

The Evolution of Social Darwinism in China, 1895–1930

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SOCIAL DARWINISM: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

The study of social Darwinism is expanding in new directions. As is well known, this sociopolitical doctrine is loosely based on science and, at root, is understood as the application of the theory of evolution by natural selection to human societies, from the closing decades of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth. Mike Hawkins, in his *Social Darwinism in European Thought* (1997), investigates the nature of social Darwinism's bond to the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin, along with the implications of these theories in ideological movements between 1860–1945. Donald Bellomy, James Moore, Michael Ruse, and Wiebke Schröder have traced the birth, intellectual sources, meanings, historiography, and fortunes of the concept in expansive form, aiming to deal not only with the content of this designation, but also expressly to examine social Darwinist principles across the political spectrum from fascism to anarchism. Not least, historians of science have been active in thereby showing the co-constitution of science and society, and a commitment to the concept that all science has social meaning.¹

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¹ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Robert J. Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Wiebke Schröder, *Meanings of Social Darwinism* (Munich: Grin Publishing, 2013); James Moore, "Socializing Darwinism: Historiography and the Fortunes of a Phrase," *Radical Science* 20 (1986): 38–80; Michael Ruse, "Social Darwinism: The Two Sources," *Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 12, 1 (1980): 23–36; Donald Bellomy, "'Social Darwinism' Revisited," *Perspectives in American History* 1 (1984): 1–129. Researchers are also deliberately pushing beyond these horizons to look at social Darwinism in Northern and Southern Europe, Latin America, the Arab world, Russia, Japan, and Korea. See Thomas F. Glick, Miguel

If social Darwinism was so deeply connected to Western society and the consolidation of capitalist economies, how did it fare in other regions of the globe? In this paper I focus on China, where in the late nineteenth century traditional forms of knowledge persisted alongside an eagerness in some official and intellectual circles to be open to Western ideas. Historians have examined aspects of these themes. Benjamin Schwartz looked at the impact of the re-evaluation of Huxley's Romanes Lecture by China's pivotal translator, Yan Fu (1854–1921), and concluded that Yan was a partisan of Spencer on the religious, ethical, and sociopolitical levels.² James Pusey described how a Chinese version of social Darwinism was planted in Confucian China, and attributes China's political revolution and philosophical changes to evolutionism in the late Qing and early Republican periods.³ Max Huang maintains that Yan initiated a distinctively Chinese liberalism that developed into a main strand of China's political culture.⁴ Jilin Xu evaluated the impact of Spencerism, which convinced the Chinese that if they wanted to strengthen their nation they would have to accept the brutal truth of the "law of the jungle."⁵

These are all admirable achievements. However, various issues surrounding the origin, meaning, and the subsequent routes of social Darwinism in China—what we can call Sinicized social Darwinism—remain unsettled or require reassessment in terms of content and historiography. The existing scholarship fails to provide a satisfactory analysis of the major changes that occurred in social Darwinism in China vis-à-vis its ties with the doctrine in the West. The full richness of the sources of Sinicized social Darwinism, particularly the influences of writings by non-Anglophone thinkers like the Russian anarcho-communist Pyotr Kropotkin (1842–1921) and the Dutch botanist Hugo de Vries (1848–1936), has not been adequately studied. In this article I seek to understand how social Darwinism was taken up during the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War

Angel Puig-Samper, and Rosaura Ruiz, eds., *The Reception of Darwinism in the Iberian World: Spain, Spanish America and Brazil* (Berlin: Springer, 2001); Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Thomas F. Glick and Elinor Shaffer, eds., *The Literary and Cultural Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Maria Zarimis, *Darwin's Footprint: Cultural Perspectives on Evolution in Greece (1880–1930s)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015); Vladimir Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: The Beginnings, 1880s–1910s: Survival as an Ideology of Korean Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Clinton Godart, *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Bernard Lightman, ed., *Global Spencerism: The Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

² Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964).

³ James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴ Max Ko-Wu Huang, *The Meaning of Freedom: Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008).

⁵ Jilin Xu, "Social Darwinism in Modern China," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 6, 2 (2012): 182–97.

of 1894 and argue that it is best understood in a Chinese context as a way of characterizing social development. I observe that terms like “evolutionism,” “social Darwinism,” or even “Darwinism” possessed interchangeable meanings in China before the scientific community matured in the mid-1910s. This study details the routes by which selected aspects of Western evolutionary ideas, including ethical concepts relating to human progress, made their way into Chinese thought and identifies the critical consequences. Deploying new material on the translations that were available to Chinese scholars, I demonstrate how the formation of China’s cadre of professional scientists decisively altered how social Darwinism was taken up in the country, and how evolutionism, arguably the earliest Western “ism” to gain a hold in China, became the dominant, though still controversial non-Chinese ideology there by the late 1910s. Historiographically, I adopt a two-phase theory: The first corresponds to the period of the translation, amalgamation, and redefinition of evolutionism in China, in the context of general responses to the writings of Huxley, Spencer, and Darwin. In the second phase, a more equivocal reconsideration ensued on the part of Chinese scholars, with criticism and occasionally rejection of evolutionism, in ways that represented a generational shift during political crises, military actions, and the emergence of a cadre of professional scientists, combined with the impacts of Kropotkinism and Marxism after the late 1910s.

What follows is an investigation of the availability of Western evolutionary ideas in China from the mid-1890s to the early years of the Communist Party. Initially, I treat Spencer, Huxley, and the translator of their works, Yan Fu, comparatively, in order to characterize the form social Darwinism first took in China, and to identify local cultural elements as well as ideas of remoter origin that modified Yan’s interpretation of Huxley’s monograph. I then turn to examine dominant or emergent intellectual groups that were drawn to the use of evolutionary slogans to validate their particular agendas. I pose a challenge to the views held by historians like Jilin Xu who contend that commitment to social Darwinism weakened in China after the May Fourth Movement of 1919.⁶ I close by arguing that after the late 1910s the influence of evolutionism narrowed but was also reinforced through two new trajectories that expanded China’s evolutionism, namely scientific evolutionism and a new version of social Darwinism. The understanding of Sinicized social Darwinism should be widened to include the impact of Kropotkin and de Vries, since the Chinese injected a broad range of non-Anglophone thinkers to come up with their own theories. Notwithstanding the syncretic nature of Sinicized social Darwinism, these different forms of evolutionism were coherent, being a series of strategies the Chinese adopted to tackle social challenges represented by *laissez-faire* capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. Social Darwinists in China and other

⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

parts of the world, with the possible exception of the North Atlantic strand, were concerned with pursuing ongoing social reformation drawing upon the cultural resources that they could muster from both indigenous traditions and Western sources.

SPENCER, HUXLEY, AND YAN FU: AN INTELLECTUAL TRIANGLE

“Social Darwinism” is mostly a pejorative label in English usage. As in the use of “racist,” those who hold such views do not usually label themselves as such; their opponents do.⁷ Although the term only appeared in Europe in the 1880s, the basic premises of what came to be called “social Darwinism” appeared *avant la lettre*, prior to the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859).⁸ The British philosopher and political theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) is most often credited with having first developed the concept of social evolution in the late 1840s, after he read Charles Lyell’s (1797–1875) criticism of Lamarck in the second volume of his *Principles of Geology* (1832). By the 1870s, Spencer’s ideas were being widely circulated in English-speaking countries and fusing with those of other progressivist thinkers, who also drew key themes from Darwin. When these ideas were set in the framework of political and economic progressivism and coupled with embedded notions of social and racial hierarchy, what ultimately emerged was a collective ideology that dominated the outlook of expansionist Western nations well into the twentieth century—a social theory that applied the law of the survival of the fittest to human societies. This theory was thought to be amply supported by the new evolutionary biology, though Darwin himself had little directly to do with promoting the social applications of his theory. The intellectual relations between Spencer, Darwin, and social Darwinism are nevertheless matters that remain much discussed.

In *Social Statics* (1851), Spencer proposed a teleological-Lamarckian explanation of progress, which regarded society as an organism on account of which the individual could be considered as a microcosmic society and society as a macrocosmic individual. The “*telos*” is mankind’s happiness: social progress means that the “sum-total of happiness becomes largely increased.” Social development is progressive and teleological, with the Lamarckian concepts of use and disuse playing a substantial role: “Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity.... As surely as a blacksmith’s arm grows large.... So surely must man become perfect.”⁹ In developing these utopian themes, Spencer assimilated Karl Ernst von Baer’s (1792–1876) laws of embryology in “Progress: Its

⁷ Moore, “Socializing Darwinism,” 38.

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 19.

⁹ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 80, 84; Rajendra Kumar Sharma, *Social Change and Social Control* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1997), 34.

Law and Cause” (1857), whereby he presented an amended definition of progress, “Von Baer ... established the truth that ... changes gone through during the development of ... an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity ... to heterogeneity.”¹⁰ From this point onward, Spencer’s progress consisted of a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, leading to increased physiological and psychological complexity.

Spencer advocated “optimistic” social struggles and opposed aid to the “unfit.” He endorsed the views of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834): “Unnecessary” governmental interference would unavoidably lead to racial deterioration; and “The poverty of the incapable ... the starvation of the idle ... are the decrees of a ... far-seeing benevolence.”¹¹ After reading Darwin’s *Origin* in 1860, he was convinced that the Darwinian principles were “not notably dissimilar” from his own propositions,¹² his *Principles of Biology* (1863) deployed what would become a chief slogan of social Darwinism, the “survival of the fittest,” explicitly to replace “natural selection.”¹³ In *The Study of Sociology* (1873) Spencer put forth a synthesis of Lamarckism and Darwinism.¹⁴

As is well-known, social Darwinism was a mixed theory that assimilated various lines of thought drawn from Lamarck, von Baer, and last but not least, Darwin. It consolidated as an ideology with the input of nationalists, socialists, and racial ideologists. The ideas taken from social Darwinists were often inconsistent with Darwin’s own theory, which, in a way, elucidates why one of the sternest critics of Spencer’s views was from Darwin’s own camp: Thomas Huxley.

