

Article

Notes on the Laozi and Yan Fu's Theory of Dao

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Abstract: In his *Notes on the Laozi*, Yan Fu constructs a new and unique theory of *Dao* that incorporates ideas from both Chinese and Western philosophies. Yan's *Dao* is a unity of the physical and the metaphysical. It not only inherits the characteristics of *Dao* in the *Laozi*, as the origin and destination of all things, but also adds materiality by being equated to Aether. Yan further draws on the principles of calculus to bridge the physical and metaphysical sides of *Dao*. However, his infusion of evolution into his *Dao* conception is incompatible with the cycles of reversion that are the characteristic motion of Laozi's *Dao* and this leads to internal contradictions in Yan Fu's vision. When applied to realpolitik, the principles of void and non-being expounded in Yan's theory of *Dao* become embodied in democracy. It can be said that democracy is the ultimate result of applying this new theory of *Dao* to politics.

Keywords: *Notes on the Laozi*; *Dao*; ximing; zhong; democracy

1. Introduction: A Shift in Perspective

In 1905, Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) published his *Notes on the Laozi* (*Pingdian Laozi* 評點老子).¹ This work, while completed by adding thousands of notes to Yan's student Xiong Jilian's 季廉 analysis of the *Laozi*,² reveals Yan's attempt to combine Chinese and Western philosophy. Yan Fu was especially suited for this effort, for in the years preceding his composition of *Notes on the Laozi*, he had translated *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas Huxley, *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, *The Study of Sociology* by Herbert Spencer, *On Liberty* by John Mill, *A History of Politics* by Edward Jenks, and the first half of *A System of Logic* by John Mill. He had also begun to translate *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu.

Scholars call Yan Fu, who introduced Western thought into China, "the first person of Western learning in modern China." This not only reflects Yan Fu's profound attainments in Western learning, but also shows that Yan Fu was a pioneer who introduced much Western thought to China. Other intellectuals at the time could not directly read European or American works, and only knew the Western world through the propaganda of missionaries or popular books on science, technology, and law translated by the Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau (江南製造局) and Beijing Tongwen Museum (北京同文館). Even such famous intellectuals as Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) had very limited access to original Western works, and Yan Fu's translations undoubtedly broadened their understanding of the Western world.

It is precisely because Yan Fu's identity as a translator is so dazzling that scholars have paid more attention to the Western aspects of Yan Fu's thought, while neglecting the traditional Chinese ideas at its foundation.³ Thus, much of the research on Yan Fu's *Notes on the Laozi* has similarly been influenced by such a prejudice. Researchers generally believe that Yan Fu's contribution lies in using the *Laozi's Dao* to promote Western learning.⁴ In contrast, we affirm that instead of Westernization, Yan's actual goal was expanding Chinese thought in a universalist way. He thus used Western learning as a tool to complement and improve the *Laozi's Dao*, situating the core Chinese concept *Dao* as one that could apply to both the East and the West.



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This is not a unique claim, as a small number of scholars have begun to identify that Yan Fu's ultimate purpose as using modern Western thought to develop but not subsume Chinese learning, and they have noticed the conscious connection between Yan Fu's *Notes on the Laozi* and traditional Chinese Laozegetics (*Laoxue* 老學). For example, Liu Sihe 劉思禾 observes: "We can see that [the] theories [of this group, including Yan Fu,] aim to return to the tradition of Laozegetics from the classical era."⁵ Kuan-yen Liu holds a similar view: "Yan Fu redefines the natural way of the *Dao* in the light of Darwinism, Spencerism, and progressivism" (Kuan-yen Liu 2020). Of course, this conclusion requires further investigation.

If we look to Yan Fu himself, he makes this goal very clear in his preface to *Notes on the Laozi*:

I often think that only with a deep understanding of Western theories can we accurately interpret the classical literature of our forefathers because Western theories can give us certain inspirations and make us understand the theories of our forefathers more thoroughly. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

We see here that engagement with Western learning is to assist in more fully comprehending the unique theories of Chinese classics such as the *Laozi*. In Yan Fu's view, the sage's words are so obscure and subtle that vulgar scholars have continually struggled to understand them.⁶ Therefore, Yan Fu tried to free himself from the limitations of his historical context to seek the ultimate truth of *Dao* (the traditional Chinese term for the order of the universe and the ideal way of human life) that he believed must integrate both Chinese and Western ideas.⁷

Yan further says:

The sage's words are concise and profound. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Western learning before rethinking the sage's words to perceive the subtlety and depth of the words and to understand the immutability of the sage's words. (Wang 1977, p. 24)

He also makes this explicit in the preface to *Notes on the Laozi*:

If one cannot understand both Chinese and Western learning, ancient and modern learning, how can one understand the wholeness, subtlety, and profoundness of *Dao*? (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

Thus, Western learning serves as a tool for Yan Fu to understand the sage's words, with universal truth based in Chinese learning as his ultimate destination. This explains why Yan advocated Western learning when he was young but returned to Chinese learning during the last phase of his life. It should be noted that Yan Fu's return to Chinese learning does not indicate a rejection of Western learning, but his establishing a "new Chinese learning" that integrates ancient and modern Chinese learning with Western learning.

This "new" learning is reflected not only in *Notes on the Laozi* but also in *Evolution and Ethics* (*Tianyanlun* 天演論), a connection previously noted by Wu Zhanliang. He believes—in contrast to scholars who overemphasize Yan's focus on Western learning and consider his core motivation to be saving the nation—that it is unreasonable to simply depict Yan Fu's work in this way. Wu explains that Yan's translation of *Evolution and Ethics* does not address contemporary problems but is an abstract study of the theory of evolution. While it does mention salvation, Yan is more interested in its content as a way to *ming Dao* 明道 (clarify the *Dao*). Wu concludes that the concept of *ming Dao* functions as Yan Fu's "ultimate attempt to put forward an ideological system that could not only guide the long-term development of politics and culture but also integrate various Western and Chinese academic ideas with the core theory of evolution to deeply reflect on traditional culture and the current situation in China so as to help save the nation" (Wu 1999, p. 109).

To summarize, Yan Fu thought Western learning could enhance previous scholars' limited understanding of the truths of Chinese learning, and so he established a new synthetic Chinese learning that included Chinese, Western, ancient, and modern ideas. If we

approach the *Notes on the Laozi* by taking Yan Fu's intent not as the imposition of Western learning on the *Laozi* but instead the enrichment of Chinese learning as a form of universal knowledge, we find that his new Chinese learning can be summarized as a rich and systematic theory of *Dao* (universal truth based on a Chinese foundation).

The following article uses the methodology of Global Laozegetics⁸ to consider Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* in his *Notes on the Laozi*. This approach stresses that his work both can be understood as connecting to an ancient tradition of Chinese learning and commentary while also drawing on knowledge from around the globe. I thus will not tell a story about the Chinese versus the Western, but one about the *Laozi* exegesis as it entered a new phase within the flow of history. Based on said view, this paper will systematically engage three aspects of Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*: *Dao* itself, things, and politics. It will analyze how this theory of *Dao* includes important internal tensions and reflect on how it leads to Yan's assertion that the *Laozi*'s political philosophy is ultimately democratic.

