the whole thesis of ultimate Chinese origins had become by the 1890s, although any number of important thinkers still tried to argue its legitimacy. As we shall see, probably the single most important argument underlying the essays Yan Fu (1853–1921) wrote in
1894–1895 that established his reputation as the major theoretician of thoroughgoing change in those years was the denunciation of the claims for Chinese origins to Western ideas that had been the ideological foundation of the Yangwu school since the 1860s. If nothing else, he seems to have regarded these claims as fostering a dangerous intellectual complacency that was a serious impediment to the sweeping rethinking that China needed for developing practical solutions suited to the gravity of its crisis.

With the discrediting of this rationale, however, came new problems. If Western learning was no longer to be declared a descendent of the Chinese tradition, just what would its new relationship be with indigenous learning, in which the educated classes had invested vast amounts of time and energy, not to mention basic intellectual conviction? Could common elements between the two bodies of knowledge be found and built upon? Or was Chinese learning simply irrelevant to the new regime, as Jin's melancholy ruminations seem to imply? I wish to suggest that the question of the position of Western knowledge became an important—if not the most important—leitmotif within late Qing thought, with overtones reaching throughout the twentieth century. A larger and more vexatious question underlay what on the surface seemed an issue that could at least be framed with considerable clarity. This underlying matter was not so amenable to conscious formulation and was for that reason the occasion for greater anxiety. What seems to come up again and again is a question regarding the genesis of ideas considered fundamental to organizing human society, such as issues concerning the canons of morality or the prerequisites for scientific thinking. How could one go about determining whether such ideas were of foreign origin or instead had a long domestic history? This problem consistently lurked behind and complicated what seemed to be more insistent and more pragmatic questions that were discussed to a much greater extent and with much greater ostensible certainty, such as how technology was to be implemented.

This chapter will set out the basic argument that, at least in the case of Yan Fu—by common agreement the key mediator between Chinese and Western ideas in the period immediately after 1895—no ultimately satisfactory method could be found to balance these conflicting demands. There seemed, in other words, no way to ensure a smooth reception for the inevitable foreign ideas by neatly fitting them into a domestic context. Too great an insistence upon difference—with its clear implication of absolute Western superiority—led to nationalistic backlash, more often than not (as with Yan Fu) a response stemming from further reflection by those who had posited the radical difference in the first place. Claims for universality, however, led to even shriller denunciation of provinciality and downright failure to understand Western knowledge...
on the part of those who claimed it by ever more radical voices. The de-
nunciation was even harsher of those who attempted to argue with the
premises or conclusions of Western ideas.

In this period, then, the question of accommodation became piv-
otal, in that all other issues kept being pulled into the orbit of the essen-
tial insolubility of this core problem. A partial list of the matters that were
overdetermined by this central question would include almost everything
that constituted the intellectual agenda of the time: How was the new con-
cept of nation to be defined? How were this nation and its people to be
renewed? How was a new set of values to be generated that would be ap-
propriate both to new, more perilous times and to time-honored ways of
doing things? How were old convictions to be renegotiated in a transi-
tional period? What was damaging and what was good about the old ways?
What was damaging and what was good about the new Western scheme of
things? And, perhaps most highly fraught of all, how was loyalty to the na-
tion to be balanced against the need to import ideas from precisely those
countries that were perceived as posing the greatest threat to China’s con-
tinued existence as a sovereign entity, both politically and culturally?

It was not as if the issue of how to incorporate Western learning into
China sprang full-blown into intellectual debate only in the late 1890s.
As outlined in chapter 1, extensive discussion of the issues involved dated
back at least to the early 1860s. With China’s defeat at the hands of Japan
in 1894–1895, however, came a general sense that more-radical measures
were needed to cope with the challenge that the West had long posed. In
retrospect Yan Fu seems the obvious candidate to have sounded the
general alarm. He was a man of Fuzhou who had tested into the newly
opened Fuzhou Shipyard School of Navigation (Fuzhou mawei chuanchang
chuanzheng xuetang) in 1866, when he was but fourteen sui, graduat-
ing five years later. He had taken the entrance exam the same year his
father died. As we saw in chapter 1 regarding the Tongwen guan’s inability
to recruit competent students, in those early days of Western learning in
China the new institutions offering such training had a very difficult time
recruiting anyone of real talent, in spite of the full stipends offered to suc-
cessful candidates. One may safely assume, then, that for a young man of
Yan’s educational ambition to have taken this exam was more than any-
thing else an indication of difficult family finances. During his course of
study, built upon an English-based curriculum, Yan gained a considerable
knowledge of basic science and, after graduation, served tours of duties
on two Chinese naval vessels. In 1877 he was sent to England for almost
three years of advanced training, time he devoted primarily to the general
study of England’s strength above and beyond his own technical studies.
The extracurricular knowledge he gained thereby was eventually put to
good use when he began translating in earnest in the 1890s.
Upon his return from Europe in 1879, Yan took up a series of administrative appointments in Chinese naval schools. He always felt, however, that his lack of a degree from the Chinese examination system hampered his utility as an officer, rendering him voiceless in governmental deliberations. He thus tried his hand at taking the imperial examinations four times—in 1885, 1888, 1889, and 1893—each time failing to pass. As a consequence, he often voiced feelings of inadequacy concerning not just his career pattern but also the quality of his traditional Chinese learning. For instance, as he wrote to Liang Qichao, most likely in 1902, concerning the latter’s critique of his translation of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*:

> As for the superficiality of my Chinese learning, it is something my friends have all observed, so I am not simply being modest [when I mention its inadequacy]. I am not proficient at both ways (dao) [i.e., Chinese and Western learning], having abandoned one and later taken up the other. Add to this that I took up learning late and had no teacher. Thus, in regard to the classics of the sages and the traditions of the worthies (shengjing xianzhuan), I have never "gained admittance through the gate . . . to see the sumptuousness of the palaces or the magnificence of the official buildings." All I have for my pains is some facility at letters (wenzi), and I don’t even have much flexibility at this.

It is worth noting Yan’s sense that his most serious claim on Chinese learning lies in the realm of letters, a claim, as we shall see in chapter 3, that was widely shared among the educated men of the late Qing.

**The Four Early Essays**

Yan’s career as a social commentator begins with a series of closely argued essays he contributed to the Tianjin newspaper *Zhibao* even before the Sino-Japanese War was officially ended by the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17, 1895. Zhou Zhenfu, Yan’s most important biographer and the editor of Yan’s work published in the 1940s and 1950s, calls these essays Yan’s most significant writings. The first is a piece entitled “Lun shi bian zhi ji” (On the urgency of change in the world), published on February 4–5, 1895. This opening shot was followed in quick succession by “Yuan qiang” (On the origins of [national] strength) between March 4 and 9; “Pi Han” (Refuting Han [Yu]) on March 13–14; and “Jiuwang juelun” (Decisive words on our salvation) between May 1 and May 9. In a letter to Liang Qichao probably written in October 1896, Yan expressed both the urgency and the inadequacy he felt in undertaking the immense burden of reform that motivated the writing of these articles: “Toward the end of the jiawu year (i.e., in late 1894–early 1895), just when affairs
in the east were tottering (niewu), I suddenly felt that a number of things came to mind to which I simply had to give voice. At that point, the set of essays that included ‘Yuan qiang’ and ‘Jiuyang juehun’ were published in the *Zhibao*. But my talents were so straitened and my spirits so weary that I could not measure up to my original intention and the [four essays] that resulted are thus far from being adequate to the task at hand.’’

In carefully examining “On the Urgency of Change,” it is easy to detect—if not so easy to comprehend fully—the basic qualities on which Yan predicates his sense of the need for urgent reform. These consist of a set of complicated distinctions he himself generates concerning social qualities he determines to be definitively Chinese as opposed to those he categorizes as characteristically Western. One of his primary concerns is to hold up to critical scrutiny the complacent assumption of an underlying unity between the West and China, thereby opening new and implicitly perilous cognitive terrain that Yangwu thinkers had always tried to paper over.

