

The Meaning of Freedom: Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism. By Max Ko-wu Huang. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008. Pp. xxviii + 408. \$55.00.

The most satisfying studies of individual thinkers reveal major conceptual themes of an entire era. A case in point is Huang Ko-wu's study of Yan Fu (1854–1921), China's premier translator and interpreter of Western social thought. The starting point is Yan's apparent failure to grasp some of J. S. Mill's central concepts in *On Liberty* (1859). Why did Yan's translations fail to grasp some central Millian ideas about the essential role of liberty for human progress? Huang's answers become the basis for a wide-ranging exploration of Chinese liberalism from Yan's day to the present. The hinge connecting the book's argumentation is a line-by-line analysis of Chapter 1 of Mill's *On Liberty*, as translated by Yan. From it emerge three questions:

(1) What were the sources of Yan's intellectual difficulties with Mill's thought?

(2) What do these difficulties reveal about Chinese social thought around the turn of the twentieth century? Did Yan's failure to pick up Mill's subtle argumentation suggest broader features of Chinese culture, presuppositions that made Mill's scepticism inaccessible or distasteful to Yan and perhaps to others of his time?

(3) If there was (is) a distinctive "Chinese" liberalism, how is it related to Yan's problems with Western doctrines of individualism and creative freedom?

First, consider Yan's translation of *On Liberty*: Translations notoriously betray. Perhaps the most fascinating cases of betrayal arise, not from incompetence or from intent to distort, but from failure to penetrate the target culture. Ironically, the more conscientious the translator, the more revealing the deviation. Such is the case of Yan Fu, as Huang shows him wrestling with the subtleties of Mill's logic and with the European intellectual contexts in which Mill was writing.

How well equipped was Yan Fu to mediate between Chinese and foreign cultures? Huang approaches this question from the bottom up: the deepest strata of social and philosophical awareness seem to have caused the most difficulty. However firm Yan's command of English, Huang shows that it was not subtle enough to grasp the crucial links in Mill's logical arguments or to render them into accurate Chinese equivalents. Yan was apparently unable to grasp Mill's central rationale for free discussion of moral, political and philosophical ideas, unconstrained by society's prejudices or taboos. Mill believed that in advanced societies, such as Victorian England, thought and hence human progress were more likely to be impeded by societal pressure than by state persecution. To protect original thinkers from "the tyranny of the majority" required a staunch determination to preserve "liberty" in the form of unfettered debate over social, political and moral issues, debate in which every man's (or woman's) opinion would be confronted by the opinion of others for verification or falsification. No opinion was, of itself, a reliable statement of "truth," but rather a provisional reach for it, subject to rigorous challenges from the opinions of others. Mill believed that human progress depended upon such searching examination of new ideas, put forward by innovative thinkers, undeterred by majority opinion.

Mill saw human reasoning as inherently fallible; hence the search for provisional truths required a resolute scepticism. This “epistemological pessimism,” deeply rooted in European thought, stemmed from “a widespread impression that moral norms lack any basis in objective knowledge.” Hence the need for endless testing of such norms through free discussion. Such was Mill’s “liberty”—to be limited only by the possibility of its doing actual harm to other people.

In comparison, Huang believes (along with his mentor, Thomas A. Metzger, who wrote the Foreword for this book) that Chinese social, moral and political reasoning “remained epistemologically optimistic”—that is, inclined to believe that such truths were not only absolute but humanly accessible through reason or faith. This cultural constant, Huang suggests, prevented even as talented an intellectual as Yan Fu from understanding key points of Mill’s argumentation, to say nothing of rendering them accurately in Chinese. Completely overlooked by scholars of Yan’s translations, this fact is proven, to my satisfaction, by the author’s comparison of Mill’s argumentation with Yan’s translations. (Examples of these translations, with Mill’s original followed by Yan’s Chinese translation and its English equivalent, are offered in Chapter 3. The entirety of Mill’s Chapter 1 of *On Liberty*, along with Yan’s Chinese version, is provided in Appendix II. Readers can get the flavour of the discrepancies by careful attention to these passages, which are to my mind the most revealing sections of the book.)

Yan’s difficulties can be illustrated, first, by his failure to understand Mill’s use of “opinion,” meaning a judgement not fully attested by evidence. Mill’s subtleties are lost, for example (emphasis added):

Mill: “We may, and must, *assume* our *opinion* to be true for the guidance of our own conduct” [acting according to an idea we accept provisionally, even though its ultimate value is far from certain.]

Yan: “But when [on the spot] decisions in human affairs have to be made, there are *permanent standards*” 則固有其常經 [implies that we must select among well-attested and enduring moral formulae.] (p. 137)

Yan had similar difficulties rendering Mill’s hypothetical treatment of how he might publicly oppose what he classed as anti-social ideas:

Mill: “and it is assuming no more when we forbid bad men to pervert society by the propagation of *opinions* which *we regard* as false and pernicious.” [Here we see Mill falling back on his one exception to complete liberty of discourse—the case in which ideas do demonstrable harm to others—arguably not one of his finer moments.]