2. *Dao*: Unity of the Physical and Metaphysical

Since Yan Fu's academic aim in engaging Western learning was to demonstrate the truth, completeness, and subtleness of the omnipresent *Dao*, the first question that needs to be answered is whether such a *Dao* as a universal cosmic order really exists. Yan considers *Dao* as a universalizable Chinese concept that can be brought into dialogue with Western metaphysics,⁹ and he relies on Lu Jiuyuan's (陸九淵 1139–1193) theory of "same mind and principle" (*tongxin tongli* 同心同理) to support his view:¹⁰

I always believed Lu Jiuyuan when he said "there will be sages in the East Sea and the West Sea with the same mind and principle (*li* 理)." Although what he said was much more intelligent than other scholars in the Song dynasty, I think it does not yet fully explain the sage's implied meaning. Does it only include the East and West Seas? Hundreds of centuries in the past and hundreds of centuries in the future, mind and principle never vary. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12)

Yan proposes that there exists a universal mind that transcends time and space. Therefore, the Eastern and Western sages have the same mind, which means that the *li* (principle, also known as *Dao*) adhered to by both Eastern and Western sages is the same. Having asserted the *Dao* indeed exists and is a cosmic order that transcends culture, Yan Fu begins to analyze and enrich the *Laozi*'s theory of *Dao* to address universal philosophical questions. Generally speaking, the *Dao* he constructs unifies the worlds of physics and metaphysics. His metaphysical ideas come from the *Laozi*, and his physics component draws more from Western thought. Therefore, the theory of *Dao* constructed by Yan Fu is a fusion rooted in Chinese thought that integrates Western thought. Specifically, he makes *Dao* not only the supreme overarching creator of all things, invisible, inaudible, imperceptible, independent, unchanging, pervading, and unfailing, but also the physical substance that is the fundamental component of all worldly objects.

With its metaphysical status, Yan Fu's *Dao* has the characteristics of being "without birth or death, never increasing or decreasing; all things are interdependent, but *Dao* is independent; all things are changing but *Dao* remains the same" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 36). It directs the world: "The Great Form is *Dao* and what all things mentioned in the previous chapter obey" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 44). It is the creator: "*Dao*, namely, *Taiji*, comes down and gives birth to the One" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 51). The supremacy of this *Dao* can be seen from the word "come down." It occupies the highest position, staring down at all things. This process by which *Dao* comes down and gives birth to all things determines the nature of things.

Importantly, in the last quote about creation, Yan glosses *Dao* with *Taiji*. This is due to his view that while universal metaphysical existence might be called by different names in various traditions, it is all *Dao*:

Mystery (*xuan* 玄) metaphorically refers to the doorway whence all secret essences were derived in *Laozi*, and which is called *summum genus* by Westerners. Mystery

equates to terms in the *Book of Changes* such as *Dao tong wei yi* 道通為一, *Taiji* 太極, and *Wuji* 無極. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 21)

Since *Dao* is the cause instead of the effect, it is said that “what it is originated from is unknown.” If a thing can be named, it originated from *Dao*. *Zhongfu* 眾甫, the father of all things, is known in Western philosophy as the First Cause. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 23)

It is called *Dao* in *Laozi*, *Taiji* in the *Book of Changes*, independence (*zizai* 自在) or the dharma-gate of non-duality (*buer famen* 不二法門) in Buddhism, and the First Cause in Western philosophy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 36)

As can be seen from the quotations above, Yan believes that *Dao*, here glossed as “Mystery,” can also be called *summum genus* and the First Cause from Western learning, *zhongfu* (the father of all things) from the *Laozi*, *Wuji* (the Great ultimate) and *Taiji* (the Great One) from the *Book of Changes*, *Dao tong wei yi* (the one from the viewpoint of *Dao*) from *Zhuangzi*, and independence or the dharma-gate of non-duality from Buddhism.

While Yan appears to equate these concepts, he still emphasizes the *Laozi's* key theory that language, understanding, and reason are not enough to know the complete transcendent existence which we can call *Dao*:

The unvarying *Dao* (*changdao* 常道) and unvarying Name (*changming* 常名) are independent of external things, inexpressible, and cannot be analyzed with rational thinking (*buke siyi* 不可思議). (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 20)

Yan Fu continues by elaborating on the meaning of *buke siyi*:

Buke siyi is not the same as *buke mingyan* 不可名言 (inexpressible) or *buke yanyu* 不可言喻 (indescribable), and starkly different from *buneng siyi* 不能思議 (un-thinkable). A peculiar thing that one encounters can be described as *buke mingyan*. Being trapped in extreme happiness or sadness beyond expression because of, for example, feeling comfortable to do what you desire to do, can be described as *buke yanyu*. People living in the tropics who have never seen ice suddenly hear that one can walk on water, or for example, people who do not know about gravity suddenly hear that the earth is trampled underfoot. They are confused, thinking there's no such thing and even regarding it as nonsense, and that's what *buneng siyi* means. What I mean by *buke siyi* is, for example, saying that there is a square shaped circle, death without birth, and a thing that appears in different places at the same time . . . Buddhist Nirvana is something that can be described as *buke siyi*. (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 318)

Buke siyi has two meanings. One is the concept full of internal contradictions such as the rectangular circle and death as birth. The other is the ultimate state to which *Dao* belongs. *Dao* itself is beyond description beyond the logic and differentiation in language. “Chapter [4] specifically describes *Dao*. We should pay attention to the characters *huo* 或 and *si* 似, so as to have a deeper understanding of *Dao*. Fundamentally speaking, *Dao* cannot be accurately described in words” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 22). Yan Fu notes these two terms *huo* and *si* that both mean “seems to be” to highlight the impossibility of concretely depicting *Dao*, as he believes that human perception or cognition cannot be applied to the independent and transcendent *Dao* but only interdependent worldly things.

Yan Fu's metaphysical aspect of *Dao* makes it the ineffable universal creator. Uniquely, though, Yan also endows *Dao* with a physical status. He says, “*Dao* is nature” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 37), and “only Aether (*yitai* 以太) can enter in invisible form into the infinitesimal gaps that cannot be seen” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 52). Here, Yan Fu professes that the essence of *Dao*, or *qi* 氣, equates with the now outdated scientific notion of Aether as the most fundamental material substance (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 316). Explaining *qi* with the modern scientific language of Aether, *qi* becomes the core component of the 64 chemical elements that constitute all things in heaven and earth.

Qi means definite particles that have mass, with attractive and repulsive forces between them, and whose mass and motion can be detected. Those chemical elements can be turned into *qi* when heated to the highest temperature. (Yan 2014c, vol. 5, p. 351)

Importantly, Yan Fu redefines the traditional Chinese *qi* according to science, depicting it as a material particle that has mass, is omnipresent, and can be detected when it moves. He makes it the basis of all things, saying explicitly: “in spite of their varieties, all things between heaven and earth have the same source” (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, p. 23). “Human beings, animals, insects, plants and trees in heaven and earth all originate from *qi*, and gradually become all things through the evolution of *qi*” (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, p. 24). Ouyang Zhesheng holds the same view, arguing that “Yan Fu makes a materialist interpretation of *Dao*, the core concept of Laozi’s philosophical system” (Ouyang 2015, p. 109). The interpretation of *Dao* as *qi*/Aether undoubtedly pulls down the lofty *Dao* and gives it a material attribute, narrowing the gap between *Dao* and all things.

Yan is claiming here that *Dao* is matter, but this seems to conflict with the contrast between the two in his articulations of metaphysics, and also seems to impose Western science on the Chinese *Dao*. Yet, to resolve this tension, Yan relies on Laozi’s concept of non-being, while stating that “non-being is not nothing” (無不真無) (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 50). Given that non-being is not really nothing, what is it?