As will become clear, however, even as he insists upon making radical distinctions, Yan also seems gripped by a parallel—if considerably less manifest—urge to seek an underlying identity related to that which had animated the ideas of the Yangwu reformers on the relationship between China and the West. The oscillation between these two antithetical modes of perception—seeing China and the West as completely distinct on the one hand, or marked by an ultimate identity on the other—creates a tension in Yan’s thinking in the final half of the 1890s. This tension explains much of what some other scholars have taken as evidence of either an imperfect commitment to or an imperfect understanding of the values of the new ideas Yan is introducing from the West.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Yan’s initial essay is the way in which he begins. He starts off by sharply delineating different conceptual realms for China and the West, a scheme that breaks, as pointedly as possible, with comfortable Yangwu presumptions concerning the ultimate convergence of Chinese and Western ways of thought: “It has been said that of things in the West and in China that are most unlike and, in fact, cannot even be harmonized, nothing is more different from the Chinese love of the past and neglect of the present than Westerners’ determination to have the present overcome the past.” Yan explains this difference further by linking it to the idea of progress in the West, which he characterizes as the linearity of history that has allowed the transcendence of certain historical problems through time. This approach to history stands in contrast to that of China, where he sees all things involved in a process of perpetually recurring cycles. Yan goes on to trace the origin of this distinction to the motives of the ancient Chinese culture heroes, who, in the face of material shortage, sought to diminish competition rather
than encourage ways of overcoming the shortage. In raising the issue of a material basis for the difference and the contention associated with it, Yan hints at the social Darwinian motivation behind his theory. He also effectively preempts the continuing sense of underlying identity that was to make it possible for thinkers to demarcate a Chinese essence (ti) that could have a Western function (yong) grafted onto it—a fusion credited both at the time and after to the progressive official Zhang Zhidong and his 1898 Quanxue pian.13 A few years later, after it had become popularized, Yan was, in fact, to attack this distinction sharply and explicitly.14

In pursuing the effects of this historical difference, Yan narrows them down to a few that have profound resonance within Chinese thought. Two of these are the Western determination “in learning to dismiss the false and value the true, and in politics to curb the private (qu) in favor of the public (gong).” That he uses the venerable Chinese concept of gong to define the essence of Western morality is perhaps the surest indication of the conclusion he is reaching for here: “There is [however] no fundamental divergence between these two and basic Chinese principles (lidao). They [i.e., Westerners], however, have generally been able to implement them, whereas our attempts at implementation have generally been flawed. This is the difference between freedom and lack of freedom (ziyou).”15 From stressing the differences between China and the West in the passage quoted in the preceding paragraph, Yan has temporized here and allowed himself to come close to finding common roots. What he says, it will be recalled, is congruent with what the Yangwu scholar Chen Chi had written in 1893.16

For all their apparent agreement on the basics, however, Yan’s differences with Chen are even clearer. For one thing, Yan’s momentary flirtation with the idea of consonance between China and the West is not undergirded by the notion that all useful things in the West have Chinese origins. Beyond that, and more to the point, Yan almost immediately oscillates back to a notion of definitive difference by invoking what he regards as the particularly Western idea of freedom.

Yan goes on from this point to catalog some of the contrasts between China and the West that ensue from the absence or presence of freedom, which by now has become the key variable in his argument:

China values the Three [family] Bonds (san gang) most highly, while the Westerners give precedence to equality.17 China cherishes relatives, while Westerners esteem the worthy. China governs the realm through filial piety, while Westerners govern the realm with impartiality (gong). China values the sovereign, while Westerners esteem the people. China prizes the one Way, while Westerners prefer diversity. . . . In learning, Chinese
praise breadth of wisdom, while Westerners respect new knowledge. In respect to disasters, Chinese trust to fate, while Westerners rely on human strength.\textsuperscript{18}

In all, it is a long list that sounds remarkably familiar even a hundred years later. In retrospect we can thus see this to have been a profoundly influential formulation.

What is most striking about Yan’s interpretation, however, is something that is deceptively easy to overlook—namely, his redeployment of such binary terms as “gong” (public) and “si” (private). These terms had always been used to describe the range of experience purely within the realm of Chinese intellectual discourse and, in fact, had often been regarded “as complementary rather than opposing values.”\textsuperscript{19} And within the moral economy of these complementary terms, “gong” had almost invariably been regarded as the valorized member of the pair, a usage that was to continue, as can be seen clearly in Liu E’s 1903 masterpiece, \textit{Lao Can youji}: “What [Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism] have in common is that in enticing people toward the good they lead them to dwell in public-spiritedness (dagong).”\textsuperscript{20} Yan, in his essay, however, redistributes these virtues differentially between China and the West, in effect to remap onto separate cultural terrains the qualities that canonical neo-Confucian texts like the \textit{Da xue} (The great learning) had always linked on a continuum.\textsuperscript{21} Within this new scheme, the terms assigned to China generally fall in the realm of private or even domestic virtues, whereas those assigned to the West occupy the space allotted to public practice and the virtues of the state. In this redefinition of the concepts of public and private, one can even see here the origins of the gender coding of values and nationality that were to become such a prominent feature of intellectual life during this period and continuing well into the May Fourth era.\textsuperscript{22}

Such constructions of diametrical opposition between China and the West had a momentous effect on Yan’s early thought as a whole. We would do well here to digress a bit from consideration of this particular essay in order to explore some of the ramifications of such an extreme notion of difference. For one thing, the invidiousness of the sort of distinction Yan is making here between China and the West pervades all four of the 1895 essays. It stands out with special force in a particularly sharply worded—but not atypical—passage from the essay written right after “On the Urgency of Change,” entitled “Yuan qiang” (On the origins of [national] strength):

In the West, equality is the teaching, so the people are ruled with fairness (gong) and freedom is valued. Because of this freedom, keeping one’s
In the East, the teaching establishes fixed principles (gang), so filiality is used to rule the realm (tianxia), and relatives are most valued. Because relatives are valued, one’s word is taken lightly. But the defects [of this latter system] run to the extremes of deceit and fraudulence, affecting all levels of society. So [those countries] who live by loyalty and filiality do not survive as well as those that live by relying on one’s word. There is thus a reason behind the fact that Western countries are able to have their people love their countries and rulers as if they were of their own [families] and to treat a general (gong) war as if it were a private grievance.23

Based on his rigid essentialization of China and the West, Yan proceeds to find quite dreadful consequences following upon this finding that the notion of public spirit is the exclusive property of the West. As part of the process of creating such a dichotomy, Yan seems to require himself to disallow the possibility of any sort of purposeful communal activity under the traditional system of Chinese values. And the crux of the issue is that he regards just such communal activity as being essential to the running of a viable modern state. The extent to which this sort of negative evaluation of Chinese thought and its relationship to politics and society dominates Yan’s 1895 writings cannot, by the way, be overstressed.

The ways in which Yan’s denial of the possibility of a public arena within China either influenced or struck a chord with late Qing opinion can be seen in Liang Qichao’s important essay of 1902, “Xin min shuo” (On renewing the people). In commenting on the question of morality, Liang wrote: “It cannot be said that our nation was not early in developing morality. Although this is true, we have developed private morality (si de) and lacked in public morality (gong de). If one looks at works such as the Confucian Analects (Lunyu) and Mencius (Mengzi)—all tocsins to our people and the sources of morality—nine out of ten moral teachings are private morality, with fewer than one in ten devoted to public morality.” After citing a number of examples of how this is true, Liang goes on to specify the loci of private and public:

Because of [these teachings represented in the examples], one cannot compare the old Chinese ethics with the new Western ethics. The categories of the old ethics are ruler-minister, father-son, older brother–younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend. The categories of the new ethics are family ethics, social ethics, and national ethics. What the old ethics emphasize are matters between one private person and another, but the new ethics emphasize matters between one private person and the group.24

(Emphasis added)
Liang focuses in here on the *si/gong* binary posited with such finality by Yan Fu. Following Yan, Liang assigns “gong”—a term with the deepest of resonances within Chinese history and almost invariably marked as superior to its partner, “si”—as being virtually the exclusive property of a Western social and moral order.\(^{25}\)

Ironically, in positing such dramatic differences between China and the West, Yan ends up emphasizing the centrality of the need for moral revival in a manner quite similar to that of the conservative thinkers to whom he was most opposed. In discussing the Yangwu platform of incremental reform, for instance, Yan criticizes it thus:

> The policies [they] espouse now are simply concerned with wealth and power. Since the Western countries are truly rich and powerful, [they] think that there is no other way than to learn from the policies of the West. In terms of government (*yu chao*), they wish to establish democracy and a true prime minister; in terms of society (*yu ye*), they advocate building railroads, opening mines, training a national army, and constructing numerous fleets of naval ships. Such policies all seem correct, and more or less in line with what we need. If, however, we carry them out based on our current way of doing things, and don’t change our current customs, then I am afraid that ten years from now the effects will not be limited to just [a continuation] of our weakness and poverty.\(^{26}\)

In other words, Yan is saying here that a general moral and intellectual revival takes precedence over an incremental adoption of foreign techniques. He is contending that without such a revival, the consequences of merely carrying out a policy of incrementalism actually threaten the survival of the country.