Yan: “I do no more than attack *perverse doctrines* 邪說 . . . so as to protect the world from falling into confusion.” 使不至於惑世誣民 [here resorting to standard imperial terms for *heresy* (*xieshuo*) denoting a malign denial of a doctrinal absolute, a capital crime under the Qing regime and earlier.] (p. 137)

Such examples may seem captious; nevertheless they are supplemented by many more in Huang's passage-by-passage scrutiny of critical philosophical points in Mill's argumentation. Yan consistently misses what Mill believes is the provisional and falsifiable nature of human understanding, and the relativity of human behaviour. Could such anti-scepticism (which could be labelled "naïve" rather than optimistic) really characterize the thought of an entire people? Did Yan purposely misrepresent Mill to appeal to what he believed a classically-educated Chinese readership could absorb? It is just as likely that Mill and his translator were negotiating such bumpy philosophical ground that, in the process, one party's failure to penetrate the intellectual depths of the other was only to be expected. Yet Huang leaves us wondering whether or not Yan's off-key translations *could have been expressed in Chinese, in terms that did full justice to Mill's thought*. If Yan had found that they *could not*, because the appropriate expressions did not exist in the classical Chinese lexicon, then that would have said more about Chinese thought in general, than about Yan's translations of them. This point Huang suggests but does not firmly establish.

In another instance, however, Huang does point out how Yan clearly rejected or substantially modified certain of Mill's basic ideas, evidently out of conviction that they were not consistent with Chinese values. Take Yan's conscientious substitution (in a second version of "*On Liberty*") of a homonym for the *you* of *ziyou* "liberty" (繇 for 由) which delivers a more generous, less selfish tone; and an alteration of the title itself to reflect the idea of a moral "boundary between self and group." Huang explains that this latter alteration was a reference to Xunzi, who used "boundary" in the sense of preventing conflict. Clearly, Yan's choice of words was bending Mill's "liberty" in a more socially empathetic and unselfish direction (p. 95).

With respect to the political implications of humans' individuality, Mill's meaning again evades Yan's translation:

Mill: "In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others."

Yan: "Therefore, one with a distinctive personal character and style can achieve the full realization of both himself and all other things, making virtue clear to all and renewing the people. Making myself good and so helping others become increasingly good thus depends on morally independent action, as opposed to becoming corrupted by convention."

Huang notes that Yan's trite *teli duxing* (morally independent action) embedded in *yi duxing er teli* 以獨行而特立 did not fully realize Mill's "the development of his individuality" which for Mill was the mainspring of progress. And Yan's use of the classical tag *mingde xinmin* 明德新民 (making virtue clear to all and renewing the people) calls to mind "the Confucian way of synthesizing the worth of the self and the group," diluting Mill's primary focus on the unique individual (pp. 152-53).

In sum, "Yan was influenced by the Confucian vision of the ideal person, that is,

the ideal of the sage or individual distinguished not by his originality but by his ability to embody eternal principles and overcome egotism” (p. 142). Yan also had trouble with the concept of “inherent rights,” which in some instances he simply declines to translate at all (pp. 155–57). The consistency of this Confucian bias makes it unlikely that language problems were the only underlying cause. Instead, Huang goes on to demonstrate how Yan consciously sought accommodation between Western and Chinese values; and most of the book proceeds toward that conclusion.

Yan’s “accommodation,” as Huang describes it, was far from a mere variant of the “essence” and “function” paradigm (Chinese learning for the essence [*ti* 體: Confucian morality and social structure], Western learning for the function [*yong* 用: machine technology, industrial production]) that underlay nineteenth-century efforts to resist foreign aggression. “Accommodation” meant a deeper, more integral blending, by which the foreign element was tempered and enriched by Chinese values. In fact, argues Huang, a “harmonious juxtaposition of continuity and discontinuity can be found throughout Yan’s life” (p. 108). Yan saw Confucian morality as the social glue for a modern society; and an accommodationist version of modernization as the best hope for China’s survival (p. 244).

In Huang’s enlightening historiographical account (Chapter 1), he takes issue with the work of the first Western historian to deal seriously with Yan: Benjamin I. Schwartz (unaccountably missing from the Index), whose influential book, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* focussed on the “Faustian-Promethean” energy which fuelled European civilization through its all-powerful nation-states, as the primary value that Yan derived from reading Adam Smith, Mill, Spencer et al. Huang states accordingly that Schwartz “depicted Yan Fu as motivated primarily by nationalism” (pp. 28, 182). Despite Schwartz’s provocative title, this is an oversimplification of his findings. If one examines the decade beginning in 1895 (a crucial one for Yan’s thought) from a broad perspective, “national wealth and power” (while important) expresses only narrowly the range of urgent projects facing Chinese reformers. The main point was *the survival of China as a civilization*, which would require not only building a defensible modern state, but also “renovating the people” to a point where China’s inherited culture and institutions could be reshaped to serve the economic and social needs of a modern society.