There is such a saying about calculus: numbers originate from the infinitesimal, which cannot be perceived by human senses. Therefore, it is not impossible to regard it as non-being. Infinitesimals can accumulate to form objects that can be known by humans. And the origin of all things is within the infinitesimal. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 25)

Yan Fu introduces the calculus-based concept of infinitesimals to interpret non-being; he thinks that infinitesimals can be regarded as non-being directly, and that infinitesimals accumulate to form all things that can be known. In this sense, all things originate from infinitesimals (non-being). Therefore, non-being in the *Laozi* is neither the ontological non-being in Wang Bi’s (王弼 226–249) thought, nor the *kong*¹¹ (空 emptiness) of Buddhism, but the infinitesimal which is within the range of human understanding and rational thought but beyond perceptual knowledge. For example, Aether is understood as a basic particle that, though invisible and inaudible, in reality, has weight and extension. Yan interprets *Dao* empirically and uses the infinitesimal to explain how *Dao* has given birth to things with form and mass.

Yan Fu appears to reduce *Dao* to the finest matter that equals *qi*/Aether; however, he holds to the Chinese tradition by noting the other aspect of *qi*: “what was called *qi* in ancient China is now called force (*li* 力)”¹² (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 204). This does not indicate that *qi* and force are exactly the same. It means that *qi* accumulates into all things that possess mass, the quality that naturally generates attraction and repulsion. Yan says in *Evolution and Ethics* that “all things in the universe interact with each other to produce force. If there were no objects, there would be no attraction or repulsion. If there were no attraction or repulsion, objects would not appear. Mass and force depend on each other. Force disappears without mass and vice versa” (Yan 2014a, vol. 1, p. 76). The result of this approach centers the Chinese unity of matter and energy in the physical side of the *Dao*, though also employing Western theories to refine this view.

Yan further extends his vision of *Dao* in nature as the origin of attraction and repulsion, explaining this force aspect of *qi* as also manifesting through the competition for survival between all living things and the process of natural selection. He explains:

One is “competition between living things” (*wujing* 物競) and the other is “natural selection” (*tianze* 天擇). The former refers to all things competing with each other for their own survival and the latter refers to natural selection where the stronger race survives natural competition. All things are competing for survival. In the beginning different races competed, and then groups competed against

each other. The weak are often enslaved by the strong and the foolish by the wise. The species that are stable enough to survive . . . must be the fittest for a given time and space. (Yan 2014d, vol. 7, pp. 23–24)

Yan asserts, according to Spencer's theory of evolution, that all things are competing for their own survival: there is competition between different species, there is competition within groups, and the result of competition is that the weak are enslaved by the strong, and the foolish are enslaved by the intelligent. Therefore, there is a law of the jungle in the universe and, based on natural selection, only those species that are best adapted to the environment will thrive. Yan Fu calls the secret of evolution "fitness" (*tihē* 體合), or things adapting well to their external environment.

Here, Yan connects evolutionary theory to *Dao* as the law formed by the attraction and repulsion of all things in the process of competition. This relationship is possible because of what he calls "general laws" (*gongli* 公例), which are implicit in *Dao*. He says, "As long as it can unify the principle of all things and does not stay in a particular thing, it is Mystery. In philosophy, it is called the thing's virtue that extracts a general law from numerous particularities" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 26).

Yan further describes these general laws as follows:

No matter who you are or what conditions you are under, general laws remain the same. That others can teach but I cannot, or that what I teach is different from what others teach are not general laws. Thus, [standards of] right and wrong that are not immutable are not included in general laws. It is auspicious to follow them and disastrous to violate them. So, we are talking about what Chinese thinkers and Western thinkers have agreed on separately. What are the same without prior agreement are general laws. They must be obeyed and cannot be violated. In addition, if Chinese thinkers and Western thinkers have opposite opinions on what is right or wrong, these are local customs that are formed in specific places and times, and they do not belong to general laws. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 51)

Xiong Jilian said, "All things have a certain order to follow in birth and development, which is the natural order beyond human knowledge." Zhuangzi assumed, "What was simple in the beginning may become enormously complex in the end." In Chapter 64 of the *Laozi* these ideas are expressed: the principle (*li*) of all things are the general laws of history. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 63)

As we know, Yan equates *li* and *Dao*, and so these laws that apply to both the East and the West are the general laws of *Dao*. Xiong Jilian also conveys that everything relies on laws, from the most simple to the most complex. This is the natural order, manifested in the general laws of physics and history. Since the general laws are universally applicable, we should act in accordance with these general laws of the *Dao*.

These general laws extend beyond nature; when they manifest in human society, they are called the laws of history:

If you do not know general laws, you cannot "use the ancient *Dao* to grasp what now exists" (執古道以禦今有) nor can you "know the ancient beginning" (知古始). The meaning of "use the ancient" is the same as "seeking the antique" in *Mengzi*, and all scientific and philosophical research engages in this. I once said Laozi was a historian who enjoyed a long life, and his attainment of *Dao* was completely reliant on his understanding of the laws of history. Now that I have read the above two phrases "use the ancient" and "grasp what is now," I am even more convinced of my opinion.¹³

Yan suggests human history follows the same basic laws, and we can extract these laws from ancient history to understand the present. However, that requires an accurate understanding of ancient history, a point that further explains why the *Laozi* is a source of knowledge and not just a Chinese classic needing to be colonized by Western ideas. Of

course, Yan still insists these general laws of history also follow evolutionary theory. Since Yan Fu uses *qi* to explain *Dao*, and his conception of *qi* is based on a dual nature of matter and force, the constantly changing *Dao* then represents the spontaneous evolution of all things.

However, according to the theory of evolution, the movement of objects is linear, which is not consistent with the idea of the eternal cycle in the *Laozi*. Chapter 40 of the *Laozi* says, “In *Dao* the only motion is returning” (Waley 1958, p. 192); in this, it can be seen that for Laozi, in contrast to the linear progression of history that Yan claims was his inspiration, the movement of *Dao* is an endless cycle.¹⁴ Yan Fu tries to use Western learning to enrich the *Dao* conception, which is the core of Chinese thought, so as to build a harmonious and universal *Dao*. However, his vision has a problem here, that is, it is difficult for the Western theory of evolution to integrate into Laozi’s thought. The most fundamental reason is that Yan Fu interprets *Dao* through Aether, endows *Dao* with physical meaning, which is in conflict with the *Dao* in the *Laozi*.

In Laozi’s thought, *Dao* only has a metaphysical meaning, is above all things, and is a metaphysical existence. The returning *Dao* always draws back on itself, moving in cycles (*fan* 反). As Chapter 40 says, “In *Dao* the only motion is *fan*.” Here, the sense of “*fan*” is ambiguous, as the term has three different meanings used by scholars to variously explain Laozi’s theory. The first possible meaning is “opposite.”¹⁵ The second results from reading it as the similar character “*fan*” (返). This “*fan*” (返) means “return” (Xiyi Lin 2010, p. 45). Or “cycle.”¹⁶ The third is “reverse.”¹⁷ Actually, in the *Laozi*’s philosophy, all three meanings are present; however, I consider the meaning here to be return or cycle (“*fan*” 返) because in the earliest edition of the *Laozi*, the *Guodian Laozi*, the sentence reads “In *Dao* the only motion is cycles or returning (*fan* 返)” (Jingmen Museum 1998, p. 6). The importance of *fan* to Laozi’s theory of *Dao* leads to a contradiction between the cyclical and linear in Yan Fu’s vision. Since Yan Fu physicalized *Dao*, he had to claim that *Dao* is progressively linear in accordance with the theory of evolution. This flawed combination of the cyclical *Dao* with evolution is the most glaring weakness in Yan Fu’s syncretic *Dao* theory.