A comparison of Yan Fu’s views with some of the statements of the late Qing anti-Western conservatives reveals certain points they have in common, despite the obvious differences in their respective visions of the constituent elements of the moral revival. They both are written in opposition to what they see as an ultimately barren policy of incremental reform, and, as a logical consequence, they both give priority to intellectual and moral agency in the cause of national renewal. A case in point is Woren’s famous memorial of March 20, 1867, in which he rejects Yixin’s suggestions for hiring Western instructors for the Tongwen Guan (quoted in full in chapter 1).

Although Woren demonstrably differs from Yan Fu and Liang Qichao in his complete rejection of any compromise with the West, he does share in common with them an important element: the uncompromising conservative insists upon a seamless web between the moral order and any political or technical means, even as Yan and Liang base their
advocacy on a notion of the irreducible importance of a consistent framework of ideas behind any practical implementations. Yan and the obstinate Bannerman (and, as we shall see, the young Lu Xun) share a contempt for efforts to install piecemeal reform without considering its broader implications, however opposed their respective differences on what that moral order should be and where it originates. It is easy to discern just behind this emphasis on consistency the moral focus that had always resided at the heart of the Confucian political economy.

In returning to the course of Yan's argument as he sets it out in "On the Urgency of Change in the World," however, his conclusion at the end of his list of differences comes as a real surprise. Given his apparent determination in constructing as many differences between China and the West as possible in his list, not to mention his clear implication that the Western ways are superior, it is difficult to know what to make of the following statement: "Since both [sets of things] exist in the world, I really would not dare to hastily declare one superior to the other." On a strictly literal level, this makes sense, for in reality most of the attributes he set out have long histories in Chinese thought. But assertion of fundamental equality has plainly not been his intention here. Given the rhetoric of the rest of the essay, however, with its manifest intent to valorize what he seeks to define as the "Western" qualities, this evaluation reads as if it might be a sop to conservative notions of Chinese superiority. Or, and perhaps more likely, it represents a belated attempt to recuperate equality within a newly constructed bilateral arena after he had just assigned all the positive instrumental values to one side. The net effect of the passage is at once to construct and to undermine a notion of a Chinese "tradition" that diverges from the uses of the modern West at all important junctures. The sudden access of what seems to be nationalistic sentiment that marks his final statement of equality complicates this by adding an apparent ideologically imperative declaration of equality. As Yan seems to frame it here, however, it is an equality without any real conviction to it and, more important, almost deliberately devoid of any positive local instantiation, whether actual or potential.

Nevertheless, we should not dismiss out of hand the sincerity either of his desire or of his conviction that some common denominator could be found between China and the West. The reasons behind his need to differentiate between the two are clear enough. He had long been frustrated by what he regarded as the half measures of the Yangwu movement. He looked with evident disfavor on that enterprise's characteristically piecemeal efforts to develop military or infrastructural strength on the Western model, without any serious examination of the conditions enabling the Western science that had been the basis for the West's development in the technical sphere. And what had made the Yangwu posi-
tion so unsatisfactory to Yan was that it had so plainly failed: the need to address the long, downward course of China’s position vis-à-vis the Western powers was suddenly rendered even more urgent by the recent defeat at the hands of upstart Japan. If nothing else, Yan’s accentuation of difference represents an effort to obtain new leverage over an intractable situation. Whatever his deepest convictions were concerning the relative merits or ultimate values of China and the West, the long string of political failures China had endured had persuaded him of the need to differentiate his ideas from the current mind-set, which had so evidently not yielded practical solutions. To a certain extent, then, his denigration of the Chinese element of the binaries he establishes represents a rhetoric of alarm calculated to awaken policy makers to what Yan regarded as their failure to commit to the radical measures that the situation demanded. There is, in other words, a profound and unabashedly instrumental motivation in Yan’s turn to the West for political and sociological inspiration.²⁸

The three essays that follow “On the Urgency of Change in the World” are, on the whole, even more devastating in their critiques of China and their advocacy of Westernization. But even as they body forth their criticisms, Yan periodically reminds his readers of the validity of a set of ideas that seems to transcend the twin goals of wealth and power that he seeks from the West:

[N]ational prosperity and decline, weakness and strength, are only relative matters. It is true that from the perspective of present-day China the West is powerful and rich, but to conclude from this that [the West] has achieved perfect governance and maximum prosperity (zhi zhi ji sheng) would be completely foolish. What we called in ancient times perfect governance and maximum prosperity was self-sufficiency for every person and family, each household containing people worthy of commendation, and the elimination of punishments.²⁹ None of the Western nations has been able to reach this condition. In fact, it is not just that they cannot attain it, but, according to what sociologists say, it seems as if they are leaving [this goal] ever farther behind. For an era to achieve perfect peace (zhi taiping) the people must have extremes neither of wealth nor of poverty, nor may there be huge distinctions of status.³⁰

The reader would be well served to keep in mind the important distinction between power and social good that Yan makes here, something that more often than not becomes obscured by the urgency of his advocacy. In other words, his instrumental need to prescribe the gospel of wealth and power does not necessarily mean that they have supplanted all other notions of morality or visions of how to order the world. As Wang Hui has so compelling observed, Yan seems to have remained committed at some
basic level to the ideal—common to both Confucianism and Daoism—of a noncontentious world uninfected by schemes of personal gain.31

This underlying set of values may explain why Yan often demonstrates an impulse to pull back from the brink of what would later be described variously as “wholesale Westernization” or “totalistic iconoclasm,”32 even as he seems at the point of expressing the utmost contempt for what he defines as the Chinese tradition. For instance, in “Jiuxiang jue-lun” (Decisive words on our salvation), he begins by brutally dismissing—as inadmissible to a new and absolutely essential scientific outlook—not only the examination system but also the whole body of more substantial learning that constituted the canon of Chinese writing. But at this point Yan suddenly pulls his argument in a different direction:

After you gentlemen immerse yourself in Western learning and seriously consider it, you will realize that politics and doctrine (jiao) in China have more shortcomings than points that are correct. Even the subtleties of our own sages can be established permanently only after undergoing scrutiny in the light of Western learning. In China the point of learning is to reattain one’s basic good nature, whereas in the West, learning is for cultivating the self and serving God; the basic idea is the same. It is just that in the West the notion is based on improving human life, whereas in China, whenever we encounter a natural disaster, we assume it have been caused by heaven and that it has nothing to do with us. From their [i.e., the Westerners’] point of view, however, we have not planned well, and they assess our guilt such that they even think we should be attacked [for these transgressions against common sense]. . . .33 (Emphasis added)

Beginning this passage with a denunciation of Chinese inadequacy that is consistent with the overall tone of the essay, Yan suddenly shifts in the third sentence to a surprising confirmation of basic equality between the two traditions. This underlying commonality was one of the “subtleties” hidden by centuries of misrule by tyrants (“from the Qin on, those who have ruled China have been those particularly violent and aggressive and particularly adept at robbery”34). As soon as he announces his idea of a fundamental likeness between Chinese and the West, however, he just as suddenly returns to a focus on the differences in implementation of the ideal. His concern with this point seems to originate in an evident anxiety concerning the harsh judgment of Western onlookers regarding China’s failure to live up to the norms of the modern (Western) state. Yan seems, in other words, uncomfortable with both positions on the extremes, but he cannot appear to find any way to mediate between them.

