

Social Darwinism and Chinese Nationalism: A Reinterpretation through Yan Fu's Tianyan Lun

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Abstract

Using Yan Fu's Tianyan Lun (天演論), a selective translation and adaption of Thomas Huxley's Evolution and Ethics, this essay examines the relationship between Chinese nationalism and social Darwinism. In the late 19th century, when China was experiencing anarchy due to military defeats, Western imperialism, and the fall of the Qing dynasty, Tianyan Lun introduced Chinese intellectuals to Social Darwinian ideas like the "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest." In addition to the framework of Social Darwinism as a logical and scientific solution for China's national survival, Yan Fu's creative translation of Huxley's work also integrated Confucian ideals into the Western knowledge of Huxley's theory of Social Darwinism to balance out the cruelty of Social Darwinism with morality and laws. In this paper, the significance of Tianyan Lun in the development of Chinese nationalism will be examined, with the emphasis on change and evolution. Yan Fu's Tianyan Lun has influenced China for decades; its integration of Huxley's perception of Social Darwinism and Yan's reinterpretation and cultural adaptation was one of the major reasons of the widespread of Social Darwinism in China and the growth of Chinese nationalism.