Though Yan Fu misses this logical contradiction, in other aspects of his *Dao* theory, logical and scientific reasoning are important to understanding *Dao* as general law. Interpreting the *Laozi* Chapter 48 passage “learning consists in adding to one’s stock day by day and the practice of *Dao* consists in subtracting day by day,” (Waley 1958, p. 201) Yan Fu proposes that “adding day by day is ‘inductive inference’ (*neizhou* 内籀) and subtracting day by day is ‘deductive inference’ (*waizhou* 外籀). Adding day by day is what is used for subtracting day by day” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 54). Yan believes that both learning and *Dao* are attained through scientific methods. Inductive inference, or the construction of theories based on observation, is the method to develop learning and deduction, or top-down reasoning, is the method for reaching *Dao*. Yet, he stresses that the premise used in deduction must be derived from induction, otherwise it is purely imagination. If you make inferences based on imagination, it is impossible to deduce the correct conclusion.

Clearly, Yan Fu regarded learning as foundational for reaching *Dao*:

The *qu* 曲 mentioned in this Chapter [22] refers to a part from which the whole can be seen. Therefore, there is a saying in *the Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) that an able and virtuous personage who is inferior to a sage devotes himself to one part. Only he who knows the whole from a small part can achieve [*Dao*]. Therefore, Westerners attach importance to analysis. Zhu Xi [朱熹 1130–1200] once said: “The failure of the whole is ultimately due to the failure of some part.” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 34)

Since there is already something missing and empty, how can I know the most perfect and the greatest fullness through them? The eyes are not covered, but we cannot rely on them to enumerate infinity or verify everything. For while we can observe great straightness, great skill or great eloquence, we must also carry out logical reasoning to do what the eyes cannot. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 53)

This note comments on the *Laozi* Chapter 22's contrast between different qualities, paradoxically suggesting *qu* (literally bent) as the way to straightness. Yan takes this not as Laozi describing a paradox but as his depicting the relationship of *qu* as a part of being able to reveal the whole, or what Westerners call induction. As for other examples of the totality of complex phenomena referenced from the original passage, such as the most perfect and the greatest fullness, Yan Fu believes that although we can examine them in detail one by one with our eyes, it is too troublesome. Yan explains this is why Laozi indicates we should examine them by inference.

Induction and deduction deal primarily with the problem of the phenomenal world. Yet, Yan Fu admits the existence of the noumenal world beyond phenomena. Therefore, can inductive deduction still be applied to the incredible parts of the transcendental world? How does Yan Fu deal with this problem? He says:

Being (*you* 有) refers to something that is visible, audible and perceptible. If being becomes non-being (*wu* 無), that is, something invisible, inaudible and unperceivable, how do such three names as elusive (*yi* 夷), rarefied (*xi* 希) and infinitesimal (*wei* 微) come up? Is it true that *Dao* will ultimately not be seen, heard or felt? The answer is affirmative but only for those who can achieve the elusive, rarefied and infinitesimal. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 29)

Yan directs our attention toward the elusive, rarefied, and infinitesimal that the senses cannot grasp as what we must investigate to understand *Dao*. However, while Yan Fu does not clearly indicate the way to reach *Dao* beyond logical propositions, Huang Kewu suggests there is something else required, which he names "silent wisdom" (Huang 2012, p. 168). In fact, I think Yan Fu, though trying to take induction and deduction as the methods of understanding *Dao*, still reluctantly considers the most delicate and incomprehensible part of *Dao* to belong to "silence," as will be discussed in the next section.

To summarize, Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* not only makes it the origin and destination of all things, but also the general law concerning the attraction and repulsion among these things after their creation that runs through the whole process of their birth, growth, and death. In this way, Yan not only retains the metaphysical status of *Dao*, but also explains *Dao* with empiricism. The theory of *Dao* established by Yan embraces both Chinese and Western learning and combines both the ancient and the modern. However, there inevitably are contradictions in such a mixed theory, reflected in the tension between Yan's depiction of the endless circular movement of *Dao* and the theory of evolution that only expresses linear change. Yan Fu believed that *Dao* is shown in the movement of all things, but is the direction of *Dao*'s movement curving back or straight forward? The root of this problem lies in Yan's failure to fully deal with the relationship between *Dao* and matter. This enormous tension is irreconcilable in Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*.

3. The Principle for Coping with All Things: Defending *Zhong* with *Ximing*

Compared with the distinct dualistic relationship between *Dao* and things in the *Laozi*,¹⁸ Yan Fu endows *Dao* with materiality by interpreting *Dao* as Aether, making *Dao* into a concept that can unite the realms of metaphysics and physics. Simultaneously, Yan inherits Laozi's idea of advocating void and quietness as the source of knowledge, and extends it by quoting evolutionary theory, thus forming the principle of "hold to *zhong*"¹⁹ to follow the illumined (*ximing*)" (守中以袭明). He points out that the essence of *Dao* lies in void:

Only by defending *zhong* can we reach the endless and unlimited *Dao*. This is what Zhuangzi meant when he said "stay at the center (*zhong*) of the ring to cope with the infinite transformation of things" 得其環中, 以應無窮. What is *zhong*? The essence of *Dao*. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 24)

Only by consciously being in a state of emptiness and quietness, removing desire, expanding vision and observing the transformations of all things, will one know that all things that depend on each other can be equal, and this is where I need to make the most efforts. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 21)

Yan Fu believes that the essence of *Dao* is represented by the concept *zhong* and uses the center of the ring metaphor from *Zhuangzi* to explain his understanding of it. Furthermore, by emphasizing *zhong*, which for Yan also means holding to emptiness, removing desire, and expanding vision, he asserts that from the perspective of *Dao*, all things and opinions become equal.

In the *Laozi*, emptiness is often mentioned, and Yan regards it as the most important part among the three dimensions²⁰ of *zhong* that both enables the creation of things and allows the human mind to engage *Dao*. Yan explains this based on a passage from Chapter 5:

The pronunciation of the word *qu* 屈 (submit) is [actually] *jue* 掘, and it means *jie* 竭 (exhaust). Thus, *xu er bu qu* 虚而不屈 (empty but never submitting) [should be read as] *xu er bu jie* 虚而不竭 (empty and never exhausted).²¹ (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 24)

Here, Yan Fu interprets this passage about *xu* as a general statement which makes “emptiness” the inexhaustible foundation of all things, further elevating its importance in Laozi’s philosophy. He likewise notes that in humans, emptiness relates to mind but not body and clearly states in his analysis of a line from Chapter 3 that:

Emptying one’s mind, one is able to receive *Dao*; filling one’s belly, one’s body can get its needs; weakening one’s intelligence, all things can move following the natural law and not be disturbed by one’s will; toughening one’s sinews, one can undertake what one should do on one’s own. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 22)

This suggests that weakening one’s will as a type of “emptying” is a precondition for receiving *Dao*. Weakening one’s will, in other words, means not to show oneself, define oneself, boast of what one will do, or be proud of one’s work.

Yan, however, also believes that we should not only empty but also enlarge our minds. How is this not a contradiction? As mentioned above, emptying the mind requires the elimination of self-righteousness, but when the mind becomes empty, then what? Does it become an empty shell? What is the function of the empty mind? Laozi did not answer the question. Enlarging the mind and extending perception are two answers Yan proposes. These are explained as both rational thinking and perceptual thinking, respectively, and ideally, the two forms of knowledge become combined.