Perhaps Yan’s final word in his 1895 essays on the question of difference between China and the West comes toward the end of “Decisive
Words on Our Salvation," where he excoriates those he sees as worshipping the past so much as to read all Western ideas as being ultimately of Chinese origin:

Recently there has been a group of those who consider themselves to be persons of distinction (mingliu) who take up merely the idle talk about the various branches of Western science (gezhi) without ever delving into the substance. In an effort to promote themselves and put down others and to boast of their learning and discernment, they hunt around for what amount to clichés in our ancient books, claiming that Western learning is something that China already had and that there is simply nothing new about it.

After listing a number of examples of what he regards as tendentious claims of Chinese ancestry (for other instances of the sort of thing he lists, see chapter 1 above) for Western science, Yan concludes:

In other words, [these statements as a whole constitute] a boasting so endless that it would be almost impossible to enumerate it all. I won’t go into the question of whether the instances they are referring to actually work or not, but even if what they say turns out to be factual, is this not the same as to arrogantly praise a rough-hewn chunk of wood as superior to a great warship, or to disesteem an elaborate chariot in favor of the crudest of wheels? In what way could this possibly serve to open people’s eyes? It is simply a matter for the greatest shame.\textsuperscript{35}

Yan’s frustration at those who complacently claimed and boasted of Chinese origins for Western technology is more than evident here. For all his invidious comparisons, however, he in fact seems to suspend judgment on the important question as to whether the extravagant claims of ultimate Chinese origin advanced by the Yangwu school are empirically demonstrable or not. Instead, his animus is directed at the utility of the arguments in furthering the greater cause of reform. In other words, he meets the Yangwu thinkers on their own turf, on the very matter of decisions about relative utility that are arguably their original point of departure. Yan’s ultimate position seems to be that if resting on one’s laurels militates against “opening people’s eyes,” one has no choice but to castigate complacency in the harshest terms.

\textbf{Second Thoughts}

In spite of revealing moments of temporizing on the key question of cultural difference, Yan in these early essays was clearly driven more by a need to establish the difference between the West and China than by a
need to seek an equation. In the preface to his translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*—which dates from the end of 1896, only a year and a half after his *Zhibao* essays were published—Yan seems suddenly determined to reverse course and to emphasize just how much Chinese and Western thinkers have in common. While protesting several times that he is not trying to ally with the discredited sinocentrism of the Yangwu reformers or to “make forced interpretations of our [own role],”36 Yan does insist that the roots of a number of important scientific ideas can be found in the Chinese classics. In fact, he goes a bit further: “In the past two hundred years European academic knowledge has far surpassed anything in the ancient period. In establishing principles and rules, they [the Europeans] have reached the utmost and are not subject to challenge. But the insights of our own ancients always preceded theirs, and this is no forced interpretation or self-promotion on my part.”37 At this point, Yan seems to consider that gaining knowledge of how Western learning developed these ideas not only reveals the rich germ contained within indigenous thinking but also shows how later thinkers failed to expand upon profound ideas that would have led to science, had anyone been furnished with the requisite empirical curiosity:

In China now the Six Classics [guide us] as the sun and moon do heaven and as the rivers and streams frame the earth. Among the Six, Confucius most respected the *Changes* (*Yi jing*) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*). Sima Qian said that “the *Changes* are based in the hidden and arrive at the manifest, while the *Spring and Autumn Annals* push from the obvious back to the hidden.”38 These are the most exquisite words ever uttered in our realm (*tianxia*). Originally, I thought that “based in the hidden and arriving at the manifest” was merely a reading of the trigrams used in augury, and that “pushing from the obvious back to the hidden” referred only to moral judgments on human activity. When, however, I read about the Western study of logic, I saw that in regard to the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge, [these two ideas] contained the techniques of induction and deduction....[When I read this,] I pushed the book away, stood up, and said: “This is it! This is none other than the learning of the *Changes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals.*” What Sima Qian called “based in the hidden and arriving at the manifest” is deduction, and what he called “pushing from the obvious back to the hidden” is induction. His words as much as proclaim it. These are the two most important techniques in the investigation of physical matter, and the failure of later scholars to expand upon and use these [insights] is simply a result of their failure to inquire further into these techniques.39

Having established this discovery, however, Yan immediately becomes embittered at the failure of later Chinese to develop these ideas:
“The ancients originated [the ideas], but later men could not continue them. The ancients set out the great principles, but later men could not refine them. [We] are thus the equivalent of an unlearned, untempered, and unskilled people. Our ancestors may be sages, but what good does this do their ignorant descendants?” Yan also seems to realize how close he had come to Yangwu theorizing about ultimate Chinese origins. He thus takes special care to deny that interpretation: “Although this [i.e., that certain ideas can be found in China earlier than they can be found in the West] is the case, to develop from this fact the idea that all their [Westerners’] discoveries were things we had already, or even that their learning all came from the East, is simply not in accord with reality. In fact, it is simply something we can use to deceive ourselves.”

Yan thus seems to trap himself by an apparent inability either to imagine a situation in which the Western ideas he is so eager to introduce lack underlying similarities to indigenous ideas on the one hand, or to accept that the ideas are indeed similar on the other. In so doing, Yan in effect becomes the first enunciator of a new discourse of anxiety that was to become widespread in the twentieth century. The dominant premise in this discourse has been that certain key Western ideas were superior and that China could not do without importing them. At the same time, however, there has always been an equally steady undercurrent insisting on reciprocity—that there must be some sort of equality between the intellectual traditions of China and the West if Western ideas are to be able to flourish there. If this issue is, in fact, as important as I claim it to be, it is equally significant to be able to trace the dynamics of how it has worked itself out. Those who have studied this issue, both in China and the West, have tended—as Yan does when he makes policy recommendations—to frame their arguments within an unquestioned assumption of the simple superiority of Western ideas. This has been true whether consciously enunciated or not, or whether the matter at hand is the metaphysics of religion or an analysis of the modern enlightenment. And it must be said that if the conversation is premised on the needs of the modern state, that assumption is perhaps inescapable. But, as was the case with Yan, an underlying discomfort has always accompanied the very universality of the assumption in China, awareness of which has produced a variety of explanations for why this assumption of Western superiority seems at once so irresistible and so hard to digest.

Joseph Levenson, for instance, in the course of his meditations on Chinese history posited a series of dualisms that he took as the master tropes of Chinese intellectual and political life. Perhaps the most impor-
tant of these for the modern period was the universal/particular binary. In the spirit of the times in which he wrote, Levenson built his argument on the unquestioned assumption that the Western discourse had always been the universal one. Thus, the Chinese share in ideas raised by various thinkers as compelling universals could be nothing more than simply the psychological fallout of an intellectual system that had lost its integrity and fundamental intellectual appeal. As Levenson wrote of Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), an educator and the builder of the modern Beijing University:

[Cai’s] theory, then—“best in East and West”—with its surface commitment to general validity alone, but its inner, perhaps defeatist commitment to a share in validity for the historically Chinese, was an incantation which some nationalists used to stave off suspicion that traditional Chinese civilization was petering out, and in no condition to set the terms of its modification. As such, it hastened the day when the tradition’s ruin could no longer be concealed.41

The assumption here—that traditional ideas and practices had somehow simply lost what Levenson, in the passage quoted in the introduction to the present book, referred to as their “charm”—begs the question of why this situation came about in the first place. Was it, as Levenson implies when he uses the phrase “Chinese civilization was petering out,” merely that the marketplace of ideas had guaranteed the transcendent allure of the Western, the “new”? If this is the case, then Levenson’s conclusion—that the invocation of Chinese ideas was invariably a kind of psychological compensation brought about by what was at base a sentimental attachment to a notion of national identity—becomes the only explanation that makes any real sense.