Huxley, without Oxbridge credentials (he attended a nonconformist medical academy), was a self-motivated naturalist who rose to the peak of the scientific world as President of the Royal Society (1883–1885). He was one of the first scientists to appreciate Spencer and played an essential role in the development of *Principles of Biology*. Huxley first befriended Spencer in 1852, though they did not become close until 1858 when Spencer moved to the City of Westminster to be near Huxley. It was only with Huxley that Spencer could speak freely of the vast metaphysical schemes that had begun to emerge in his head. Without Huxley’s support, these would have probably come to nothing. As an indication of Huxley’s respect, Huxley, whose aggressive energy was notorious, went to extreme lengths to avoid quarreling with Spencer. The two had many similarities when they became X-Clubbers in 1864: They were close in

¹⁰ Herbert Spencer, *Seven Essays, Selected from the Works of H. Spencer* (London: Watts & Co., 1907), 7.

¹¹ Spencer, *Social Statics*, 323.

¹² Herbert Spencer letter to Edward Lott, 10 Feb. 1860, in David Duncan, ed., *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* (London: Methuen & Co. 1908), 98.

¹³ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (New York: Appleton, 1904[1864]), 530.

¹⁴ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (New York: Appleton, 1875), 353.

age, shared a middle-class background, vocally endorsed Darwin's theory of natural selection, and vigorously defended academic liberalism.¹⁵

Although an ardent proponent of Darwinism after 1859, Huxley gradually became critical of those who read ethical implications into the process of natural selection. For many years afterward he published on the question of whether the biological processes of evolution might be applied to the moral realm of humankind. Spencer was frequently his target after the late 1860s. In *More Criticisms on Darwin, and Administrative Nihilism* (1872), Huxley criticized Spencer's attack on government and defended the state, arguing that men are not isolated individuals but parts of a "social organism."¹⁶ Spencer proposed that competition was virtuous because it eliminates the inferior; evolution is a harsh but ultimately beneficial force and therefore "ethical" in the long run. By contrast, Huxley proposed the need to beat back nature, and advocated that industrial nations pay a living wage to workers and administer the benefits of sanitation to the poor.¹⁷

The personal relationship between the two did not unravel until 1889.¹⁸ Four years later, Huxley developed a strong case against Spencer in his lecture, "Evolution and Ethics," delivered in 1893 as the second Romanes Lecture, given annually at Oxford. Published as an essay the following year, the forty-one-page lecture is prefaced by a forty-five-page "Prolegomena," supplemented by thirty pages of footnotes exhibiting a remarkable range and depth of expertise in philosophy.¹⁹ In Huxley's lecture, the pre-Socratic philosophers, notably Heraclitus, became "evolutionists." Socrates and the Athenians, on the other hand, engaged in "a kind of inverse agnosticism," putting physics beyond the reach of the human intellect and enjoining philosophers to study ethics. Huxley said the Stoics, who he described as "disciples of Heraclitus," had altered Socrates's teachings by endowing the "material world-soul" with the attributes of an "ideal Divinity," thus giving it an ethical quality.

The philosophers of antiquity occupy the largest part of Huxley's lecture, yet the account comes to its climax in the modern doctrine of the "ethics of evolution," which might better be named, on Huxley's terms, the "evolution of ethics." Huxley rejected the notion that human society is a part of nature and subject to the evolutionary process; to him, human society is created by humans

¹⁵ Ruth Barton, *The X Club: Power and Authority in Victorian Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1–35; Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 146.

¹⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Evolution and Ethics, Revisited," *New Atlantis* 42 (2014), 81–87, 83; Thomas Huxley, *More Criticisms on Darwin, and Administrative Nihilism* (New York: Appleton, 1872), 79.

¹⁷ Robert Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 314.

¹⁸ Bernard Lightman, "Huxley and Scientific Agnosticism," in Bernard Lightman, *Evolutionary Naturalism in Victorian Britain: The 'Darwinians' and Their Critics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 287.

¹⁹ Himmelfarb, "Evolution and Ethics," 83.

in the face of nature—we try to hold back the evolutionary process in our ethics. Although Spencer is not mentioned directly, this is an obvious critique of his entire approach of seeing no difference between the world of nature and the social world.²⁰

Ironically, social Darwinism was introduced to Chinese scholars through a translation of Huxley's most robust criticism of the application of natural selection to human culture. Yan Fu translated Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics" and its attendant "Prolegomena," under the title *Tianyan Lun* [On natural evolution] (1898).

Yan's translation merits close examination. He had considerable knowledge of British intellectual movements, and later became known in China for translating several Western thinkers, including Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. He was recruited in 1867 as a young man to Fuzhou Naval College and became one of twelve students sent to England in 1877 by Prosper Giquel (1835–1886) to attend the Royal Naval College at Greenwich.²¹

Yan's British education inspired him to support democracy and the constitutional monarchy, while he harbored doubts about the decaying sociopolitical order in the late Qing Empire. After two years' schooling in Britain, he returned to China in June 1879 and at first taught mathematics at the Fuzhou Naval College. In 1880, he relocated to the Northern China Naval College in Tianjin at the urging of Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), then the Viceroy of Zhili Province. In 1890 he rose from the position of Dean to that of Chancellor.

Yan's dissatisfaction with the Qing's decadent sociopolitical order exploded in the aftermath of the devastating Sino-Japanese War. As the Chancellor of Northern China Naval College, the preparatory school for the officers of the North China Fleet, Yan witnessed China's humiliation in the war. Its dramatic military failures, combined with his frustration with his own lack of success in passing the Imperial Exam, were probably what led Yan to turn to the publication of translations bearing on institutional reform. His best-known translation, of Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics," provided the Chinese with an introduction to Western ideas about social evolution, just after the war.

Yan's *Tianyan Lun* is by no means a literal translation of Huxley's text, for almost all of Yan's translations were paraphrases. For example, Huxley argued in his "Prolegomena":

Its [nature's] very essence is impermanence. It may have lasted twenty or thirty thousand years.... One of the most

²⁰ Thomas Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 70–145; Himmelfarb, "Evolution and Ethics," 83–85.

²¹ Sun Yingxiang, *Yan Fu Nianpu* [The chronology of Yan Fu] (Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 2003), 26–29; Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 372–75.

characteristic features of this cosmic process is the struggle for existence, the competition of each with all the result of which is the selection.... [T]he survival of those forms which, on the whole, are best adapted to the conditions ... and which are therefore in that respect ... the fittest.* (*[Footnote]: That every theory of evolution must be consistent not merely with progressive development, but with indefinite persistence in the same condition and with retrogressive modification, is a point which I have insisted upon repeatedly from the year 1862 till now.)²²

Yan “rendered” this text as follows:

Its essence is impermanence. What we see currently is the result of evolution in the past ... two or three thousand years. ... Evolution is of long-duration and ceaseless.... There is something remaining perpetual. What is constant? “Evolution.” Evolution is the fundamental structure, with two applications, say, the struggle for existence and natural selection.... Natural selection ... explains the reasons for the survival of those forms.... Spencer says: “Natural Selection is no more than the survival of the fittest.”²³

Yan eliminated Huxley’s non-progressivist footnote, which potentially undermined the progressive interpretation of the workings of Darwinian “descent with modification.” He made clear that many of Huxley’s criticisms were directed at Spencer, whose name was not mentioned by Huxley. Yan took great pains to comment on (and mostly criticize) Huxley from the perspective of Spencer in his own extensive annotations that constitute half of the book, and, for the unsuspecting Chinese audiences, he equated Darwin’s concept of natural selection with the Spencerian “survival of the fittest.” This was not so unusual, since Darwin and Spencer themselves equate the two phrases in their writings. But Huxley did not mention “survival of the fittest” in the original text, nor did he ever equate natural selection with the “survival of the fittest.” In a letter to a friend in 1890 he expressed his opposition to Darwin’s adoption of Spencer’s “survival of the fittest”: “The unlucky substitution of ‘survival of fittest’ for ‘natural selection’ has done much harm in consequence of the ambiguity of ‘fittest’—which many take to mean ‘best’ or ‘highest’—whereas natural selection may work towards degradation.”²⁴ In “Evolution and Ethics,” and in private, Huxley made this distinction clear.

²² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 4.

²³ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun* (Mianyang: Shenshiji Zhai Press, 1898), vol. 1, 2–3.

²⁴ Letter from T. H. Huxley to W. Platt Ball, 27 Oct. 1890, in Leonard Huxley, ed., *Life and Letters of Thomas Huxley* (London: Macmillan, 1900), vol. 2, 268.

In *Tianyan Lun*, though, evolution is progressive. “We can judge from worms, plants, and animals that evolution makes progress every day. There are vestiges from *infusoria* to man, which is a viewpoint of multiple naturalists.”²⁵ Yan was convinced by Spencer’s Lamarckian transformism, and he devised a Lamarckian term—*tihe* (“adjusting the body to fit the environment”)—in his own annotations: “An organic being changes its appearance and function for the sake of fitting the changing environment; such a process is named *tihe* by evolutionists.”²⁶ Struggle for existence is the cause of progressive *tihe*: “If we stop men from struggling for existence.... *Tihe* will not happen, and man will not make progress.”²⁷ “Organic beings progress in natural evolution; hence social evolution is also undeniably progressive.”²⁸

For Spencer, competition would naturally bring about cooperation within a laissez-faire society, which is fundamental for the biological advancement of a race. Like Spencer, and unlike the mainstream Chinese literati who had a tradition of rejecting commercialism, Yan advocated for laissez-faire market economies and Adam Smith. The secret of European wealth, Yan argued, lay in the theory of economy that was “developed by Smith.”²⁹ Yan asserted that humankind’s intellectual, physical, and ethical capacities could be fully realized in a laissez-faire society.³⁰

Huxley’s text included philosophical discussions of the idea of the cosmos and cosmic progress, in opposition to the view Spencer put forward. In Spencerian cosmic nature, animals and plants advanced in perfection via the struggle for existence and the consequent survival of the fittest. Huxley portrayed ethical thinkers as revolting against the moral indifference of nature, and made a sharp distinction between “social progress” and “cosmic progress” that was essential to the main point of the entire piece: “social progress” means a checking of the “cosmic process”; humans can manipulate nature in the sense of resisting natural forces (as with a garden), but at the same time this human capacity is in itself natural; evolution selects not the fittest but “ethically the best”:³¹

Men in society are undoubtedly subject to the cosmic process.
... The strongest, the most self-assertive, tend to tread down
the weaker.... Social progress means a checking of the cosmic
process at every step ... which may be called the ethical
process; the end of which is not the survival of those who

²⁵ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun*, vol. 2, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.* vol. 1, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰ Wang Shi ed., *Yan Fu Ji* [Collected essays of Yan Fu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986), 1082.