In contrast to Laozi’s serious worries about accumulating knowledge as the antithesis to an empty mind, Yan Fu advocates cultivating knowledge and believes that the development of knowledge can actually in turn promote an empty mind:

Increased knowledge leads to modesty; increased understanding leads to caution. Only after engaging in self-cultivation, do I realize that I have made so many mistakes in my life. So, [Laozi] says, [*Dao*] “seems hard to understand,” “seems to retreat,” and “seems uneven.” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 50)

Yan suggests here that as knowledge grows, people realize how little they know. This in turn leads to them becoming humbler. Similarly, the more deeply people understand *Dao*, the more carefully they make decisions. Self-cultivation leads people to see defects in themselves that they could not see before. This requires that we always maintain an ignorant, humble, and fearless attitude, i.e., the state of an empty mind.

Based on these principles, Yan is extremely opposed to Laozi’s ideas of banishing wisdom and discarding knowledge:

Abandoning learning to not worry does not really eliminate worries. It is like an ostrich in Africa being chased and attacked that just sticks its head in the sand. It deludes itself into thinking it is not hurt by not looking at how it has been hurt. The banishing of learning in *Laozi* and the ostrich case have no difference. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 32)

Yan Fu, here, aims to show that the carefree abandonment of learning is hypocritical and a form of self-deception. In Yan’s view, this does not accord with the real *Dao*,

which contains knowledge and is the metaphysical foundation for induction and deduction. Accumulating knowledge through learning means observing the transformations of all things to realize the physical and historical laws. With this knowledge, we can then act in accordance with those laws.

Yan Fu uses Laozi's term *ximing* 襲明 (following the illumined) to describe this process. Explaining the related content from Chapter 27, he says:

Perfect activity, perfect speech, perfect calculations, perfect seals, and perfect knots all depend on *tianli* 天理 (heavenly principles). The reason why they can rely on *tianli* is that is [the order under which] human affairs occur. Guan Yiwu 管夷吾 (723–645 BCE) realized this. Thus, orders flow as though from the original source, and one can turn a disaster into a blessing, a defeat into a victory. This is what Zhuangzi called *yinming* 因明 (according with the illumined) and Laozi called *ximing*. The meaning of *yin* (accord with) is the same as *xi* (follow)²² . . . When we reach *ximing*, we will surely succeed in doing things, maintaining stable relationships, and protecting things safely. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 38–39)

Yan Fu uses *yinming* from the *Zhuangzi* to explain *ximing* in the *Laozi* as following the movement of all things and the principles of nature. The key point is since *yin* means conforming to or following, it indicates following *Dao*. Therefore, Yan said, "Laozi's *Dao* advocates *yin*, not stagnation, and only the flexible and soft can achieve it" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 68). Like Laozi, he affirms the spontaneous order of the cosmos. Thus, his ideal of *ximing* respects the spontaneous movement of all things at a fundamental level and opposes human intervention based on limited human knowledge.

Ximing in the *Laozi* is rooted in an unspecified spontaneous order, and Yan Fu explains this spontaneous order as the natural selection driven by the survival of the fittest. In short, Yan transforms Laozi's emptiness and quietness into the principle of holding to *zhong* with *ximing*. In Laozi's thought, *Dao* and matter are separated, with *Dao* high above. This relationship provides the model for the monarch to be distant from and not interfere with people's natural activities. Yan combines Laozi's and Zhuangzi's metaphysical characteristics of *Dao*, while endowing *Dao* with materiality. Compared to Laozi's simple sense of emptiness, Yan's vision of emptiness as part of holding to *zhong* provided a more positive conception that allows him to affirm knowledge and encourage learning. However, the different views of Laozi and Zhuangzi on the relationship between *Dao* and things inevitably lead to different ideals for how to be in the world. The *Dao* in the *Laozi* resembles a sovereign power and "things" (*wu*) in the text mostly just refers to the collection of all things (*wanwu*) (Yubin Wang 2014). In this way, what can be deduced from Laozi's thought is the importance of the naturalness of all things belonging to one whole. Yan not only admits Laozi's view that *Dao* produces all things but also affirms Zhuangzi's view of the freedom of individuals based on the premise that "*Dao* is in all things." Thus, he must deal with the tension between the naturalness of the group and the freedom of the individual. In other words, Yan Fu not only confirms the existence of the natural order within the group, but also believes that each individual can still be free.

Thus, he says:

After the root is established, then the myriad phenomena can revolve around the root. The music of heaven is varied, but it is the same wind that makes different hollows produce different sounds. Each hollow produces its own sound. If they all stubbornly believe that they have the truth, then who is wrong? (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 44)

Here, the root refers to *Dao*. *Dao*, which is the foundation of all things, on the one hand, the hollows as a whole produce a harmony of different sounds, and on the other hand, ensures that the hollows are free to produce their own unique sounds without being influenced by other sounds (a metaphor taken from *Zhuangzi*). In this scenario, each voice has its own uniqueness but does not elevate its uniqueness to universality.

The *Dao* in this system can also be applied to human order, where it manifests as a political system or model of social governance. For Yan, this model not only ensures that human society follows the direction of evolution, but also guarantees the realization of each individual's unique value. Therefore, how does the lofty *Dao* in Yan Fu's thought manifest in politics? Moreover, how can we ensure the true individuality of all things? This brings us to Yan's study of the political application of the *Laozi's Dao*.

4. The Application of *Dao* in Politics: Democracy

Yan Fu plainly states the importance of politics in the text: "When Laozi talks about the function of *Dao*, he often mentions nobles and kings, so it can be seen that the *Daodejing* is a book about how to govern the world" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 46). What Yan leaves unsaid is that for Laozi, the Way of Heaven and Way of humanity should be the same and therefore asserts the movement of cosmic *Dao* as the ideal governance technique. This governance follows the *Dao* by imitating the workings of all things, and therefore for Yan, this Daoist politics must follow the theory of evolution.

In discussing types of governments, Yan accepts three kinds: despotism, monarchy, and democracy. These are the same three Montesquieu put forward in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Yan paraphrases them thusly:

There are three forms of government: democracy, monarchy and despotism. The difference between the three is . . . Democracy means that the sovereignty of a country is not held in any single person's hand but grasped by all or part of the country's people. Monarchy refers to a system where a monarch governs a country with the people acting according to long established laws. Despotism also has a monarch that governs the country, but he does so according to his will alone. (Yan 2014b, vol. 4, p. 13)

Yan Fu not only explains the meaning of the three regimes, but also further applies the theory of evolution to them, arguing that despotism evolves to monarchy and monarchy evolves to democracy.

For Yan, the democracy of Laozi is virtually equivalent to Montesquieu's "antique democracy".²³

This evolutionary model supports his conclusion that democracy is the best form of government and that Laozi's political thought most closely resembles this ideal type.