But before we too readily concede this, we would do well to consider another point or two. First, it is always important to remind ourselves that imperialism, rather than some abstract coming to awareness of which set of ideas was superior, provided the real motive force behind the reconsideration of “tradition.” Even “On the Urgency of Change in the World,” the 1895 essay in which Yan Fu insists upon cleanly dividing up ideas between China and the West in a way that always seems to advantage the West, contains a passage that provides a powerful insight into his underlying motives:

When the Westerners first came, bringing with them immoral things that did harm to people [i.e., opium], and took up arms against us, this was not only a source of pain to those of us who were informed; it was then and remains even today a source of shame to the residents of their capital
cities. At the time, China, which had enjoyed the protection of a series of sagacious rulers, and with its vast expanse of territory, was enjoying a regime of unprecedented political and cultural prosperity. And when we looked about the world, we thought there were none nobler among the human race than we. Then suddenly one day a group of island barbarians wearing wild clothes, with a birdlike language and animal-like faces, sailed to our shores from thousands of miles away and knocked at our gates, requesting access. When they failed to attain their aims, they breached our coastal defenses, imprisoned the officials of our land, and even burned the palaces of our emperor. At the time the only reason we did not devour their flesh and sleep upon their hides was that our power was insufficient.

If this passage is contrasted with the praise of Western things that constitutes the overwhelming majority of these first four essays, it would be possible to dismiss it as simply a rhetorical summary of mid-nineteenth-century educated opinion, even one that is offered with a certain amount of irony. But if we place it beside Yan’s almost ecstatic account of his discovery of a protoscientific method while reading the Shiji, another interpretation suggests itself. Perhaps the old—whether conceived of as a set of ideas, a set of social practices, or some combination of the two—does exert a real “charm,” so great as to require (as Naipaul’s Indar suggests) conscious and painful suppression in the interests of immanent demands of utility and the construction of a viable nation-state.

Yan Fu in Retrospect

As Yan Fu’s rather modest invocation of his “facility at letters” suggests, he was greatly concerned with the elements of Chinese prose style, something immediately evident in his elaborate use of allusion, his arguments built from textual precedent, and his exploration of the full range of Chinese history precedent. In fact, his deep attachment to the tradition of Chinese writing represents the intensity of his involvement with Chinese history as a whole and evokes some of the contemporary pressures to keep Chinese history alive or, perhaps better said, to revivify it. The question of attitudes toward Chinese history in China past and present has been a vexatious one for scholars. The general Western sense in the age of imperialism that no real history existed outside the European orbit has been pithily summed up by Hegel (“The Far East is outside the course of world history”) and Marx (“Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history”). Moreover, this supposed lack was often invoked by the British to explain and/or justify their dominion over India. The domain of historiography, in other words, provided one of the most
powerful links between the notion of the strong nation-state and the existence of a strong and articulated national history, at least in the context of the comparison of Europe’s strength with that of the various countries of Asia.

Writing in a book that was published in 1901, W. A. P. Martin, an American missionary-educator and the longtime head of the Tongwen guan in Beijing, made a number of comments about the Chinese sense of history—as he perceived it—that very much grew out of this European contempt for Asian historical traditions. At the beginning of a long section entitled “The Study of Chinese History,” Martin allows that the writing of history was important in China, citing Hegel to the effect that “the Chinese have a historical literature more voluminous than that of any other nation on earth, and the Hindus none at all.” It is the very bulk of this tradition that irritates Martin, however, for he can find no principles of order within the vast corpus, only simple chronicle. This finding causes him to pose the instrumental question: “But are these venerable remains of any value to us?” Beginning his answer, he sets the basic terms of his inquiry in a most invidious fashion: “In forming an estimate, we must not forget that our standard of value in the criticism of such work differs as widely from that of the Chinese as a golden sovereign does from the cheap productions of the native mint.” He follows with his explanation for this difference: “[T]he whole range of their literature contains nothing that can be called a Philosophy of History. They have no Hegel, who, after reconstructing the universe, applies his principles to explain the laws of human progress; no Gibbon or Montesquieu to trace the decay of an old civilization; no Guizot or Lecky to sketch the rise of a new one.”

All this from a scholar who professes great sympathy to the Chinese predicament and who writes in his introductory chapter that the Chinese “have passed through many and profound changes in the course of their history.” What most seems to bother Martin, in other words, is that he can find no theoretical principles underlying the Chinese writing of history, and as his choice of examples indicates, historical theorization to him necessarily implies a teleology that would narrate a trajectory of historical progress.

In a book published a decade later, J. O. P. Bland offers a rather less erudite version of Martin’s evaluation: “The Chinese, like the Hindoos, have ever been peculiarly lacking in historic consciousness. The annals and records of successive dynasties provide little or no material for critical or scientific study of the evolution of the nation’s laws, institutions and culture.” Of all the negative evaluations of China’s fitness to survive in the modern world contained in Bland’s book, this is among the harshest. Although he crudely lumps the Chinese and Indian historical records together, his conclusion is of a piece with that of Martin. What
Bland seems to be asserting here is the uselessness of the past, as it was conceived in premodern China, for the purpose of building a modern state: “The scientific interpretation of sociological phenomena, by the accumulation and critical comparison of groups of facts, and by tracing back of proximate causes to those more remote, presupposes continuous and fairly trustworthy historical records.”\textsuperscript{50} The negative consequences of the parlous state of the Chinese historical record are implied when Bland invidiously compares China with Japan, the latter landmarked implicitly by a more careful nurturing of its historical traditions and thus possessed of “[h]er centuries of discipline, of loyalty, civic virtues and social cohesion,” in other words, of a “good” history apparently defined by its utility in creating the preconditions for modern statehood.\textsuperscript{51}

Martin and Bland each represent contemporary Western discourse on China and are part of a powerful and ineluctable Western demand that China, if it were to survive, must reconstitute itself in accordance with the world system. In light of the concept of the nation they embody in their writings, we should be able to understand Yan Fu’s sense of the imperative to include a uniquely national history within his purview. This imperative is rooted in neither simple psychological need for compensation nor even necessarily part of an abstract intellectual conviction of a Chinese “essence” of some sort. It was, rather, very practically a necessary condition for attaining status within the community of nations. As Peter Munz has written: “Since the doctrine of nationalism required people to believe that every nation had existed for many centuries even when its existence was not socially and politically noticeable, the proof for its existence depended on the continuity of its linguistic and cultural coherence.”\textsuperscript{52} In writing the introduction to his “Xin min shuo” (On renewing the people) in 1902, Liang Qichao expressed a keen awareness of this imperative. After making it clear that nationalism (\textit{minzu zhuyi}) was the reason for the development and expansion of the European powers in the most recent four hundred years, he goes on to enumerate the requisite building blocks for nationalism:

For a nation to be able to stand in this world, it requires particular characteristics on the part of its citizens. From morals and laws on down to customs, habits, literature and the fine arts, all have an independent spirit that has been passed down from father to son. In this way, society (\textit{qun}) is formed and the nation is created; these are the real roots and sources of nationalism. For our people to have established a nation on the Asian continent for several thousand years, we must have some characteristics that are grand, noble and perfect, as well as being distinct from those of other races (\textit{qunzu}). We need to preserve these and not allow them to become lost.\textsuperscript{53}
In the strongest sense, as Partha Chatterjee maintains, the call to preserve—or to create—a national history “implied in effect an exhortation to launch the struggle for power [against Western hegemony], because in th[e] mode of recalling the past, the power to represent oneself is nothing other than political power itself.”

Another source of Yan’s characteristic oscillation thus comes into focus: with every reason to be fearful that China was in danger of demise, his turn toward a utilitarian perspective on complete Westernization is understandable. But the ideologies he was so intent upon importing carried within themselves contradictory terms. Even as the theory of the modern nation seemed to demand a ruthless desire for wealth and power and extirpation of any traditional notions that militated against this, the demand for a native pedigree that was part of modern nationalism made this extirpation intellectually and politically impossible. Jia Baoyu—the protagonist of the eighteenth-century epic novel Shitou ji (The story of the Stone), brought back to life in turn-of-the-century Shanghai by Wu Jianren in his 1905 novel, Xin shitou ji (The new story of the Stone)—sums up the contradictory situation embodied by the comprador Bai Yaolian: “In other words, just because he understands a few foreign words, everything foreign becomes good, and he would just love to discover that his parents were actually foreigners. But yesterday I sat up reading the whole night through, and I learned that the thing foreigners value most is patriotism. So I’m afraid patriotic foreigners wouldn’t recognize such an unworthy descendant as he.”