³¹ Adrian Desmond, *Huxley: From Devil’s Disciple to Evolution’s High Priest* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 597–98.

may happen to be the fittest ... but of those who are ethically the best.³²

Yan translated this text as follows:

Men in society ... are undoubtedly subject to the rigid cosmic process.... The strong ones tend to survive, because they are the fittest.... The ones that preserve their own groups (*baoqun*) tend to survive. The ones that are not beneficial to their own groups are close to death.... Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process.... The result of evolution is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest [but those who are ethically the best].³³

Part of Yan's translation is accurate but making the cosmic and the ethical processes somehow part of a single process is a radical reinterpretation of Huxley's message, the whole point of which is that ethics cannot, in any way, emerge from the cosmic process. Yet Yan did adopt Huxleyan ethics and social cooperation and conveyed the original meaning in Huxley's lecture whenever he agreed with it. To fortify Huxley's idea of ethical cooperation, Yan even coined his own concept, *baoqun*—preserving the group—since this would help his fellow Chinese understand the implications of social cooperation in international struggles for existence.

Yan drew parallels between this Huxley-Spencer dispute and one from his own scholarly tradition. In an annotation added to the just quoted text, he remarked that the Huxley-Spencer debate on ethics was akin to a longstanding argument in Chinese intellectual history about nature and virtue:

The unification of cosmic process and human ethics revealed in the “*Tian Lun*” [On nature] developed by Liu Yuxi and Liu Zongyuan.... It is contradictory to ... Song dynasty scholars who proposed that the *li* (principles) belong to nature, while desire belongs to humans.... Huxley argued, “Nature only has principles, but does not have ethics.” This is identical to Zhou Dunyi's “*Cheng wuwei*” [The realm of sincerity is unintentional and undesirable], and Lu Jiuyuan's “*Xing wushan wu'e*” [Human nature does not have kindness or evilness].³⁴

The Chinese intellectual community, then, could easily equate the Huxley-Spencer dispute with arguments from their own tradition. Huxley's position

³² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 81–82.

³³ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun*, vol. 2, 51–53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

was that all efforts to find a ground for mankind's higher ethical tendencies in the cosmic evolutionary process in nature are futile. In this he strongly resembled Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) and Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1193) in the Song dynasty (960–1176), for whom cosmic nature is not a school of social virtue. Huxley did not attempt to ground ethics in the cosmic forces in nature because he maintained that there was nothing moral about the operation of natural laws. To the contrary, Spencer, like the Tang literati Liu Zongyuan (773–819) and Liu Yuxi (772–842), found the root of ethics in the cosmos, because they all affirmed the role of the cosmic process writ large and approved its manifestation in the human sphere.

Still, Benjamin Schwartz's claim that "Yen [Yan] Fu is Spencer's partisan on the religious, ethical and sociopolitical level" is problematic,³⁵ since Yan was not Spencer's partisan regarding ethics, where he sided with Huxley. For both Huxley and Yan, Spencerian "optimistic" social struggles are ruthless, and men could transcend the restrictions of the cosmic process through the development of social ethics. As Yan reiterated, "Huxley's argument for preserving group cooperation is clear... Forming a group is the safest strategy [for survival]; therefore, evolution preserves the ones that are good at cooperation, and eliminates the ones that are not."³⁶ Yang Shen's meticulous analysis on *Tianyan Lun*'s commentaries makes clear that he never endorsed struggles. Yan and Huxley were commensurable in terms of ethics.³⁷

Yan's principal concern was not with Darwinism per se, but with its social application as he interpreted it. He never indicated any interest in translating Darwin's works, since the scientific principles Darwin developed in his studies, such as "variation," the blurred variety-species boundary, and "descent with modification," offered little toward resolving China's immediate sociopolitical conundrums. Nor could they be understood by a reading audience that lacked scientific schooling. Yan did consider Spencer's progressive evolutionism applicable to the contemporary situation, but Spencer's works were too diffuse to be the subject of a manageable project right after the Sino-Japanese War.³⁸ Huxley's Romanes Lecture, on the other hand, was compendious and dealt with themes Yan thought relevant to his immediate, overriding concern: the implications of evolutionary principles for the sphere of sociopolitical reform and the racial survival of the Chinese.

The path by which social Darwinism entered China, via the translation of a work that attacked the concept itself, differed from other national settings.³⁹

³⁵ Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 111.

³⁶ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun*, vol. 1, 34–35.

³⁷ Yang Shen, "Social Darwinism or National Darwinism," *Philosophical Researches* 1 (2014): 70–75.

³⁸ Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 98–101.

³⁹ A very few nations, including China's neighbors Japan and Korea, introduced social Darwinism through the translation of Huxley's anti-social Darwinist essay. In Korea, Spencer and

Again, Yan never intended to present a literal translation of Huxley's text and the final product consisted of his copious commentaries. Spencer nowhere introduced consideration of the wealth and power of the state into his arguments, nor did his rival Huxley. Yet much of *Tianyan Lun* is preoccupied with China's power. Spencer viewed society as like an organism, but neither Huxley nor Yan did. Huxley rejected progressivism based upon his study of comparative anatomy, while both Yan and Spencer, learned laymen, had no biological training. Evolutionarily, Yan was a Spencerian, who equated evolution with progress. Yan's translation eradicated Huxley's non-progressivism from the text. Spencer followed a Malthusian view that saw laissez-faire capitalist competition as analogous to natural selection and thus as ethically justifiable, whereas Huxley rejected this sort of naturalism and embraced the humanistic regulation of capitalism and social protections from its excesses. Here Yan sided with Huxley: because the amoral natural force behind biological evolution, both human and non-human, was formidable, humans needed *baogun* in order to secure survival and prosperity. It was Huxleyan social cooperation, rather than a Spencerian law of the jungle, that Yan felt was more substantial for preserving his nation.

Not pronounced in the British debate was the issue of how group solidarity and community braced the capitalist world. The kind of neo-Confucian humanism scholars like Yan were imbued with made it easier for them to identify with the Huxleyan position, which made sense of how group selection, and not just individual selection, works in the social world of evolutionary competition. This is why the question of "grouping (*qun*)" was so crucial in turn-of-the-century China. Yan saw Spencer as advocating merciless international competition and colonization (about which Yan felt anxious), while Huxley's approach was more applicable to Chinese society since it required cooperation. Yan saw his society as backward and urged his fellows to evolve, develop laissez-faire policies, unite, and compete with the world powers. He formulated his own syncretic evolutionism, a grandiose linear-progressive evolutionary system that incorporated the notions of natural selection, the struggle for existence, *tihe*, Spencerian social progress, and Huxleyan ethics. In *Tianyan Lun*, Yan presented a fundamentally progressive yet ethical version of social Darwinism, which could be properly termed as "Sinicized social Darwinism" for a partially colonized China.

Darwin were introduced during the 1880s. Huxley was also introduced, with attention being paid to his physiological works, such as: Thomas H. Huxley and William J. Youmans, *The Elements of Physiology and Hygiene: A Textbook for Educational Institutions* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1884). See Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism*, 25. Social Darwinism was introduced to Japan through a translation of Spencer's works during the Meiji period. See Godart, *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine*, 243.

CONFUCIANISM, THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE, AND SOCIAL ETHICS

The Chinese scholar Cao Juren (1900–1972) estimated that over five hundred autobiographical memoirs written by Chinese elites in the early twentieth century recalled Yan Fu’s influence.⁴⁰ *Tianyan Lun* became widely read, with some thirty editions appearing within ten years of its 1898 publication. Sinicized social Darwinism was closely interwoven with political and cultural changes as China underwent unprecedented transformation, notably during the Hundred Days’ Reform in 1898, the 1911 *Xinhai* Revolution, the New Cultural Movement (ca. 1915–1921), and 1919’s May Fourth Movement.⁴¹ These movements advocated social advancement, which created cultural frameworks that validated modern science and education, at least for the prominent Chinese intellectuals of the time. We can also discern a noticeable shift from the valorization of grouping as a universal, civic, and non-exclusive project in Yan, to a more nationalist orientation as advocated by Zhang Taiyan and Liang Qichao. This occurred as Western imperialism and colonialism intensified globally, and the “nation” was treated as a natural political unit for dealing with the jungle of world politics. Multiple types of social Darwinism, each tailored to the Chinese tastes, coexisted, sometimes uneasily. They were tactics implemented to confront the challenges of Western expansion.

Progressivism Justified

As was often the case with social Darwinism, there was little interest in the actual biological roots of these social notions, yet the name of Darwin was used to legitimize and justify social evolutionary theories. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Sinicized social Darwinism reached various fields in China’s sociopolitical realm, outside of science. There is, perhaps, little need to inquire why evolutionism during this period was “non-scientific” or “non-experimental”: the formation of China’s scientific community still lay in the future, emerging most obviously in the middle and late 1910s, as has been shown by Peter Buck, Zuoyue Wang, and my previous research.⁴² Before that, social Darwinism could be broadly defined as evolutionism that was developmental;

⁴⁰ Cao Juren, *Zhong guo xueshu sixiang suibi* [Essays on the Chinese history of academic thinking] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2003), 112.