He further says:

Laozi's idea "humbleness is the trunk upon which the mighty grows, lowliness is the foundation upon which the high is laid" relates to democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 49)

In *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu, [the foundation of] democratic politics is the people's morality [or noble character]. Monarchy [rests on] rituals [that express status and rank]. A despotic system is [built on] harsh punishments. China has never practiced democracy. Yet, Laozi could not produce a philosophy of something that he had never seen before. As the rule of morality [like in democracy] cannot be found in monarchy, Laozi turned his thoughts to the Yellow Emperor and Shennong to reason that it existed in high antiquity. In high antiquity, the status of the monarch was not so elevated, and the status of the people was not so lowly. There was no great disparity between them, and the people were more engaged in government affairs. Laozi mentions in Chapter 80 the "small country with few inhabitants." There "the people should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, and [should] take pleasure in their rustic tasks. The neighboring land might be so near at hand that one could hear its cocks crowing and the dogs barking; but the people would grow old and die without ever having been there," and this is precisely the truth of democracy that Montesquieu mentioned in *The Spirit of the Laws*. If there is a person in the world who understands both the *Laozi* and *The Spirit of the Laws*, he will surely think what I say is very reasonable. Oh! Laozi applied the method of democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 46)

From the above, it is clear Yan Fu sees the element of democracy in Laozi's thought and believes that Laozi's "small country with few inhabitants" is closer to the ideal regime of democracy. Yan even interprets the *Laozi's* Chapter 46 as indicating a democratic ideal.²⁴ He repeatedly speaks highly of democracy and states the idea that *tianxia* can only be won by democracy twice when analyzing Chapters 57 and 81 (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 59, 69).

Yan Fu suggests the *Laozi* contains democratic elements, and conversely, democratic countries also need the wisdom of Huang-Lao Daoism:

The *Dao* of a Huang-Lao Emperor is what is used by democratic countries. This is how [a democratic government] "is chief among them, but does not oppress them," "never does [anything] yet all things are done." (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 27)

Yan not only regards the democratic system as the logical conclusion of Laozi's thought, but also sees that combining and promoting the two traditions together can result in a greater achievement.

In Laozi's system, *Dao* must be that on which proper government is modeled. Yet, if, as Yan Fu interprets, the ideal government is a democracy where all or part of the people of a country hold supreme sovereignty (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 13–14), then this inevitably weakens the notion of *Dao* as a transcendent metaphysical power. This shift accords with Yan's view of *Dao* as the material Aether, an immanent conception that allows the importance of the people to be elevated and a democratic politics in which people hold sovereignty to represent the proper Way of humanity.²⁵

Laozi advocates *wuwei* 無為 (non-interference) in politics, an ideal that Yan Fu inherits. He gives it a rich connotation that links it with the democratic system. He explains both the positive and negative dimensions of *wuwei*, using ideas of natural selection and the survival of the fittest to explain its negative side. Yan believes that there is a natural competition between all things. They inevitably fight for survival, and this leads to the evolution of the whole species. The direction of evolution is to fit in with the environment, a process that on the whole forms a stable order. This is because the mutual attraction and repulsion of all things naturally leads to rewards and punishments. Therefore, Yan Fu is extremely opposed to external interference that impedes with this natural process.²⁶

Although the activity of establishing a new dynasty requires working hard, being combed by the wind and washed by the rain, and fighting intensely, just like Han emperor Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 BCE) and Emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (599–649) did, the fundamental reason for the successful establishment of a new dynasty is actually avoiding governmental interference, not engaging in governmental interference. Just as it was for the rulers of the Qin and Sui dynasties, people can come to power but will lose it in the end if they do not avoid governmental interference. That is so true! [So as Laozi says,] "Had they interfered, they would never have won the adherence of all under heaven." (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 54)

Here, Yan mentions both successful and unsuccessful Chinese dynasties to illustrate that good governance rests on non-interference. Xiong Jilian further explains *wei*²⁷ by saying "disrupting people's lives, draining people's energy, and encroaching on civil rights are all deliberate acts of *wei*" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 57).

In Yan Fu's view, *wuwei* means not only no interference, but also being emotionally unbiased. Yan, thus, strongly agrees with the idea in Chapter 5 of the *Laozi* that "Heaven and Earth are ruthless; to them the ten thousand things are but as straw dogs. The sage too is ruthless; to him the people are but as straw dogs" (Waley 1958). He further relies on Wang Bi's commentary on this chapter to show how this embodies the essence of evolution.²⁸ In it, Wang states:

Heaven and earth follow nature. Without action or creation, all things rule each other by themselves. Therefore, they are without kindness. Kindness creates, upholds, administers, and changes with grace and action. Being Created, upheld, administered, and changed, things will lose their true nature. With grace and

action, things cease to co-exist. If things cease to co-exist, there is not enough to support them all. The earth does not grow straw for the beasts, but the beasts eat the straw. The heaven does not produce dogs for man, but man eats the dogs. Inaction in regard to all things means to let them do as they should. Then they will be self-sufficient. If one has to use wisdom, it will not work. (Lin 1977, p. 11)

Dao's inaction and unkindness return the task of governance to all things themselves, so that all things can give full play to their functions. On the contrary, if there is a shred of *wei*, with human intelligence involved, it cannot be achieved.

Meanwhile, Yan also applies his sense of *ximing* to reveal the active aspect of *wuwei* politics, expressing that the art of *ximing* is a type of *wei* (action) but one that has access to *Dao*.

All under heaven is not impossible to gain. It likes a noble vessel, so only by *ximing* can it be obtained. If you do not follow *ximing*, you will fail. Laozi compared All under heaven to a vessel, and Spencer regarded the group of nations as an organism. They are both indeed wise. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 40)

Yan Fu takes Laozi's idea that all under heaven is like a noble vessel that is dangerous to tamper with and connects it to his interpretation of *ximing* as the spirit of democracy. As explained before, Yan equates his behavioral ideal of *ximing* to *yinming*. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936) affirms that Yan made this connection, saying, "Laozi's discussion of politics revolves around the word *yin* (follow). *Yin* refers to this sentence, 'the sage has no heart of his own; he uses the heart of the people as his heart.' Yan Fu agreed with this and thought . . . Laozi advocated democracy." (Zhang 1987, p. 161). Whether one accords with (*xi*) or follows (*yin*), in politics, the result is the same. The sage does not rule as a monarch or despot who follows his own laws or whims but accords with the needs and desires of the people. He lets the people guide him as the true sovereign.

For Yan, this more passive role involved in *ximing* governance further relates back to Laozi's *wuwei* vision where "by doing nothing, all things are done."

The six questions mentioned in Chapter 10 of *Laozi* seem to be contradictory but actually complement each other. For example, one can not only rule the land and love the people, but also remain unknown. The senses can simultaneously both engage the outside world and guard stillness. One can know everything, but you do not have to scheme. Acting this way means to love the people and rule the land through sincerity. Enacting the feminine leads to the pinnacle of masculinity; by doing nothing, then there is nothing that is not done. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, pp. 26–27)

People generally think that the only way to rule the land is to actively *wei* (control, direct, interfere with) it. Yan, instead, promotes the importance of passive stillness, of the mind as the key to knowing the world, and, thus, how to govern. This still mind follows the needs of external things and moves accordingly. Inspired by Laozi, Yan Fu believes only this stillness-based *wuwei* can achieve the goal of loving the people and ruling the land.

As mentioned above, democracy is the outcome of evolving beyond despotism or monarchy and is the ideal political system. Yan's democracy contains the political spirit of *wuwei*, so how does he view military action? He sides with Montesquieu:

Invading other countries is not what democracies should do. If you invade another country, war will also hurt yourself. Why is that? Because invading another country is incompatible with the spirit of democracy. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 40)

However, when it comes to being attacked by other countries, Yan Fu thinks that war cannot be avoided. "It is not just the use of the military that leaves us with no choice. If things reach a stage where there is no other choice, we can only respond to things as they are, and this response is rarely against *Dao*" (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 41).