A complete accounting of Yan’s contradictions on this issue requires some delving into the question of the extent to which politically alert Chinese were conscious of Western judgments of contemporary China. Previous scholarship has been largely silent on this point, which is one reason it is difficult to come up with a clear answer, although it is plain that the deluge of translations of Western material in post-1895 China signaled a greatly augmented awareness of Western opinion in general. There is considerable evidence that Yan Fu paid close attention to contemporary Western writings about China and was concerned about the negative tenor of the evaluations. Perhaps the most convincing single piece of evidence is that between October 26, 1897, and October 14, 1898—the first year Yan was editing the Guowen bao in Tianjin with Xia Zengyou (1863–1924)—72 of 212, or fully one-third, of the articles in the editorial section of that newspaper were translations from the foreign press, the coastal and metropolitan papers of China. Internal evidence from Yan Fu’s own writings is also plentiful. Aside from the two instances cited above (“From their point of view, however, we have not planned well . . .” and “. . . it was then and remains even today a source of shame to the residents of their capital cities”), in “On the Origins of [National] Strength”
Yan cites the response of the Western press to Chinese behavior during the war with Japan: “They said that our people sold out our nation and our military for the merest of pecuniary advantage and thus lost our land and our troops.\(^57\) And if the result is our present defeat and future destruction, it cannot really be labeled unfortunate. It goes without saying that this is enough to make one’s hair stand on end.”\(^58\)

Given that Yan Fu did not leave China during these years, it is probable that the Western press he is referring to is the press on the China coast, an assumption substantiated by the fact that at least one letter written by Yan in English to the *North China Daily News* was published in that paper, in December 1911.\(^59\) In addition, in an 1898 essay critical of contemporary defenders of Confucianism, Yan acknowledges the force of a characteristic Western appraisal of China: “Foreigners have said that from the standpoint of the mentality and actions of the contemporary Chinese gentry (*shi dafu*), if the results of three thousand years of education are no more than this, then the teaching itself must contain the roots of its own corruption. It is because of this that things came to be the way they are today.”\(^60\)

That Yan’s first extended translation from English was *Missionaries in China*, an 1892 tract by Alexander Michie (1830–1901)—something the scholarship on Yan is largely silent about—is perhaps the best indication of how sensitive the Chinese scholar was to foreign opinion and the Western gaze. Michie, who was an old China hand, a sometime editor of an English newspaper in Tianjin, the author of several books, and a correspondent for the *London Times*, wrote the work as a sharp-edged and satirical attack on missionary work as it had been practiced in China.\(^61\) It takes particular aim at the intolerance the majority of Christian fundamentalist practitioners manifested toward the canons of Chinese morality and the Chinese way of life, and their tendency to conflate conversion to Christianity with the embrace of a Western style of life.\(^62\) Yan complained later that he had been frustrated by his considerable difficulty in finding a publisher for the piece; he eventually wrote a brief summary of the work that apparently served as an introduction when the translation was eventually published via the assistance of Zhang Yuanji (1867–1959), but only after Zhang had become head of the Translation Bureau at the Shanghai Nanyang gongxue (forerunner of Jiaotong University) in 1899.\(^63\) In this introduction Yan reveals again the extent to which his chagrin over domestic squabbles originates from an awareness of the possibility of judgments that would be part of a Western standard of evaluation: “If [scholars] are bickering about the defense of China from the barbarians, and arguing about what is orthodox and what is heterodox, this is not something I really wish to know about. I am afraid, however, that the author of this book [i.e., Michie] is laughing up his sleeve about it.”\(^64\)
Behind all the circumstantial issues surrounding the appropriation of Western ideas, however, lies a larger and more substantial question. This question is not so much the extent to which Yan borrows the ideas he is so entranced with, but rather the extent to which these ideas are being filtered through concerns generated out of his own intellectual experience within China. On the surface, Benjamin Schwartz assumes that Yan has been able to find real correspondences between Chinese and Western ideas, if only because Schwartz does not seem to believe that Yan made substantial categorical distinctions: "'Chinese tradition' as an all-inclusive abstract category does not become a target of his attack, because it is doubtful whether the tradition presents itself to him as an integrated synthetic whole." This statement seems quite curious in light of Yan’s constant determination to make just such distinctions in his key writings of the mid-1890s. Schwartz’ formulation does, however, at least account for—if not very precisely—those moments in Yan’s writing when he suddenly claims identity for the basic ideas of China and the West.

Just underneath Schwartz’ surface optimism concerning Yan’s ability to smoothly amalgamate Chinese and Western ideas, however, lie doubts that the faithful student of Herbert Spencer was really able to grasp the concept that Schwartz seems to value most highly—namely, the genius of Western liberalism:

If Yen Fu thus escapes the dogmatic features of Spencer’s individualism, the real question which confronts us is, How profoundly rooted is his variety of liberalism? In the final analysis one may assert that what has not come through in Yen Fu’s perception is precisely that which is often considered to be the ultimate spiritual core of liberalism—the concept of the worth of persons within society as an end in itself, joined to the determination to shape social and political institutions to promote this value. Yen Fu’s concept of liberalism as a means to an end of state power is mortally vulnerable to the demonstration that there are shorter roads to that end. (Emphasis in original)

For all the precision with which this passage retroactively adumbrates the unhappy history of modern Chinese liberalism, there seems to me to be something not quite fair about it in respect to Yan Fu and his intentions in turning to the West. Yan never fails to be frank about his motives: he simply assumes that his country is in the gravest danger of disintegration and thereupon takes national survival as his overriding premise. He makes no real pretense of describing liberalism as anything other than the key feature that makes the Western nations more viable than China. In fact, Schwartz’ critique of Yan Fu’s utilitarian approach to Western ideas had been anticipated in a more historically specific fashion by Qian
Zhixiu, a key editorial writer at *Dongfang zazhi* (The Eastern miscellany) during the late 1910s, in an influential essay published in that journal in 1918 and entitled “Gongli zhuyi yu xueshu” (Utilitarianism and scholarship). In claiming that utilitarianism was the major premise under which all Western ideas came to China, Qian says:

> When [the concepts of] popular sovereignty and freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism are employed by Europeans and Americans to eradicate the old systems of feudalism and the power of the church or to implement the ideas of humanism, they cannot simply be encompassed by the notion of utilitarianism. But this is not true for us [in China]. In taking these ideas, we are basing ourselves on the notion that the European and American powers now so prominent in the world have passed through these stages, and since we wish to emulate their wealth and power, we cannot but follow in their tracks. . . . [This attitude] evolves out of utilitarianism . . . [and] anything from foreign cultures that has no direct utility is also thrown away in disgust (*tuopi*).67

Thus, according to Qian, the very perception of historical difference and the Chinese deficiency that it implies to those engaged in the modern state-building project render utilitarianism the only actual means by which Western ideas can be implemented in China.

Moreover, Schwartz, like Levenson, will not really entertain the idea that there might be a legitimate competing value system to which Yan owed serious allegiance and which thereby seriously overdetermined his commitment to those Western ideas that Schwartz holds most dear. The presumption that liberalism transcends all other values in the end renders Yan something of an imaginative failure in Schwartz’ eyes. In other words, rather than treating Yan Fu as someone torn by intellectual demands that could not possibly be reconciled, Schwartz treats him more as someone who cannot quite grasp the nobler ideas he ought to be reaching for. The contemporary Chinese thinker Wang Hui has turned the tables here, supplying a historical context for Schwartz’ conclusions: “In the atmosphere of the cold war, Schwartz, by means of Yan Fu’s observation that the ‘Western spirit’ was suffused with nationalism and the worship of power, sought to emphasize the absolute, autonomous, and nonutilitarian value position of liberalism, in order to overcome the excess of the notion of collective strength in the ‘Western spirit.’”68

In another article, Wang Hui sheds further light on the question of Yan Fu’s ultimate intellectual convictions. Wang analyzes Yan’s various statements about science (*gezhi*) and finds them to be heavily influenced by traditional Chinese ideas on “the investigation of things.” The key concept here is that celestial, terrestrial, and human (*tian, di, ren*) ac-
tivities are linked on one continuum of causality rather than being the result of independent processes, as is posited by Western science. As Wang put it:

Nature, psychology, and society possess an objective “principle” (li); however, they are not independent of one another but collectively implicated; they differ only in their level of articulation and not in their qualities. This difference in level of articulation is determined by their distance from the ultimate goal of “cultivating [the person], ordering [the family], governing [the country], and pacifying [the realm].”