⁴¹ Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 115–20; Lee Lai To and Lee Hock Guan, eds., Sun Yat-Sen, Nanyang, and the 1911 Revolution (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 165–204; Geng Yunzhi, *An Introductory Study on China’s Cultural Transformation in Recent Times* (Berlin: Springer, 2015), 303–6.

⁴² Zuoyue Wang, “Saving China through Science: The Science Society of China, Scientific Nationalism, and Civil Society in Republican China,” *Osiris* 2d series, 17 (2002): 291–332; Peter Buck, *American Science and Modern China, 1876–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 4; Xiaoxing Jin, “The Evolution of Evolutionism in China, 1870–1930,” *Isis* 111, 1 (2020): 46–66, 55–56.

and labels like “evolutionism,” “social Darwinism,” and “Darwinism” were largely transposable.

Even when *Origin of Species* was first published in Chinese, the translator made great efforts to “socialize” Darwin’s technical concepts. This translation validated the progressivist reading of evolutionary theory and its first social applications by Yan. Yan’s *Tianyan Lun* had directed people’s attention to Darwin’s book: “The principles of natural selection and the struggle for existence are derived from the Englishman Darwin. His *Origin* inquires into the development and extinction of species.”⁴³ Partially owing to this slender mention, a twenty-two-year-old undergraduate, Ma Junwu (1881–1940), decided to translate the book. Ma’s translation was presented in separate installments, with the first five chapters published between 1902 and 1906.⁴⁴

Whereas Darwin had carefully avoided talk of “progressiveness,” and explained that development is sometimes retrograde, Ma changed the sense to read more socially.⁴⁵ For example, Darwin’s words on comparative levels of organization read:

It may be asked what advantage . . . would it be to an infusorian animalcule—to an intestinal worm—or even to an earthworm, to be highly organized. If it were no advantage, these forms would be left, by natural selection, unimproved or but little improved. . . . And geology tells us that some of the lowest forms, as the infusoria and rhizopods, have remained for an enormous period in nearly their present state.⁴⁶

Ma reinterpreted these sentences in an evolutionarily progressive way:

Tiny organisms, like the infusorian animalcules, intestinal worms, and earthworms, are lowly organized forms. Nonetheless, in their own living environment, they are the highest. Only if occupying the highest position could they survive until today. . . . Struggling with more advanced species, they might have already been destroyed. . . . Geology shows some of the lowest forms, such as the infusoria and rhizopods, have remained for an enormous period in nearly their present state.⁴⁷

⁴³ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun*, vol. 1, 3.

⁴⁴ Xiaoxing Jin, “Translation and Transmutation: The *Origin of Species* in China,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 52, 1 (2019): 117–41.

⁴⁵ Dov Ospovat, *The Development of Darwin’s Theory: Natural History, Natural Theology, and Natural Selection, 1838–1859* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 218–28.

⁴⁶ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1872), 99.

⁴⁷ Ma Junwu, *Daerwen wuzhong youlai* (Shanghai: Wenming Shuju and Guangyi Shuju, 1906), 145.

Ma took pains to legitimize the progressive evolutionary code put forward by Yan. For Ma, progressiveness, or “occupying the highest position,” was indispensable for survival. His transformation of *Origin* provided Chinese intellectuals with what Ma believed was the secret of racial survival and social advancement, which anti-colonial nationalists in China demanded after 1905, when official Confucianism was ended. The Chinese *Origin* legitimized progressive evolutionism in its broadest sense and solidified a Chinese interpretation of evolution under an authoritative emblem: Charles Darwin.

Social progressivism was also advocated by China’s political reformers and literati-evolutionists Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao, both of whom were recognized for their roles in the Hundred Days Reform of 1898, after which the military, industry, and commerce were viewed as keys to China’s national revitalization.⁴⁸ After Kang read the *Tianyan Lun* manuscript Yan mailed to him in 1896, he hastily absorbed evolutionary ideas into his *Datong Shu* [On the great unity], a Confucian-teleological evolutionary map for world unity. Kang converted Confucius into an “innovator” who championed institutional reform.⁴⁹ For Kang, evolutionism sparked utopian visions about the future world of “great unity.” Only by adopting such visions, he thought, could the Chinese put aside their customary mindset to look for an ideal society in antiquity, and replace it with a new optimism toward the future. Such developmental tenets encouraged the Chinese to believe that their nation could catch up with Japan and the West by following the principle of social improvement, and thereby acquiring material abundance. Along with his protégé Liang Qichao, Kang promoted institutional innovations, following the patterns set by Japan’s Meiji Restoration. Kang was one of the Confucian tradition’s more inventive theorists, and one of its most fanatical as well; he converted that heritage into a structure that was not intrinsically conventional, but rather developmental.⁵⁰

As a Confucianist, though also a non-conformist, Kang did not intend to repudiate social morality; instead, he decried competition but believed in material progress. After touring twenty-three foreign states during 1898–1905, Kang announced in his 1905 paper, “Saving China with Materials”: “During the past two millennia, China has triumphed by ethical philosophy.... [But China’s] material accomplishment is lacking.”⁵¹ He concluded that for countries like China, India, Burma, and Vietnam, material accomplishments outweighed ethics. As he wrote after he began his foreign travels: “I have been touring

⁴⁸ Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴⁹ Kang Youwei, *Datong Shu* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1935); Wang Fanseng, *Gushi bian yundong de xingqi* [The rise of the anti-ancient worship movement] (Taipei: Wangda Shuwei Press), ch. 2; Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, ch. 1.

⁵⁰ June Grasso, Jay P. Corrin, and Michael Kort, *Modernization and Revolution in China* (Armonk: Sharpe, 2015), 54.

⁵¹ Kang Youwei, *Wuzhi jinguo lun* (Shanghai: Cheung Hing Book Co., 1919[1905]), 2–3.

Europe and America.... The most urgent strategy for saving our country is [to advance] material culture.... Steam engines and electricity, ships and cannons, and weapons [are useful].... The secret of European power is ... neither philosophy nor human rights ... but material strength."⁵²

Kang's disciple, China's most prolific thinker Liang Qichao, who published more than ten million words,⁵³ made calls for political amendments that relied even more upon *Tianyan Lun*. After reading the condensed *Tianyan Lun* manuscript in 1896, Liang wrote to Yan: "Other than my master (Kang Youwei), you are the only one who could ... teach me."⁵⁴ Liang, who originally saw the struggle between Chinese and Western civilizations as in parallel, changed his view after reading Yan Fu's writings. He now viewed the two as unequal and deemed Chinese civilization as retrograde and the Western ethos as progressive.⁵⁵

Like Yan (and Spencer), Liang highlighted the role of the environment, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and mental powers: "Only the ones adapted to the environment can survive. Hence [organisms] tend to adapt themselves to the environment, and transform steadily. The acquired characteristics are inheritable. Transformation does not only happen to physical appearance, but also to mental status."⁵⁶ In his article, straightforwardly entitled "On Progress," Liang asserted: "The struggle of existence is the mother of evolution.... Struggling is not limited to nations but occurs among individuals. [Struggling is] physical, intellectual, and ethical. [If] all individuals fight for [progress], evolution will naturally be prosperous."⁵⁷

Liang, the "loudest champion" of the Sinicized evolutionism,⁵⁸ promoted the Spencerian "law of the jungle," which profoundly unsettled China's traditional beliefs, notably Confucian morality. Confucius' ethics was rooted in the clan values of the early Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE). With particular emphasis on the importance of the family and social harmony, the core of Confucianism is ethical, an assumption that members of a society will be kind to each other unconditionally, with an ideal promise of a benevolent government. The Confucian moral theory—*Ren* (humaneness)—denotes the good quality of a virtuous person when one is altruistic to the ways in which we ought to care for

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Hao Chang, *Liang Chi-chao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890–1907* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵⁴ Liang Qichao, *Yu Youling xiansheng shu* (Letter to Mr. Yan Fu), quoted in Shen Yongbao and Cai Xingshui, eds., *Jinhualun de yingxiangli—Daerwen zai zhongguo* [The influence of evolution—Darwin in China] (Nanchang: Jiangxi Universities and Colleges Publishing House, 2009), 143–45.

⁵⁵ Cho-yun Hsu, *China: A New Cultural History*, Michael Duke and Timothy Baker, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 547; Jin, "Translation and Transmutation," 126.

⁵⁶ Liang Qichao, "Jinhualun geminze jiede zhi xueshuo [Theories developed by evolutionist Benjamin Kidd]," *Sein Min Choong Bou* 18 (16 October 1902): 3.

⁵⁷ Liang Qichao, "Lun Jinbu [On progress]," *Sein Min Choong Bou* 10 (20 June 1902): 2–3.