Yan, further reflecting on the social reality of war and violence, explains:

An unjust attack is like a knife in a common cook's hand. Even if [his hacking] does not break the knife, it will be damaged, and there is nothing [like this] that will not come to an early end. In ancient China, no one was more famous than Chiyou 蚩尤²⁹ for having a powerful army. Bai Qi 白起 (?–257 BCE) of the Qin dynasty, Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE) of the Chu state, Alexander, Hannibal, and Napoleon of Europe are all men who were good at fighting, but there was not a single one of them who did not die young. Laozi once said that such [violent] people soon perish. It can be seen that nothing Laozi said was unconvincing. Those who can have a good beginning and a good ending all achieve good results without violence. But the current situation in China requires the people to cultivate a martial spirit. But this is only a temporary measure, in the future we should still adhere to the principle of non-violence. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 41)

Yan Fu cites historical figures who were good at fighting and notes how none of them avoided an early death. Following Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, Yan believes that an army should only be maintained to safeguard national security, defend itself, but never be used to invade others. That is called a just army. It is also a realistic interpretation of Laozi's principle of taking no advantage from victory.

In conclusion, democracy is the political application of Yan Fu's theory of *Dao*. However, his *Dao* is inherently contradictory, due to the irreconcilability between the linearity of evolution theory and the circular running direction of *Dao*. Yan clearly rejected Laozi's admonition to return to the pristine and redefined the *Dao*, instead suggesting *Dao* as a law of progress or a power that propels myriad things to grow, develop, and evolve,³⁰ or humans, this means the process of social development, which even Yan admits contradicts the core ideas in the *Laozi*.

We must pay attention to the difference between Laozi's philosophy and modern Western philosophy in the next three chapters. Today, from uncarved block to civilization, from simple into complex, from the hexagram *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 into hexagram *weiji* 未濟, this is a natural trend. Laozi's desire to return to the state of the uncarved block is like driving water from a river to a high mountain. It will not succeed. Laozi opposes the development of human society towards civilization. At present, human beings have entered the stage of civilization, but Laozi still thinks that human society should return to the state of the uncarved block. This is wrong. Why is that? Because it's against nature's tendency, against the essence of *Dao*. Freedom means that all things themselves will be at rest. The one that competes with others and survives is the one that is most adapted to nature. If this principle is followed, the era of Great Peace will soon come. (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 31)

As Laozi emphasizes "return" and "reversion" to the simplicity of *Dao*, he locates his ideal society in the ancient past and calls for people to return to the "uncarved" natural state of things. Laozi is aware and critical of the failings of civilization. By contrast, for Yan Fu, there is an inevitable human evolution from simple community to complex civilization, and it is impossible to return to primitive society. Unlike Laozi, who put the ideal world in the past, Yan Fu believes that the future progress is what human beings should pursue. Therefore, Yan criticizes Laozi's idea of returning to simplicity because it is contrary to nature; it is like trying to push river water back up a mountain.

It should be noted that Yan Fu, as a scholar with a profound understanding of Chinese and Western thought, was deeply aware of the harms that civilization had caused in Europe. Therefore, he recognized the wisdom of Laozi in criticizing civilization, but concluded that the defects of civilization are the necessary price of historical progress. This view was unavoidably influenced by the fact that China had been invaded by Western countries in his time, so Yan needed a *Dao* based in evolutionism and progressivism to help his country.³¹ Still, there is no doubt that Yan has not solved the contradiction between evolu-

tion and Laozi's thought at all. He tries to give *Dao* a more positive side through evolution, but the two different understandings of the relationship between *Dao* and things dooms his effort to failure. This is the main flaw in his theory of *Dao*.

5. Conclusions

Yan Fu tries to enrich the Chinese concept *Dao* by infusing it with Western learning. This leads him to construct a new theory of *Dao* which incorporates the ancient and the modern, as well as the Chinese and the Western. On the one hand, he admits that *Dao* occupies the dominant position as the starting point, the basis, and the end point of all things. Yet, at the same time, he interprets *Dao* with the materiality of Aether, giving *Dao* a tangible quality. Moreover, he uses the infinitesimal concept from calculus to bridge the internal tension of physics and metaphysics. However, his theory encounters problems when he tries to combine the linear motion of the theory of evolution with the cyclic movement of *Dao* in the *Laozi*. This results in an irreconcilable tension in Yan's notion of *Dao*.

This cosmological confusion is carried over into Yan's political application of *Dao*. He, combining Laozi's "*Dao* produces all things" with Zhuangzi's "*Dao* in all things," deduces the principle of "defending *zhong* and *ximing*." In politics, Yan Fu takes *wuwei* as the core, on the one hand, Yan continues the traditional explanation of *wuwei* as no interference; on the other, he extends its connotation by using the theory of evolution and observes the correlation between *wuwei* and the modern political system of democracy. *Wuwei* and democracy both aim to limit or minimize the role of government control and emphasize the power of the people. In this way, it is possible to argue for some semblance of the democratic ideals present in the *Laozi*. However, his cosmology, and upholding the premise of evolution, means Yan is unable to explain Laozi's advice to return to the state of the uncarved block. This contradiction forces him to reach the conclusion that the thought of Laozi is just wrong.

Regardless of its internal inconsistencies, Yan Fu's theory of *Dao* and its democratic manifestation in politics represents a novel expression in the long history of Laozegetics, and one that specifically aims to infuse Western learning into the *Laozi*'s thought to create a truly universal theory of *Dao*.

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Notes

- ¹ The book's title was changed several times. Its first publication was named *Hou Guan Yan's Notes on the Laozi* (侯官嚴氏評點老子), which was printed in Tokyo, Japan in August 1905 and published officially in December of the same year. It should be pointed out that Yan Fu did not write this book alone, something proven by the inclusion of the statement "Xiong Jilian said" in Chapters 25, 33, 53, 64, and 74. Later, in 1931, the Commercial Press reprinted the book on the basis of its Tokyo edition and changed the title, naming it *Yan Fu's Notes on Laozi Daodejing* (嚴復評點老子道德經). Then, in 1970, in Yan Lingfeng's 嚴靈峰 (1904–1999) collection, the *Continuation of Wuqiu beizhai's Complete Laozi* (無求備齋老子集成續編), the book's title was *The Laozi with Notes* (老子評點). In 1986, this part was titled *Laozi Notes* (老子評語) in a collection of books named *Yan Fu's Works* (嚴復集) published by Zhong Hua Book Company, compiled by Wang Shi 王弼. In 2014, Fujian Education Publishing House published *Notes on the Laozi* (評點老子) but the title of *Hou Guan Yan's Notes on the Laozi* (侯官嚴氏評點老子) was retained in the preface. Regardless of the title, the part written by Yan Fu is basically the same. Yan Fu's interpretations on the *Laozi* quoted in this article are all from the 2014 edition, so the author here adopts the title of *Notes on the Laozi*.
- ² In 1903, Yan Fu suggested that his disciple Xiong Yuan'e 熊元鏜 (1879–1906), who styled himself Jilian 季廉, write an interpretation of the *Laozi*. Yan Fu confirms Xiong Jilian's work was the foundation of *Notes on the Laozi* in an unpublished letter to Xiong that states "when I was in the capital, you were kind enough to show me the *Laozi*. It was not until I was abroad that I thought deeply [on it] and added my own notes" (Wang 1998a, p. 47).