In other words, for all Yan’s passion in invoking the need to pursue the spirit of Western science, behind it lay an enduring neo-Confucian motivation to have it serve the even more basic cause of bringing order to the realm and peace to the world. It was in the end just another aspect of Yan’s utilitarian pursuit of the elements necessary to allow China to cope with an ever more threatening world.

The point of convergence between Yan’s thinking and the Chinese ideas he vacillated about was not lost on later commentators on Yan’s work. These commentators, however, rarely regarded his intellectual link to the past in a favorable light. Writing around 1920, even Liang Qichao—someone who, as we have seen, had been much in Yan’s intellectual debt early in his career—saw fit to damn Yan with faint praise: “[T]here was at that time the unique Y en Fu...who translated a number of books..., all of them famous works, although half were old and rather out-of-date [lit., ‘removed from the trends of the time’].” Liang goes on, however, to acknowledge the importance of Yan’s work in translation: “Nonetheless, among the students who had returned from the West, Y en Fu was the first to make connections with the intellectual world of China.” Liang’s approbation lies strictly in his gratitude toward Yan for introducing Western ideas into the Chinese discourse of the time, and he is quick to judge Yan by the social Darwinist standard that Yan himself had introduced: Yan was “removed from the trends of the time” in a rapidly changing world that demanded swift adaptation. It is particularly noteworthy that Liang does not see fit to mention any of Yan’s own intellectual contributions to late Qing thought, in spite of Liang’s own evident debt to them. In fact, this focus on Yan’s translations and the concomitant silence about Yan’s original work is something most later commentators have in common.

For all the general inattention to Yan’s own ideas, many scholars of the next generation gratefully acknowledged their gratitude for Yan’s pioneering translation work. Lu Xun (1881–1936), for instance, was ungrudging in his praise for Yan’s work. But a larger number of voices of the May Fourth generation criticized Yan even here, and in highly revealing
ways. This May Fourth critique eventually came to dominate the response to Yan Fu, resonating within the English-language scholarship as well. Much like Liang Qichao, Hu Shi (1891–1962) displayed a mixed feelings toward Yan's translations. On the one hand, writing in the early 1930s, he acknowledged their tremendous influence: "Within a few years of its publication *Evolution and Ethics* gained widespread popularity throughout the country, and even became reading matter for middle-school students. . . . Within a few years these ideas spread like a prairie fire, setting ablaze the hearts and blood of many young people." On the other hand, that Yan Fu wrote in what Hu thought of as the elitist "Tongcheng style" of classical prose caused Hu to pass harsh judgment on Yan's efforts overall. In an essay written in 1935, Hu first quotes Yan's own conclusions as to why his translations were so difficult: "Those within China who read my translations always find that they cannot immediately understand them, and criticize their complexity. Do they not realize that the original works actually surpass them in difficulty? The ideas within are subtle and profound, and thus cannot be mixed with words that are not eloquent in themselves." After this declaration by Yan, Hu concludes: "This is ironclad proof of his failure at translation. Today there are still people who copy Yan Fu's method of translation, like Mr. Zhang Shizhao [1882–1973], but their translations will have no readers." Thus, by the 1930s Hu, like Liang Qichao before him, seems to hold Yan to the same standard of social Darwinist obsolescence that Yan himself introduced into modern Chinese thought.

A younger generation delivered even harsher judgment. Fu Sinian (1896–1950), then a student activist at Beijing University and already a major player in the New Culture movement, would write in early 1919: "Of the books translated by Yan Fu, *Evolution and Ethics* and [Montesquieu's] *The Spirit of Laws* are the worst. . . . This is because he did not take any responsibility toward the original authors, but only toward himself; [in fact] he took responsibility only toward his own fame and position." Fu pays inadvertent homage to Yan's early writings even as he passes this harsh judgment: Fu in effect consigns Yan to the "Chinese" half of the binary that Yan himself had established in his seminal essay of 1895. That is to say, in castigating Yan with the words "he took responsibility only toward his own fame and position," Fu seems to relegate Yan to the realm of strictly private (si) motivation. And as Yan had defined it, si lay at the other end of spectrum from the public-spiritedness that both he and Liang Qichao had praised so highly, even as they marked it as being characteristic of the more dynamic West. By 1919, in other words, Yan had come to be condemned by a younger generation in almost precisely the same terms with which he had rebuked his elders in 1895.

Writing a few years later, the philosopher Zhang Zhunmai (1886–
1969) would maintain: “[Yan] uses ordinary ideas from the present and the past to translate the meaning of Western science. Therefore, though the words are beautiful, the meaning diverges.... In sum, when Yan translates, he likes to use old Chinese concepts to translate new Western thought, thereby losing the spirit of precision of Western science.”

For Zhang, even Yan’s translations have been infected and thereby vitiated by traditional ways of thought. In a commentary on Yan’s 1959 preface to Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, Zhou Zhenfu remarks in a similar vein: “The pains Yan takes to spread Western learning are admirable, but the sort of forced interpretations [he makes] are unworthy of emulation. Moreover, they are not in accord with fact.”

Harsh criticism of Yan Fu’s intellectual range is by no means restricted to Chinese commentators. In fact, perhaps the most extreme example of this dismissal of Yan Fu’s intellectual legacy can be found in James Pusey’s jejune rejection of even the possibility of finding any rigor in Yan Fu’s thought as a whole. After failing to find consistency in Yan’s attempts to characterize the role of the Chinese sages in history, Pusey concludes: “There is no logical way out of these contradictions in Yen Fu’s early essays. But never mind. Confusion was a deeply important part of Yen Fu’s influence.”

Perhaps the problem here is best represented by Benjamin Schwartz’ sympathetic and insightful treatment of the relationship between Yan and his Western sources. Schwartz makes note of the following passage from Yan’s “On the Origins of [National] Strength,” in which the Chinese scholar sums up the contribution of Herbert Spencer’s sociology:

> Spencer was also English and was a contemporary of Darwin’s. His book was published earlier than *Origin of Species* and based itself on the ways of evolution to explain human relations and ordering society. It was called *Sociology* (*Qunxue*), and his [motivation] was similar to that of Xunzi when he said that the reason humans were superior to beasts was that they could group (*qun*). [Spencer says] that whatever humans do to help one another survive, to cause change so as to bring about merit, even to the extent of [the installation] of punishments, government, ritual, and music, are all based on this capacity to group. He also uses the most recent principles of science to illuminate matters concerned with [self-cultivation], regulating [the family], governing [the country], and bringing peace [to the world].

In analyzing this statement, Schwartz offers a minatory remark: “It will be immediately noted that all these traditional Chinese phrases give a somewhat odd twist to Spencer’s prosy tract. This terminology, in fact, imposes a prescriptive, programmatic interpretation which would have scandal-
ized the master. Spencer is not providing prescriptions for social action by an intellectual elite.”

Schwartz was the first to point out that what fascinated Yan about the West was his discovery of the link between group custom and the individual dynamism that gives the latter a practical arena in which to operate. Yan duly explicates Spencer in terms of this fundamental insight about the nature of modern English society, but it is an interpretation that Schwartz is quick to label as a mistake. In so doing, Schwartz’ reading of Yan as being idiosyncratic in his rendition of Spencer in effect sums up the relationship between the Chinese scholar and the ideas he is trying to introduce. The way Schwartz phrases his comment implies that Spencer is the independent variable and that anything Yan has to add is merely supplementary (the very obliqueness of which needs to be explained) rather than something that might change our perception of Spencer’s basic ideas. As a result, in regard to their respective positions of authority, Spencer’s text and Yan’s commentary could not be more different. Not just the later commentators but also Yan himself assume Spencer to be the universal case and Yan’s remarks to be particular to the occasion. For Yan, Spencer both resonates with his own Chinese education—hence the allusion to Xunzi—and to the new universal order represented by ideas from the West. In fact, Spencer comes with the dual imprimatur of describing the West and having a high degree of prestige there (at least as far as Yan understood at the time he was initially attracted to Spencer). Yan’s appropriation of Spencer, however, does not share the same privilege. Although Yan can read and appreciate Spencer, Yan’s own reading could never attach itself to Spencer’s text in any but the most contingent and marginal ways.