⁵⁸ Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 154.

our connections to each other. This is built upon innate dignity and a potential of self-perfection in every human being. Later Confucianists Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (ca. 310–213 BCE) disagreed over this claim concerning the natural goodness of humans, with Mencius insisting that people are basically good and Xunzi that they are fundamentally deviant (or neutral). Both emphasized the value of proper upbringing, education, and ritual action for bringing about the correct expression of moral virtues. Xunzi regarded ruthless communal struggles as catastrophes. Mencius pronounced that the feelings of sympathy and love, from which he said humanity is cultivated, underlie and pervade the other characteristically human feelings; sympathy and love are the original qualities in human nature. The Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130–1200) claimed that *Ren* or humaneness is the principle of love and the character of heart-mind. The Confucian virtues, which are based upon ritual order, not legal order, are best understood in terms of actual human behavior rather than intellectual beliefs. Confucians, both past and present, are concerned with the practice of taking care of others, not the abstract idea of care.⁵⁹

These traditional beliefs were rebuffed in the social revolutions of the twentieth century. Even the Imperial Exam met its doomsday in August 1905, which marked the termination of official Confucianism and the consequent cessation of China's tradition of scholar-officials.⁶⁰ Confucian sentiments, which were at odds with, or diminished by, the spirit of "the law of the jungle," became for people like Liang futile assertions, as he pronounced in his 1889 essay "On Brutal Power": "Tigers and Lions, the strongest, freely slaughter and devour weak animals.... Human beings are like that. The strong nations apply their brutal power against the weak ones.... This is the principle of evolution." "All rights are owned by the strong. Living beings are born unequal, the right of self-governing is secured through effort."⁶¹

The "law of the jungle," viewed by the likes of Liang as imperative for China's evolutionary ascent, slowly but steadily eroded away the ruins of the Qing monarchy as well as the ashes of the even older philosophical traditions. John Dewey's Chinese disciple, Hu Shih (1891–1962), a key contributor to Chinese liberalism and language reform and one of China's leading intellectuals during the New Cultural Movement, complained that China was

⁵⁹ Michael D. K. Ing, *The Vulnerability of Integrity in Early Confucian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), "Conclusion"; Qingsong Shen and Kwong-loi Sun, eds., *Confucian Ethics in Retrospect and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values & Philosophy, 2007), chs. 1, 4, 5, and 7; Xiusheng Liu, *Mencius, Hume and the Foundation of Ethics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 47; James Sellmann, "Confucian Ethics," in Qiang Zha, ed., *Education in China: Educational History, Models, and Initiatives* (Great Barrington: Berkshire, 2013), 12–14.

⁶⁰ Kam-por Yu, Julia Tao, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theory and Applications* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 64; Xu, "Social Darwinism," 183–87.

⁶¹ Liang Qichao, "Lun Qiangquan," *Qing Yi Bao* 31 (1899): 4.

“culturally obsolete”: “The most hazardous characteristic of a country’s culture is obsolescence.... There is only one way to make progress: quickly inject fresh “juvenile blood” into it.... It is still not too late if [we now] rapidly absorb the Western ‘juvenile blood.’ Unexpectedly, the unsuccessful progeny of this patient [the Chinese] seeks to ban the [Western] doctor and not allow him to cure [China] with medicine.”⁶²

Other scholars came to much the same dramatic conclusion. The philosopher and anarchist Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) believed any cultural evolution undertaken in China should be interwoven with, or even preceded by, ethnic evolution of a social Darwinist kind. He thought the Manchu, traditionally labeled “barbarians” by Han Chinese, had to be driven back into their own “savage” nature. The Manchu, whose “inferior” ethnicity was now explained by evolutionary principles, was deemed responsible for China’s backwardness. Zhang also found a historical reason to beat back the Manchu, “The Manchu government treated Han Chinese unequally (ten times worse than the way that Kshatriya drills Sudra).”⁶³ In 1902, Zhang established an anti-Qing organization in Tokyo to promote racial revolution, which demanded that China should be led by the superior Han nationalities.⁶⁴ He went so far as to assert that the Manchus were ethnically more alien than the Japanese: “The Manchus and the Japanese belong to the yellow race, but as can be clearly seen from history the Japanese are of the same ethnicity [like us], while the Manchus are not.... Japan first used Han [Chinese] characters, and later developed the Japanese script.... The Manchus, on the other hand, have their own writing whose form is completely different.”⁶⁵ Liu Shipai (1884–1919) took things one step further and held that people’s characteristics were determined by bloodlines.⁶⁶ This sort of stance prevailed among Han intellectuals, who before 1905 had established more than thirty journals and produced more than a hundred pamphlets advocating a racist revolution against the Manchu rulers.⁶⁷

These racial and sociopolitical notions took real shape as the martial and economic strength of the West shattered the conceit of Confucian benevolence and gave rise to a new cult of materialism in the 1910s. One of the most prevalent

⁶² Hu Shi, “Wenxue Jinhua guannian yu xijugailiang [The concept of literature evolution and the improvement of drama],” *La Jeunesse* 5, 4 (15 Oct. 1918): 320; Xu, “Social Darwinism in Modern China,” 190.

⁶³ Zhang Taiyan, *Gegu Dingxin de Zheli: Zhang Taiyan Wenxuan*, Jiang Bin, ed. (Shanghai: Far East Press, 1996), 145.

⁶⁴ Zhang Taiyan, “Zu Zhi (Clans’ Policy),” *The Essays of Zhang Taiyan* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 1984), vol. 3, 46–48.

⁶⁵ Quoted from Julia Schneider, *Zhang Taiyan: The Republic of China as an Image* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 144.

⁶⁶ Julia Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 198–99.

⁶⁷ Wang Zhongmao and Hu Zhanjun, “On ‘Anti-Manchu’ in Late Qing,” *Journal of Zhengzhou University* 4 (1994): 23–28, 25.

ideas in this trend was expressed by the movement known as “Jintie zhuyi (Gold-ironism),” founded by Yang Du (1875–1931), a Senator of early Republican China. For him, gold represented financial power and iron symbolized martial strength; this sort of ideology honored military power and monetary benefit at the expense of everything else, not the least being ethics.⁶⁸ Such utilitarianism, as expressed in traditional Chinese Mohism and Legalism, roughly put, advocated judging every individual or social action by the benefits or harms it brings to the society. It was revived and combined with evolutionism, and the result was an economic-military “warship” within early Republican China’s political realm.

Back to Ethics

Neither this “warship” nor the 1912 transition from monarchical rule to Republican China managed to generate China’s instantaneous “upgrade.” Worse still, evolutionism, which envisions a cosmological order based upon strength, was blended with power politics, illustrated by the fate of the military strongman Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), whose rise and fall exemplified the triumph and also the failure of evolutionism applied to politics.⁶⁹ Chinese intellectuals needed to reexamine the naïve confidence they had embraced based upon their linear conception of social advancement.

Internationally, World War I substantially altered the Chinese attitude towards evolutionism. The two founding fathers of Chinese evolutionism, Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, after the Great War changed their stance toward not just evolution but Western civilization generally. The price of social Darwinism was brought home to the Chinese by the tragedy of German hegemony, the desperate global struggles, the ugliness of warmongers, the Paris Peace Conference, and the overall wreckage of the war. They thought social Darwinism should be denounced, and for it they substituted Pyotr Kropotkin’s concept of “mutual aid.”⁷⁰ Multiple Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth period (1919) promoted a movement called “Dongfang Wenhua Jiushi Lun (On saving the world with oriental culture).”⁷¹ Laissez-faire approaches to social Darwinism, which had once appealed to many and were prevalent in China’s intellectual landscape during the century’s first decade, were now considered unsound.

⁶⁸ Yang Du, “Jin Tie zhuyi shuo,” *Yang Du Ji* (Changsha: Hunan People’s Press, 1986), 213–397; Xu, “Social Darwinism,” 185. On utilitarianism in Chinese philosophy, see Qianfan Zhang, *Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 147.

⁶⁹ Yuan-tsung Chen, *Return to the Middle Kingdom: One Family, Three Revolutionaries, and the Birth of Modern China* (New York: Union Square Press, 2008), 51–52; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 2013), 271–72.

⁷⁰ Zhang Rulun, *Sixiang de Zongji* (Jinan, China: Shandong Friendship Press, 2006), 17–26; Zheng Dahua and Zou Xiaozhan, eds., *Xifang Sixiang zai Jindai Zhongguo* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005), 144–193.

⁷¹ Zheng Dahua, *Minguo Sixiangshi Lun* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005), 115–62.

Liang Qichao was an unofficial consultant for the Chinese delegates to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and in his “On the Impressions of Europe” written afterward he dismissed the idea that China should learn from Europe and no longer voiced his prior claim that the sciences were omnipotent and evolutionism ubiquitous. He rapidly changed his radical image and became an apologist who proposed that oriental civilization should save the Westerners. “The material progress of the last one hundred years,” Liang declared, “has been several times that of the preceding three thousand years; yet, man has not gained happiness from it; it has brought us a host of disasters.” Those disasters he traced back to evolutionism and individualism. “Thousands of words in the *Origin*,” said Liang, “all condense into ten words: ‘The struggle for survival, and the survival of the fittest.’”⁷²

Yan expressed similar anxieties. Having been educated in Victorian England, he had originally thought that British constitutional monarchy comprised an ideal model for, or the *telos* of, social evolution. But right after Germany’s November 1918 surrender, he commented: “Having witnessed seven years of China’s Republic and four years of Europe’s bloodiest war in history, I feel that the European race’s last three hundred years of evolutionary progress has all come down to nothing but four words: selfishness, slaughter, shamelessness, and corruption.”⁷³

Power politics was now under attack. Du Yaquan (1873–1933), the editor of China’s influential popular journal *Eastern Miscellany*, questioned the introduction of evolutionism and materialism into politics: “We are restricted by materialism, developed by Darwin and Spencer; [we are] wandering around a ruthless universe.”⁷⁴ Du’s criticism was unfair, since Darwin rarely ever labeled himself a “materialist.” By and large, we could call Darwin a “vital-materialist.”⁷⁵ Spencer, for whom the materialist-spiritualist controversy was a mere war of words, also denied he was a materialist.⁷⁶ Yet Du did not care about Darwin’s or Spencer’s philosophy; he was focused upon the concomitant effects of social struggle: “Today’s society is driven by material desire and the spirit of the struggle for existence.... Our rationality is being abandoned; Republican China has almost turned out to be an animal kingdom.”⁷⁷ Du then claimed that

⁷² Quoted in Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 439.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Pi Houfeng, *Yan Fu Pingzhan* [Yan’s biography and reviews] (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2006), 139.

⁷⁴ Du Yaquan, “Jingshen jiuguo lun,” *Du Yaquan Wencun* (Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2003), 3.

⁷⁵ Phillip R. Sloan, “Darwin, Vital Matter, and the Transformation of Species,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 16 (1986): 369–445. In the *Descent* he certainly speaks favorably of known “materialists,” such as Vogt, Buchner. In one passage in *Notebook C* Darwin does call himself a materialist, but he generally did not. See Paul H. Barrett *et al.*, eds., *Charles Darwin’s Notebooks, 1836–1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Enquiries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 291.