- 3 Yan Fu entered an old-style private school at the age of seven. What he learned was traditional classical literature. He studied from Confucian scholars including Yan Changkui 嚴昌燿 (1926–1950), Huang Shaoyan 黃少岩, and Huang Mengyu 黃孟侑 and gained some exposure to Western thought after entering the Fujian Ship Administration School 福建船政學堂. See Zhesheng Ouyang (2015, pp. 3–14).
- 4 There are many scholars that hold this view. See Linong Ai (1982); Shaojun Liu (2001); Tiangen Wang (2004); Cheng Li (2006); and Defeng Zhou (2006).
- 5 The “they” in Liu Sihe’s article refer to Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), Gao Yandi 高延第 (1823–1886), Chen Sanli 陳三立 (1853–1937), Yi Peishen 易佩紳 (1826–1906), Xu Shaozhen 徐紹楨 (1861–1936), and Yan Fu (Liu 2018). In addition, Chen Muqing, a Taiwanese scholar, expressed similar views after comprehensively investigating Yan Fu’s *Notes on the Laozi* (Chen 2017). The development of such a view also has its basis in Yan Fu’s thought. Liu Gusheng holds that *Notes on the Laozi* is a reinterpretation of the classics, that is, an innovation made on the basis of understanding the classic texts in line with the requirements of the times (Liu 2010). Yan Fu’s interpretation was extremely bold for China at that time, and the degree of innovation in the interpretation of the text was self-evident, which even made scholars think that it was divorced from the text. *Notes on the Laozi* is indeed not completely compatible with the *Laozi*. Sometimes it even criticizes the original text. For example, Yan Fu directly critiques Chapters 18, 19, and 20 of the *Laozi*, saying that they contradict nature and violate the essence of *Dao*. Such an unprecedented skeptical attitude made it easy for scholars to mistake Yan Fu’s goal to be the introduction of Western thought through traditional Chinese classical texts. Even Benjamin Schwartz said: “There can be no doubt, however, that one of the preoccupations of the marginal notes is to find in Lao-tzu, in particular, intimations of ‘democracy’ and ‘science’ as Yen Fu understands these terms” (Schwartz 1964, p. 199).
- 6 Yan Fu once said explicitly, “it was proposed by vulgar scholars and Confucians, confined to the times, constrained by the vapid, courted their private wisdom, and made as assumptions. *Dao* is defending but not blocking.” See (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, preface, p. 12).
- 7 Yan Fu’s exact words are, “If one wants to read ancient Chinese books and understand the profound meaning behind ordinary language, it is often necessary to know Western thought before one can do so” (Yan 2004, p. 73).
- 8 Global Laozegetics is a broader and complex network of interpretations that span the globe. It assumes both *Laozi* commentaries and translations belong within a single field of research and emphasized the value of commentators and translators. This certainly broke through the limitations of mainstream scholars in searching for the *Laozi*’s “original” text and its “original” meaning and expand scholarship on the *Laozi* text. For more on this concept, see Misha Tadd (2022).
- 9 For more on this, see Zhongjiang Wang (1998b).
- 10 The meaning of “the same mind and *li*” is there are thousands of things in the universe, but their minds are all the same. Since the mind is the same, so is the *li*. *Li* refers to principles or laws. Sometimes it is another name for *Dao*.
- 11 *Kong* is usually rendered in English as “emptiness,” but its actual meaning is much broader than that.
- 12 Kuan-yen Liu examined how Western science and evolutionary biology draw Yan’s attention to the latent concepts of “force” in the *Laozi*. See Kuan-yen Liu (2020).
- 13 See Fu Yan (2014e, vol. 9, p. 29). I employ a modified version of Mr. Waley’s translation for Yan’s quote of the *Laozi*’s original passage. See (Waley 1958, p. 159).
- 14 Chen Muqing similarly agrees that “although Laozi’s theory emphasizes the way of heaven and nature . . . it excludes any evolutionary thought.” See Muqing Chen (2017).
- 15 Anything in nature or human society, when developed to one extreme, will head toward the opposite (*fan*) extreme. That is to say, to paraphrase Hegel, everything contains its own negation. See Youlan Feng (2013, p. 19). Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 also holds a similar view. He believes that “changing in the opposite direction is the movement of *Dao*”. See Jiyu Ren (1956, p. 32).
- 16 *Fan* has the meaning of “cycle.” See Heng Gao (2004, p. 130).
- 17 D. C. Lau interpreted *fan* as “reverse”. He thinks that all we are entitled to say is that, according to the *Laozi*, when a thing develops to the higher limit, it will necessarily reverse and begin to decline, but it is not stated that when a thing is at, or reaches, the lower limit, it will necessarily develop all the way to the higher limit. See D. C. Lau (1958).
- 18 The *Laozi* highlights the mysterious, ineffable, and superior nature of *Dao*. For example, in Chapter 1 of the *Laozi*, *Dao* may be called mystery. *Dao* is the ancestor of all things in Chapter 4, the shape of nothing and the image of nothing in Chapter 14, and existed before heaven and earth in Chapter 25. We can see that Laozi’s thought presents *Dao* as the quintessence which governs the universe; anything tangible in the universe is non-fundamental, such as in the “Tianxia” chapter of *Zhuangzi*. Cao Feng makes it clear that Laozi divided the world into the metaphysical world of *Dao* and the physical world of things and believes that the two are completely different. See Feng Cao (2013).
- 19 His concept *zhong* has multiple meanings, such as center, moderation, middle, mean, etc. To include this polysemy, this paper uses the transliteration *zhong*.
- 20 The three dimensions refer to emptiness, submission, and exhaustion as mentioned below.
- 21 The literal meaning of *qu* is loss and the literal meaning of *jie* is exhaust. *Xu er bu qu(jie)* means that “it is empty but gives a supply that never fails.”

- 22 *Yinming* refers to “observing with a tranquil mind.” The meaning of *ximing* is “resorting to the light.” It should be noted that the word *yinming* does not appear directly in *Zhuangzi*. The author thinks that the *yinming* mentioned by Yan Fu should be *yiming* 以明. *Zhuangzi* not only directly mentions this word, but also talks about *mo ruo yiming* 莫若以明 (the best thing to do is to observe with a tranquil mind) many times.
- 23 See Jesse (2017). Schwartz summarized this democratic characteristic as “an austere self-abnegating virtue.” (Schwartz 1964, p. 203).
- 24 Chapter 46 of the *Laozi* is as follows: “When there is Tao in the empire, the galloping steeds are turned back to fertilize the ground by their droppings. When there is not Tao in the empire, war horses will be reared even on the sacred mounds below the city walls. No lure is greater than to possess what others want, no disaster greater than that men should be wanting to get more. Truly: ‘He who has once known the contentment that comes simply through being content, will never again be otherwise than contented’ ” (Waley 1958, p. 199).
- 25 Yang Dayong analyzed in detail the status of people and the relationship between people and freedom in Yan Fu’s thought. (See Dayong Yang 1992).
- 26 Yan glosses “the master executioner” as “natural selection.” Interfering with the natural principles at work in the social realm, they suggest, can only result in harm. See Jesse (2017).
- 27 By *wei*, Xiong refers to all the hard work that the first monarchs of the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties undertook to create a new dynasty, as mentioned in the above quotation.
- 28 Yan Fu said: “these four sentences given by Wang Bi summarize the new theory of Darwin at a high level” (Yan 2014e, vol. 9, p. 23).
- 29 Chiyou is a mythological warrior who fought with the Yellow Emperor.
- 30 Kuan-yen Liu has a detailed discussion on this subject. See Kuan-yen Liu (2020).
- 31 See Zhongjiang Wang (1998b) for discussions on the different views of Yan Fu and Lao Zi on history.

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