

**The Course of Heaven (*tianxing* 天行) and Human Endeavor (*renzhi* 人治) - Yen Fu's Syncretic Interpretation of Darwinism**

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Yen Fu introduced Darwinism into Chinese thought in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to challenge the dominant conservative thinking and to argue for radical reforms.

Based on the Darwinian idea of evolution, Yen Fu outlined a grandiose scheme of universal change and evolution and argued that change was not only a necessity required by the universal law, but also the instrument for attaining progress. Yen Fu also learned from social evolutionary theories as developed by Herbert Spencer, Edward Jenks, among others, the idea that human development everywhere follows a universally deterministic and linear evolutionary process. He showed that the West had already reached a higher stage in human evolution than China had, and argued that learning from the West was not only something desirable, but a historical imperative.

In Yen Fu's reinterpretation of Western evolutionary theories, he demonstrated a highly voluntaristic tendency. Spencer's evolutionary theory bore the stamp of Calvinist determinism which, though not identical with, nevertheless had the potential of leading to fatalism. This fatalistic theme may have tended to an attitude of non-action, waiting for 'destiny' to reveal its determination. This was exactly what Yen Fu opposed vigorously. Evolutionary theory in Yen Fu was more than a theory of the law governing the natural and human world, but a demand for action and heuristic instruction for action.

Yen Fu's emphasis on man's action was evident in his translation of and commentaries on Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Through translation and reinterpretation, Yen Fu transformed Huxley-Spencer debate from an issue concerning ethics to an issue concerning determinism and human endeavor.

As has been known, the primary concern of the Huxley-Spencer debate was with the relationship between moral and natural principles, an issue which also occupied a significant place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western moral philosophy. Huxley was dissatisfied with Spencer's evolutionary theory because he considered Spencer to have applied evolutionary theory to moral issues. He argued that the ethical progress of society depends not on imitating the cosmic progress, but on combating it.

In Yen Fu's interpretation of the Huxley vs. Spencer controversy, the issue in question was no longer about relationship between moral principles and natural principles, rather it was about relationship between human endeavor and determinism. Yen Fu translated the English term 'ethics' as 'the way of man' (Jen-tao), or sometimes as 'the way of ruling' (Chih-tao), and he translated 'evolution' as t'ien-yen, 'the cosmic process' as t'ien-hsing and 'the way of nature' as t'ien-tao. He then explained the Huxley vs. Spencer controversy by the categories of classical Chinese philosophy: 'man's relationship to t'ien (nature).

Yen Fu discerned three general views on the issue of man's relation to t'ien in traditional Chinese philosophy, represented by orthodox Confucianism, Taoism and one particular school of Confucianism represented by Hsun-tzu.

Yen Fu was highly critical of orthodox Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism in particular, for its failure to distinguish the way of t'ien from the way of man. Yen's subscription to Spencer's ideas of evolution was aimed to show the existence of objective laws independent of man's will. Yen Fu often compared Spencer's ideas to some ideas found in Taoism because he perceived that they all treated nature as being independent of man's consciousness and tried to understand the laws of nature objectively. Yen Fu, however, was not entirely satisfied with Spencer's, or Taoist, philosophy. He perceived both Spencer and Taoism to be guilty of advocating man's non-action. This dissatisfaction directly motivated Yen Fu's turn to Hsun Tzu. In his translation of *Evolution and Ethics*, particularly in his original manuscript of the translation, Yen Fu tried to interpret Huxley's ideas in the framework of Hsun Tzu's argument for man's active role in controlling natural processes.

Thus in his interpretations of Darwinism, Yen Fu in fact combined, sometimes unconsciously, various ideas from different Western thinkers as well as Chinese classics to formulate a synthesis of his own. The primary aim of this synthesis was to reveal the laws which determined the destiny of a society, and illustrate the direction and process of China's changes accordingly. He displayed an immense confidence in the capacity of man to change society. These ideas were to have an enduring influence on the succeeding development of Chinese thought.