⁷⁶ John Offer, ed., *Herbert Spencer: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2000), 70.

⁷⁷ Du, “Jingshen,” 54.

the Chinese had misunderstood Darwin: “The ones who misunderstood Darwin’s theory view evolutionism as the synonym for the law of the jungle. ... [They] neglect social ethics. Actually, Darwin never disregarded ethics.”⁷⁸

Thus, ethics had to be put back into the social process. Zhang Taiyan highlighted this argument: “The species that could not understand the significance of social cooperation, namely, the golden horses and green chickens of Yizhou [Sichuan Province], were arrogant and left their group, thus becoming extinct... [There were] species ... like worms, whose activities are coordinated; others could not harm them.”⁷⁹ Gu Hongming (1857–1928), a British Malaya-born Chinese Professor of English at Peking University, deployed a hybrid account, proposing that Confucian ethics or social benevolence did not offset national competitiveness: “As individuals, the Chinese must follow Confucian [ethics]; yet as a nation, we must abandon Confucianism and adopt the modern European way [of competition].”⁸⁰

The Chinese, in the late 1910s, began to celebrate evolutionism without the “struggle for existence.” Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the provisional president of Republican China, claimed that evolutionism was the cornerstone of his “Three Principles of the People,” the official ideological basis of Republican China’s policy as promoted by the Chinese Nationalist Party: “I claim that the evolution of Euro-American [society] is based upon three principles: nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people.”⁸¹ He then avowed that the most fundamental principle of human evolution should not be “ruthless struggle.” Rather it should be the principle of “mutual aid”:

The principle of animal evolution is the struggle for existence; [the principle of] human evolution is mutual aid. Society and country are the mutual aid vectors. Ethics is the outcome of mutual aid. Men obeying this rule become prosperous: otherwise [they become] extinct. This principle has dominated mankind for thousands of millions of years... What is the *telos* of human evolution? It is Confucius’ “When the Great Way prevails, the world community is equally shared by all,” or as Jesus put it, “If this rule [cooperation] is attained, earth becomes heaven.”⁸²

⁷⁸ Du Yaquan, “Jingshen jiuguo lun,” 35.

⁷⁹ Zhang Tianyan, “Yuan Bian [In search of transformation],” *Qiu Shu* (Beijing: Blossom Press, 2017), 104.

⁸⁰ Gu Hongming, “Zhongguo niujing yundong gushi,” *Gu Hongming wenji* (Haikou: Hainan Press, 1996), 321.

⁸¹ Sun Yat-sen, “*Minbao* fakanci [The opening statement of *People’s Journal*],” *Minbao* 1 (20 Oct. 1905): 1–2.

⁸² Sun Yat-sen, “The Principles of Building Our Country,” in Shen Yongbao and Cai Xingshui, eds., *Jinhualun de yingxiangli—Daerwen zai zhongguo [The influence of evolution—Darwin in China]* (Nanchang: Jiangxi Universities and Colleges Publishing House, 2009), 105.

This is Sun's description of the "third stage" of evolution, "the evolution of mankind," in his "The Principles of Building Our Country" (1919). It builds upon the first two phases—the evolution of the lifeless universe, and that of organic forms. The essence of human evolution, according to Sun, is "mutual aid," which became the key concept in Sun's political agenda. This was partially owing to the spread of the ideas of Pyotr Kropotkin, the Russian philosopher who advocated anarcho-communism.

KROPOTKINISM, DE VRIESIAN MUTATIONISM, AND CHINA'S SOCIAL SALTATIONISM

The national and international sociopolitical turmoil that emerged in the mid-to-late 1910s, most notably World War I, decisively altered Chinese attitudes toward evolutionism. It is safe to contend that evolutionism ceased to be an "elixir" for Chinese intellectual culture after the war, yet its influence was not diminishing: it was being narrowed, but also reinforced, as new intellectual trajectories joined to enhance China's evolutionism in the late 1910s. These were scientific evolutionism, and a new kind of social Darwinism. The former, emerging from the new Chinese biological community and based upon experimental biology, I have investigated elsewhere,⁸³ so here let me address the latter.

During the late 1910s, the Chinese delved into the writings of non-Anglophone thinkers—particularly Kropotkin and the Dutch botanist and promoter of "mutation" theory as an explanation for evolutionary change, Hugo de Vries—to construct their own theories of social change. Kropotkin, the Russian anarcho-communist who also called himself a "Darwinist," was born into a family of the high Russian aristocracy. He gave up his princely title at age twelve and became an anarcho-socialist in the 1870s; that said, he condemned state socialism, Marxist class struggle, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. His 1902 book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, became the fundamental text for anarchist-communism that attacked the orthodox Marxists and social Darwinists, including Spencer and the father of eugenics Francis Galton (1822–1911). Kropotkin proclaimed:

We have seen that the vast majority of species live in societies, and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life: understood, of course, in its wide Darwinian sense—not as a struggle for the sheer means of existence, but as a struggle against all natural conditions.... The practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development.... [T]he most prosperous, and the most open to further progress.

⁸³ Jin, "Evolution of Evolutionism in China, 1870–1930," 55–66.

The mutual protection which is obtained in this case, the possibility of attaining old age and of accumulating experience, the higher intellectual development, and the further growth of sociable habits, secure the maintenance of the species, its extension, and its further progressive evolution. The unsociable species ... are doomed to decay.⁸⁴

Kropotkin, then, emphasized the value of co-operation over competition,⁸⁵ stressed the role of direct action of the living environment on bodily form, and accepted the claim that externally endowed, new traits could be inherited. The latter two assertions are Lamarckian. Coincidentally, the French-educated Chinese translator of Kropotkin, Li Shizeng (1881–1973), who had been schooled in agriculture at the *Institut Pasteur* and *Université de Paris* during 1902–1905, was “addicted to Lamarckism,” and then “turned himself to Kropotkin’s mutual aid.”⁸⁶ The first three chapters of *Mutual Aid* were translated and published in the journal *Xin Shiji* (*La Novaj Tempo*/*New Century*) in January and February of 1908 by Li,⁸⁷ and in 1919 he published the remaining chapters in China’s influential journal, *Eastern Miscellany*.⁸⁸ A full translation of *Mutual Aid*, carried out by one of the Chinese Communist Party’s founders, Zhou Fohai (1897–1948), was distributed by the Commercial Press in 1921.

The Kropotkinian catchphrase—*Huzhu* (mutual aid)—gradually gained prominence in the mid-1910s over Yan Fu’s influential slogan from the *Tianyan Lun*, “*Wujing tianze, shize shengcun*” (“Things struggle, the fittest survive”). Li Shizeng in his “Preface” to the 1919 translation argued that wars had taught that “mutual aid” was more valuable than the struggle for existence.⁸⁹ Peking University President Cai Yuanpei praised Kropotkinism in 1917: “The principle of mutual aid is used to reject Darwin’s survival of the fittest.... Most of today’s humanists follow this [tenet].”⁹⁰ Kropotkinism was considered useful in the devastating aftermath of World War I, which was followed by China’s Era of Warlords (1916–1928), when control of the

⁸⁴ Pyotr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Company, 1902), 293.

⁸⁵ Diane Paul, “Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics,” in Jonathan Hodge and Gregory Radick, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 223–25.

⁸⁶ Wu Langbo, “The Spread of Mutual Aid at the End of Qing Dynasty,” *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou* 146, 2 (2005): 154–57, 155.

⁸⁷ Pyotr Kropotkin, “Huzhu (Mutual Aid),” Li Shizeng, trans., *Xin Shiji* (*La Nova Tempo*) 31 (25 Jan. 1908) and 32 (1 Feb. 1908). *La Novaj Tempo* was Chinese weekly published in Paris.

⁸⁸ Pyotr Kropotkin, “Huzhu Lun [The theory of mutual aid],” Li Shizeng, trans., *Eastern Miscellany* 16, 5–10 (1919).

⁸⁹ Li Shizeng, “Huzhu Lun,” *Eastern Miscellany* 16: 5 (1919): 87–94, 88.

⁹⁰ Cai Yuanpei, “To Chen Duxiu,” *La jeunesse* 3, 1 (1917): n.p.

country was shaped by struggles among military cliques of the Pei-yang Army and numerous regional factions.⁹¹ In the late 1910s, almost all of China's major journals (for example, *Eastern Miscellany* and *La Jeunesse*), published articles on Kropotkinism, asserting that "mutual aid" was allied with Chinese ideas like Confucius' *Ren* (benevolence), Mozi's *Jian'ai* (Universal Love), and even the then-prevailing Sun Yat-sen's *Mingsheng Zhuyi* (Principles of people's livelihood, mentioned earlier).⁹²

There was considerable discussion during the 1910s of "organizational power" as a means to attain "mutual aid," and a noticeable shift toward the fetishism of "organization" (*zuzhi*) and "organizational power (*zuzhi li*)."⁹³ As a result, Kropotkin-related organizations emerged. One of the Communist Party founders, Yun Daiying (1895–1931), who had converted to Kropotkinism in the 1910s, established Huzhu She (The mutual aid union), with the mission of promoting "Kropotkin's new evolutionism."⁹⁴ Intellectuals associated with the anarchist journal *La Novaj Tempo*, like Li Shizeng, Zhang Jingjiang (1877–1950), and Wu Zhihui (1865–1953), established the La Novaj Tempo School, and endorsed Kropotkin as the representative "evolutionist." They translated his words selected from *The Conquest of Bread* (Paris, 1892), *Law and Authority* (pamphlet, 1886), *The State: Its Historic Role* (pamphlet, 1897), and *The Present Crisis in Russia* (1901), and published them all in *La Novaj Tempo* (vols. 31–113).⁹⁵

Not far from Li Shizeng (the lecturer on biology at Peking University), Li Dazhao (1888–1927) who was the head of Peking University Library, a member of the Communist International, and China's first scholar to treat the Bolshevik government in the Soviet Union as a potential model for China's political endeavor,⁹⁶ expounded on Kropotkin, since the instrumentalization of grouping was also critical for the appeal of Bolshevism as an effective manner to mobilize the masses against capitalism and imperialism. Along with nineteen students, Li Dazhao established in 1920 a reading room in the library for propagating communism, Kangmuni Zhai (The *Kommunismus* house).