As an example of one such reshaping project in the 1900s, consider “local self-government” (*difang zizhi* 地方自治) a movement in which élite activists were busily instituting provincial and town assemblies to mobilize resources and services, *often in competition with the central government*, to benefit their home regions and communities. Yan Fu knew about this movement and (encouraged by Mill and Montesquieu) approved of it as wholesome preparation for citizen participation in public affairs (p. 239). Competitive or not, local political and entrepreneurial self-help was not considered by its proponents as irrelevant to national strength, any more than Mill’s concept of individual self-enhancement was irrelevant to the larger interests of state and society. That does not, however, mean that the value of such projects was considered as significant mainly, let alone only, for “wealth and power of the nation-state” toward which the self-government

crowd entertained considerable suspicion. Schwartz emphasizes Yan's conviction that enlightened self-interest, liberty and democracy "are all part of one syndrome," of which patriotism is but one beneficiary.¹

Rather than "nationalism," I suggest that Schwartz (with respect to the *On Liberty* project) is rather close to Huang's point of view, finding in Yan's translations a more tenuous balance between individual and the larger society, canted more steeply in favour of the *social group* than Mill would have it, yet not primarily in favour of the ruling state. Though Yan's balance sometimes tips toward the state (e.g. p. 154), his deviations from Mill are more often in the direction of a vaguely large-scale social group—*guoqun* 國群 (which is, wrongly I think, translated as "group and nation" [p. 206]. Grammatically *guo*, or country, modifies *qun*, society, meaning "a society within a country"—that is, more socially than nationally relevant). Yan uses the term *guoqun* even more vaguely to translate Mill's "collective opinion" (perhaps in Yan's view, though not Mill's, the social component of a national entity) (p. 279). Consequently, I believe Schwartz's view of Yan's passion should not be represented as anything so simple as "nationalism," though it properly stresses Yan's primary concern with the claims of society alongside, or even supervening, the interests of the individual.

Yan's idea of "liberalism" owed part of its depth to his Western learning; but not all, or even the most important part. Huang's treatment of this theme lasts throughout the book, being discussed under every major division. A summary would include a balanced relationship between individual and group, a fusion of Western and Chinese values underlying a modern worldview, a loathing for extremism (particularly as evinced in revolutionary movements), and a preference for gradual (evolutionary) progress. The "freedom" aspect was to be upheld by solid foundations in empirical as well as spiritual awareness, and the Chinese component of "Chinese liberalism" was an essential counterpart to Western scientific thought. In fact, "Chineseness" was best appreciated by having Western ideas around for comparison, for without the old learning, "the new learning will not be established on solid ground" (pp. 243, 245). The question of "freedom," however, is not so optimistically framed in Yan's thought. What Isaiah Berlin later termed "negative freedom" (immunities from pressure or persecution) and "positive freedom" (the encouragement to make the most of one's abilities) are not well balanced in China, whether contemporary or earlier. "Positive freedom" facilitates (at worst) self-aggrandizement and (at best) powerful positions of social, economic or political leadership. No question, the positive variety has been stronger in modern China than the negative, which is perennially dismissed, by those in power, as culturally unsuitable. Yan Fu was able to finesse the issue by clinging to the possibility of conscientious, talented and learned élite leadership during China's transitional journey to modern nationhood.

¹ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1964), p. 169.

Was Yan, by virtue of these qualities and convictions, an élitist? Certainly, if one adopts the usual measures. Yet his evaluation by later scholars is not so simple. He is praised as a scholar of the West who merged Western and Chinese ideas, a kind of intellectual middleman who saw the mutual relevance of the two cultures and strove to bring the best aspects of them together. He is celebrated as a gradualist who renounced revolution, and attacked as a conservative or “feudalist” for the same reason. Yet the academic Marxist Li Zehou 李澤厚 believed that Yan was actually beyond conventional class categorization: though Yan was never a true progressive, he instead was an intellectual leader operating on a “totally new level” (*zhanxin jieji* 嶄新階級) who opened an authentic world of scientific and social thought to “generations of young Chinese patriots and revolutionaries.”²

Finally, a word about the title of this rich and learned book: *The Meaning of Freedom* should be understood as the question of how “freedom” for the individual should be balanced against “freedom” for the collectivity—particularly but not exclusively the nation; this is presented repeatedly as the main axis of differentiation between Yan’s European sources and his own orientation toward a Confucian sense of social responsibility. And the subtitle, *Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism* refers to the ongoing debate within China, from Yan Fu’s day until the present, about how, and whether, Chinese moral values can be concerted with modernization to produce what might be called “liberalism with Chinese characteristics.”

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² Li Zehou, “Lun Yan Fu 論嚴復” (On Yan Fu), in Li, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* 中國近代思想史論 (Historical Essays on Modern Chinese Thought) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社, 1982), p. 250.