Levenson has commented upon this difference of enunciating position, although in a rather different context:

Translating and expounding Montesquiue, Mill, Huxley, [and] Spencer, [Yan] felt himself to be dealing with intellectual actors, men who had changed history. But Yen was a reactor. The fact that he had to go to them to find his affirmations—even though he changed them in the process—meant that anyone translating and expounding Yen would be explaining Chinese history, not going to Yen for his affirmations. Darwin and even his epigones were intrinsically, supra-historically, interesting. Yen was interesting for what he made of them. What was weak about modern China was not simply what Yen detected with his Darwinist vision; it was what he reflected, too, in depending on that vision. What China lacked—and what drove Yen to an intellectual life that exemplified that lack—was more than wealth and power, conventionally understood. It was power to launch a Yen Fu into universal significance, instead of holding him down,
just historically significant, while he made a particular, Chinese record by reacting to what he considered universal.\(^{81}\) (Emphasis in original)

Although I think it a bit unfair to hold Yan up to some standard of seeking universal relevance that he himself never claimed, Levenson’s remarks certainly shed light on the underlying predisposition that later scholars, Chinese and Western alike, held toward Yan.

Thus, future Chinese adepts of the philosophy of social Darwinism might be attracted to it for exactly the same reasons that Yan was, but they were free, even encouraged, to reject Yan’s interpretation as being marred by the admix of “traditional” ideas. The ideology of social evolution itself led in that direction, as witnessed by Liang Qichao’s dismissive attitude toward Yan’s choice of texts to translate. In general, such rejection is precisely what happens: later Chinese scholars analyzing Yan’s work tend to focus strictly on the fidelity of the translations rather than upon his commentaries and essays.\(^{82}\) This limitation of the discussion to issues of Yan’s fidelity to the original texts (something that neither Schwartz nor Zhou Zhenfu is guilty of, by the way) assumes from the start that Yan can have nothing of value to offer on his own and thus painfully constrains his range. By contrast, one has only to recall Qian Zhongshu’s recognition that Lin Shu in fact made a creative transformation of Dickens and other English novelists in his classical Chinese renderings of the foreign texts.\(^{83}\) It is of particular interest that Fu Sinian and Zhang Junmai accuse Yan of exactly the same sort of parochialism and narrow self-interest that Yan himself had used to characterize the essential differences between China and the West in early 1895.

But for later writers, the appeal of social Darwinism lay, after all, specifically beyond what Yan was able to reach—the foreign text’s apparent authenticity as a discourse from a broader world, with the capacity to speak clearly about the keys to success in that world. From that perspective, Yan’s take on these works becomes, at least potentially, a source of pollution; the Spencerian text’s aura of authenticity is easily seen as vitiated by what those who came later would tend to regard as Yan’s parochial remarks. I think we can even see here the seeds of the propensity of later modern Chinese thinkers to undercut the positions of their intellectual predecessors as part of the endless process of reinventing discursive structures every few years. In other words, while certain Western ideas—social Darwinism in particular—would endure from intellectual generation to generation, the association of such ideas with indigenous notions in hybrid constructs required their constant reconfiguration in purer, more consciously cosmopolitan form.

The source of the problem that Yan left for his successors is most evident in his oscillation between sometimes needing to argue that China
and the West were completely distinct from one another and at other times finding them to share a number of fundamental ideas. One could try to periodize this wavering by concluding that his disposition for finding cultural difference was more radical in his first four essays and had already become tempered in his preface to Huxley, written some eighteen months later. Such a scheme would not, however, explain his many references to the common origins of ideas between the West and China even in the early essays themselves. Zhou Zhenfu, in a book published in 1940, found his own way of dealing with the problem: Yan’s writing on this issue becomes much more consistent once Zhou finds that Yan saw post-Qin Chinese history as betraying the early promise of Chinese thought. Although it is certainly true that Yan, like most scholars of the time, makes a dramatic distinction between the political and intellectual conditions in pre- and post-Qin China, this formulation brings along problems of its own. If he finds that pre-Qin China and the West share common ideas, is he now denying the foundational cultural differences he had built upon in “On the Urgency of Change in the World,” such as the notion that freedom is what had given the West its momentum? If so, is he thus also denying a concept of radical difference that can be used as leverage in what he continues to insist is a dangerously static situation? After all, for all his temporizing, Yan continues to proclaim his contempt for those who “deceive themselves” with the idea that China had every important idea first, however close he comes to advocating this point himself.

Lurking unstated in the background, however, is another, even greater, blind spot. For all the acuity Yan brings to the discussion of ultimate origins, he seems almost willfully unaware of the basic architecture of his argument, invidiously comparing the wisdom of the ancients with the failure of those who come later to live up to it. It is unmistakably the pattern that characterized the very intellectual life of post-Tang China that Yan is so intent upon denouncing. As we have seen in chapter 1, the Yangwu thinkers of the late Qing—implicitly denounced by Yan for seeking a Chinese origin for every Western idea or invention of merit—were particularly given to this form of argument. In attempting to trace the origins of these things, they find outlines of them in early Chinese books but must then note that later dynasties “failed to hand them down” (shi chuan). The epistemological links between Yan’s sense of pre-Qin possibility and the basic orientation of the school of evidentiary learning (kao-zheng) of the mid-Qing are also obvious, particularly so if one calls kao-zheng by its less precise but more popular label of Hanxue (school of Han dynasty learning). Its perception of a post-Han decadence that blinded later generations to earlier insights is echoed throughout Yan’s introduction to his translation of Huxley. And even if Yan is careful to say only that the ideas are the same rather than to specify a necessary Chinese
source, from the perspective of the radical voices that follow him he still seems a prisoner of the late Qing rhetoric of Chinese origins.

The intensely overdetermined nature of each strand of the argument that Yan chooses for constructing a coherent narrative has a number of consequences for the new regime of ideas he is so intent upon establishing. For one thing, a dramatic disproportion exists between the fragility of his attempts to declare points in common between Chinese and Western intellectual history and his tactical inability to recognize the more evident points his own argument has in common with the voices he is ostensibly arguing against. This lends a profound instability to Yan’s stance: the close attention he pays to avoiding or qualifying manifest declarations of filiation to the past contrasts with a curious lack of awareness of the shared elements between the underlying pattern of his arguments and certain paradigmatic forms that had been shared earlier by both neo-Confucian and Han learning discourse. Given the resulting tension, the easiest resolution to it becomes a line of retreat to a conservative position that advocates a return to tradition. Such a move would represent, after all, only an increased self-awareness of the unacknowledged terms of his own discourse.

Another problem inheres in Yan’s cutting himself off completely from the recent past in favor of a valorization of remote antiquity. The result is an attitude of “always jam yesterday, never jam today,” or a permanent regression of useful precedents into the past. This renders problematic any efforts to locate proximate roots to contemporary practice, something any theory embracing a teleology of progress needs for justifying its course of action. The upshot of these complications is that Yan’s discourse moves on two opposed tracks at the same time. If finding a base in the remote past moves in the direction of conservatism, the denial of the validity of more recent precedent leads to the most uncompromising iconoclasm: because they are denied any substantial justification, existing institutions can put up no strong arguments toward coping with calls for their own rejection. This paradoxical combination of archaism and iconoclasm, however, makes the search for specific and indigenous local instances of universal truths almost an impossibility: by the very terms on which Yan bases his own arguments, everything within reach must be found wanting. In this way Yan Fu’s early writings of 1895–1896 already adumbrate what was to develop into a pervasive instability within modern Chinese cultural discourse, in which local application of cosmopolitan ideas became at the same time both ideological imperative and practical impossibility.