⁹¹ See David Bonavia, *China's Warlords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁹² Bi Qingsong, "On the Spread and Impact of Mutual Aid in Modern China," *Border Economy and Culture* 157, 1 (2017): 41–43, 41.

⁹³ Yoshihiro Ishikawa, *The Formation of the Chinese Communist Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 384–99; Lawrence R. Sullivan, *Leadership and Authority in China, 1895–1976* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), chs. 2 and 3; Michael Y. L. Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism: An Idea in the Making, 1920–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁹⁴ Yun Daiying, "The First Year of the Mutual Aid League," in Zhang Yunhou et al., eds., *Wushi Shiqi de Shetuan* (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 1979).

⁹⁵ Cai Yuanpei, "Chinese Philosophy in the Past Fifty Years," in *Selected Essays of Cai Yuanpei* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959). Other anarchist organizations included Jinhua She ([Kropotkinian] Evolution League), and Gongdu Huzhu Tuan [Labor-study, mutual group]. See Bi Qingsong, "On the Spread," 42.

⁹⁶ Hans J. van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920–1927* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 26–30.

He cited Spencer as a justification for the Marxist class struggle: “Social groups with common interests tend to hurt their competitors in order to benefit themselves. This inclination was named by Spencer as egoism.... Spencer pronounced: ‘Individual egoism generates the egoism of their social class.’ ... Class struggles in a social organism, as Wilhelm Roux [German embryologist, 1850–1924] observed, are equivalent to ‘the struggles between the cells of different organs.’ ... The [Marxist] class struggle belongs to this category.”⁹⁷

Li drew on both new and older sources. The latter included Spencer’s writings, while the new cell biology of the period provided the biological concept of struggle. Li equated class struggle with Spencerian social struggle, but did not mention Spencer’s enmity toward national socialism, perhaps because he did not know of it. Actually, in later editions of *Social Statics* (after 1880), Spencer argued that socialism did away with competition and thereby interfered with the evolutionary process. Remember that Spencer wanted the evolutionary process to unfold unhampered.⁹⁸

Spencer’s proposition was confronted by socialists, since altruism or “mutual aid,” which enhanced social advancement, became associated with socialism in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The English socialist campaigner Robert Blatchford (1851–1943), for instance, advocated socialism as altruism.⁹⁹ In China, however, this underwent delicate revisions since Li Dazhao and his colleagues did not view “mutual aid” and social struggle/class struggle as mutually exclusive; instead, they said, they worked together as a consonant whole. Although Kropotkin aimed to develop his concept of “mutual aid” to compete against Karl Marx, in the Chinese context the two became comrades: the struggle for existence/class struggles and “mutual aid,” according to Li, worked harmoniously in a temporal order. That said, social or class struggles, if not humankind’s teleological goal, were nonetheless the mandatory path toward a socialist future dominated by mutual aid. As Li claimed, “Marx categorized this [the history of class struggles] as pre-human history.... Real human history ... is the history of mutual aid, or history without class struggles.”¹⁰⁰ For Li, China, at least in the second decade of the last century, had not yet reached the stage of the Marxist “real human history.” Hence the role of “class struggle” was indispensable, as this assisted in the realization of the *telos* of social advancement: the realization of a socialist state. As Chen Wangdao (1891–1977), an early communist who in 1920 rendered *The Communist Manifesto* into

⁹⁷ Li Dazhao, “Wo de Makesi Zhuyi Guan [My Marxist View],” *La jeunesse* 6, 5 (1919): 521–37, esp. 531–32, 536.

⁹⁸ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (New York: Appleton, 1899), 65–68; Bernard Lightman, “Spencer’s British Disciplines,” in Mark Francis and Michael W. Taylor, eds., *Herbert Spencer: Legacies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 222–43.

⁹⁹ Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 243, 371.

¹⁰⁰ Li, “My Marxist View,” 536.

Chinese, wrote: “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.”¹⁰¹

It is apparent that China’s Marxists were generally enthusiastic about various forms of evolutionism, including the concepts of the struggle for existence and mutual aid. Looking back, we see the Chinese translator of Darwin’s *Origin*, Ma Junwu, had been one of the first scholars to introduce the details of Marxism into China, in 1903 (before that socialism was largely unknown there and had not had any impact).¹⁰² Many Chinese Marxists had a good knowledge of evolutionism. For instance, Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) had endorsed Liang Qichao before he embraced Marxism.¹⁰³ The theory of social struggle was modified by Qu Qiubai (1899–1935), the Communist Party of China’s leader in the late 1920s: “In social struggles, several classes sharing common interest may temporarily unify so as to fight against other classes.”¹⁰⁴ Chinese Marxists saw mutual aid as working, at least potentially, within classes at the same time as there was struggle between classes, which would lead in the end to a classless society in which all persons were proletarians operating via mutual aid. Such a developmental route was attractive to the Chinese, who were in a struggle against the international environment shaped by hostile global colonization, and the instrumentalization of grouping was a significant context for the appeal of Bolshevism as an effective way to mobilize the people against imperialism.

Joseph Levenson long ago argued that part of the appeal of communism to Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s lay in its suggestion that China could jump the developmental line and lead the capitalist West instead of lagging behind.¹⁰⁵ Levenson, though, failed to offer up any evolutionary mechanism through which such a “jump” might occur. Especially relevant here is the saltationist mutationism developed by the Dutch botanist and one of the earliest geneticists, Hugo de Vries. Chinese biologists in the mid-1910s overwhelmingly presented views opposed to the theories originally described in the many editions of Darwin’s *Origin* that centered on natural variability and gradual transformation via selective pressures. Instead, they adopted de Vries theories

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Chen Wangdao, trans. *Gongchandang xuanyan* [The Communist Manifesto] (Shanghai: *Shanghai shehuizhuyi yanjiushe* [Shanghai Socialism Studies Society], 1920), 2.

¹⁰² The Chinese translator of *The Origin of Species*, Ma Junwu, published a series of articles on socialism in 1903. One of them, “The Comparison between Socialism and Evolutionism,” introduced a series of socialist philosophers. See Ma Junwu, “Shehui zhuyi yu jinhuailun zhi bijiao [The comparison between socialism and evolutionism],” *Yishu huibian* [The compilation of translated works] 2, 11 (1903), 87.

¹⁰³ Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Zhou Enlai* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁰⁴ Qu Qiubai, “Duiyu jiejidouzheng de taolun [The discussion on class struggles]—Another Response to Mr. Mingzhi,” *Weekly Journal* 146 (3 Feb. 1926): 1355–58, 1356.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 134–40; Joseph Levenson, *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism: The Western Stage and the Chinese Stages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018[1971]), 48.

of evolution in which mutation became the source of novelty, postulating new species, potentially instantaneously or in abrupt jumps.¹⁰⁶ China's leading botanist, Qian Chongshu (1883–1965), an alumnus of Harvard University, argued in his “A New Explanation of Evolution” (1915):

The theory of mutation, developed by de Vries, has been dominant. New species do not appear in a gradual process, but in a sudden jump. The diversification of species is like grade skipping; changes come instantaneously and need no intermediate transitions. Take the flowers turning from red to yellow for instance. There should be transitional colors like nearly red, the red-yellow mixed, and nearly yellow, and with yellow coming finally at the end. Such a process is gradual. Mutation means that the color turns directly from red to yellow, and there are no intermediate colors.¹⁰⁷

De Vries's mutationism was based upon seven fundamental assumptions proposing that there were leaps in nature and new species were created suddenly without reference to natural selection.¹⁰⁸ It seemed to have a “solid” empirical basis, as in evidence for the discontinuity of flower color.¹⁰⁹ His experiment on wild variants of *Oenothera lamarckiana* revealed that distinct new forms could arise abruptly in nature, apparently at random, and could be propagated for generations. A new form of the plant was produced in a single step. No longer period of natural selection was required for speciation. Elsewhere I have shown how those supporting saltationism had the loudest voice in China's most noteworthy scientific journal in the 1910s, *Kexue*, and came to dominate subsequent movements in China.¹¹⁰

Kropotkinism was endorsed by both anarchists and Marxists, while de Vriesian saltationism, in the social realm, was arguably only espoused by

¹⁰⁶ Peter Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), ch. 8. The concept of “mutation” was clearly incorporated into the new synthesis, but at a micro, “gene level” as the source of evolutionary novelty.

¹⁰⁷ Qian Chongshu, “Tianyan xinyi,” *Kexue* 1, 7 (1915): 781–82.

¹⁰⁸ De Vries's mutation theory included seven fundamental assumptions: new elementary species arise suddenly, without transitional forms (Hugo de Vries, *Mutation Theory: Volume 1* [Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1909], 248). New elementary species are, as a rule, absolutely constant from the moment that they arise (*ibid.*, 249). Most of the new forms that have appeared are elementary species, and not varieties in the strict sense of the term (*ibid.*, 251). New elementary species appear in large numbers at the same time or at any rate during the same period (*ibid.*, 253). The new characteristics have nothing to do with individual variability (*ibid.*, 254). The mutations, to which the origin of new elementary species is due, appear to be indefinite; that is to say, the changes may affect all organs and seem to take place in almost every conceivable direction (*ibid.*, 255), and mutability appears periodically (*ibid.*, 258).

¹⁰⁹ Bowler, *Eclipse of Darwinism*, 183.

¹¹⁰ Jin, “Evolution of Evolutionism in China,” 55–59.

China's Marxists during the 1920s and 1930s. Li Dazhao's close ally, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), co-founder of the Communist Party of China and the Party's first General Secretary (1921–1927), assimilated de Vries's saltationist mutationism into China's social progress. He first presented the Marxist progressive social evolutionary scheme (or "historical materialism"¹¹¹) as a determinist force leading toward a socialist future: "The evolution of human society ... is from a nomadic society to a feudalist society and a capitalist society, thenceforth a proletarian society.... The evolutionary process is deterministic, dependent on the changes in the modes of production."¹¹² Yet, it would be hard for the Chinese to follow this social advancement scheme—from nomadic, to feudalist, to capitalist, and finally to proletarian society. Unlike Euro-American countries, China had not yet reached the level of a capitalist society, let alone a proletarian one.

In time, saltationist evolutionism was adopted by Chen, who knew that a "saltationist social jump" would appeal to the Chinese, who had suffered from European colonialism. Chen, a communist-evolutionist and the Dean at Peking University and known for endorsing evolutionism as the most salient strategy to save China, labeled the saltationist creative power as the deterministic force in social ascent (or leaps).¹¹³ Chen's lecture mentioned both gradual and saltationist evolution, but favored the latter:

Human evolution has two forms: one is gradual, the other is saltationist.... Saltationist evolution skips over the intermediary process.... Saltationism is caused by external influence.... Russia, due to the influence from Western Europe, leaped over the period of hand manufacturing and established modern industry.... Capital industry, in China, also leaped ... owing to external influence.... Why don't we make a huge jump and adopt the more productive socialism? Indeed, the socialist way of production is more advanced than its capitalist counterpart, and it eradicates the sin of capitalism. China is in the initial stage of capitalism; thus saltationist evolution is not impossible.... We are still waiting for the external aid.¹¹⁴

Saltationism here means the radical leap from a peasant-agrarian economy to socialism without the intermediary of industrialization. It was thought imperative for the Chinese to obtain a more "advanced" social form—a socialist society—ahead of its Western rivals. Chen's concept of saltationist

¹¹¹ F. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Chicago: S. Sonnenschein, 1892[1880]), 18–19.

¹¹² Chen Duxiu, "Zichanjieji de gemin yu gemin de zichanjieji [The bourgeoisie revolution and the revolutionary bourgeoisie]," *Xiangdao* [Weekly review] 22 (25 Apr. 1923): 162–64, 162.

¹¹³ Shen Ji, *Chen Duxiu Research*, vol. 2 (Hefei: Anhui University Press, 2003), 81.

¹¹⁴ Ren Jianshu et al. eds., *Chen Duxiu Zhuzuo Xuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1993), 497.

social evolution provided the theoretical rationale he needed to justify building a socialist nation without the full maturity of capitalism and its affiliated proletariat. Saltationist social evolution, as he indicated, was necessary, and achievable with external support, for example from the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

Yan Fu was not a Spencerian partisan in ethics, nor was he a Huxleyan regarding evolution. Instead, *Tianyan Lun* created an intellectual continuum that blended the Spencerian (Lamarckian) linear-progressive theory of natural and social evolution with Huxleyan ethics and social cooperation. This combined with traditional Chinese debates over human nature and social ethics. Evolutionary formulae and traditional Chinese philosophy were merged with the concept of the survival of the fittest, with transmutative effects on both. It was natural for Chinese readers to conclude from Yan's monograph that there was little scholarly divergence between Darwin, Spencer, and Lamarck, and that there was, consequently, even less distinction between Darwinism and social Darwinism. The differences were perhaps unimportant for Yan and his readers, since what they most wanted was a faith of societal advancement, garnered through a vague reading of evolution.

In the twenty years after Yan's translation, China underwent considerable social transformation: the Imperial Exam was terminated; China's last imperial dynasty collapsed; Classical Chinese was abandoned; and a scientific community emerged. During these historical moments, evolutionism encountered China's traditional belief system, notably based upon Confucianism. Political and intellectual groups sprang up that used evolutionary slogans to justify their agendas. In the Chinese translation of the *Origin of Species*, Ma Junwu utilized linguistic strategies to modify Darwin's text and thereby transformed central Darwinian doctrines. This not only reflected Ma's reconceptualization of evolution through the progressive lens of Chinese eyes, but also reveals that the translator did not intend to contest Yan's progressive code of evolution. Ma, in his early translation of *Origin*, failed to promote "scientific Darwinism." That said, in the first decade of the last century, denoting a difference between "social Darwinism" and "scientific Darwinism" in the Chinese context was pointless because a "scientific community" barely existed before the mid-1910s. Henceforth Darwinism (*Da'er'wen zhuyi*), together with its variations like *Jinhua* (evolution) or *Jinhua zhuyi* (evolutionism), was naturally "social."

In the "social" realm, a form of evolutionism that envisioned a cosmological order based upon strength was transformed into a component of power politics in early Republican China, despite unsuccessful political endeavors that illustrated the triumph, and perhaps also the malfunctions, of evolutionism. After a scientific community formed in China during the late

1910s, evolutionism ceased to be the exclusive property of an intellectual elite and some Chinese intellectuals contested the entire notion of evolution. Nonetheless, the effect of evolutionism was far from diminished: it was instead reinforced by two new features in China's social evolutionism—scientific evolutionism and a new variety of social Darwinism.

In the 1920s, Chinese evolutionism drew nearer to the Confucian background by adopting Kropotkin's *mutual aid* and abandoning the concept of advancement by ruthless struggle that was embedded in Spencerism. Two foreign theoretical developments—social Darwinian evolution and Marx-Engels-Leninist Marxism—were transformed and brought into mutual interaction in China, to which were added “mutual aid” and de Vriesian saltationism. This resulted in a form of Sinicized Marxism that was quite different from that of Soviet Russia, even if there were similarities: both made a jump from a peasant-agrarian economy to a Marxist-socialist political order without going through the industrial revolution and formation of a proletariat that orthodox Marxism seemed to require as a prerequisite of the socialist state.

Uli Linke points out that the political quest for social knowledge is not only an instrument or an effect of power but can also serve as a point of resistance and a basis for an opposing political strategy.¹¹⁵ This has been true with social Darwinism in various national settings. Social Darwinism, a reductivist version of which theoretically underpinned German Nazism, was fueled by a scientific ideology drawn from a strong genetic-racialist interpretation of Darwinism. Hitler even attributed his belief in social Darwinism to his personal experiences in the Great War, for this is what the trenches had taught him. These views also gained scientific support in some circles, among people like Eugen Fischer (1874–1967) and institutions like the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut für Rassenkunde.¹¹⁶ In Japan, social Darwinism was adopted wholesale along with colonialism and its justification to close ranks with the West and enhance the race via eugenics.¹¹⁷ Social Darwinism, an engine for capitalist modernity, was associated with imperialism, pragmatism, racism, progressivism, and colonialism in the Anglo-American world.¹¹⁸

Social Darwinism in China complicates this picture. It rarely promoted China's capitalist developments or market economy, and instead its saltationist

¹¹⁵ Uli Linke, “Folklore and the Government of Social Life,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, 1 (1990): 117–48. 143.

¹¹⁶ Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 161; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁷ Sumiko Otsubo and James Bartholomew, “Eugenics in Japan: Some Ironies of Modernity, 1883–1945,” *Science in Context* 11, 3–4 (1998): 545–65.

¹¹⁸ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*; Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*; A. P. Thakur, *The Legacy of Social Darwinism* (Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2005).

ideas legitimized leaping over a capitalist-industrialist stage. It justified ideas of Chinese statist development and a social leap to a socialist society, changed the narratives about modernity and Western capitalism, and eventually helped build Han Chinese ideas of racial superiority, boosted social unity, and sponsored a “benign” version of social evolutionism dominated by “mutual aid.” It not only incorporated ideas from Spencer, Huxley, Lamarck, and Darwin, but also the lines of evolutionary thought defined by the likes of de Vries from the scientific side, and Kropotkin on the social side.

And yet, these forms of social Darwinism, tailored to the Chinese needs, were coherent within the Chinese framework since they were a series of strategies adopted to tackle challenges in the face of the Western expansion. This once again confirms the claim that social Darwinism is syncretic and multivalent, as its terms are often ambiguous and subject to change, and commonly adopted by intellectuals to the political and social circumstances of their age and region.¹¹⁹ It is difficult to say that the Chinese term *shehui Da'er wen Zhuyi* (social Darwinism) is “pejorative,” but no one claimed to be a staunch and enduring Spencerian, Darwinian, or Huxleyan, even if others might have haphazardly invoked the authority of these men to advance their own itinerary. No one upheld social Darwinism by deliberately erecting protective belts when it was under attack, in the way that a Marxian or Weberian intellectual would do. Chinese thinkers altered the application of evolutionism within their linguistic context, local philosophy, and social-political environment, and occasionally their personal pursuits. The highly selective appropriation of social evolutionary ideas in China illustrates the ways in which local cultural ingredients were pivotal in localizing knowledge emanating from remote origins of authority. It offers us guides for how historians should study the global circulation of Western ideas as these are adapted by non-Western cultures.

¹¹⁹ Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*, 35.

Abstract: This paper investigates the development of social Darwinism in China from the mid-1890s to 1930 vis-à-vis its ties with social Darwinism in the West, employing a comparative analysis of Spencer, Huxley, and Yan Fu. A form of evolutionism that envisioned a cosmological order based upon strength was transformed into a component of power politics in Republican China, despite unsuccessful political endeavors that illustrated both the triumphs and social malfunctions of evolutionary ideas. From the late 1910s, a new variety of social Darwinism arose alongside the scientific one, reflecting the influence of Kropotkin and de Vries, as Chinese thinkers incorporated non-Anglophone texts. The theories that emerged made sense of the changing Chinese adaptations of evolutionary thinking by contextualizing and modifying them within the intellectual and political dynamics inside China and also in China's evolving relationship with capitalism and imperialism.

Key words: social Darwinism, China, Spencer, Huxley, Yan Fu, Darwin, evolution, Pyotr Kropotkin, Hugo de Vries