




RESEARCH ARTICLE

How can you help us, Mr Darwin? Social Darwinism in the history of Chinese international thought

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Abstract

Social Darwinism was a pathbreaker in the history of Chinese international thought. In this study, we explore the hitherto sparsely discussed process of the reception of social Darwinism in China, which led to a fundamental transformation in Chinese thinking about the international order and the position of China vis-à-vis Western powers. Drawing on the work of three leaders of that intellectual transformation – Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao – we analyse issues such as the struggle for existence and survival, national and racial competition, and statism. We demonstrate how the three aforementioned thinkers modified the original Darwinist thought, enriching it with voluntarism and radical collectivism, all in order for the emerging set of ideas to suit China's historically determined needs. Overall, our analysis contributes to both the history of International Relations thought in China and the broader debate on the globalisation of IR theory and IR knowledge production.

Keywords: China; history of international thought; nationalism; power politics; social Darwinism

Introduction

The political practice of the contemporary Chinese state, the language of the state's officials, and popular discourse on international relations in Chinese social media all seem to draw extensively on the conceptual heritage of the late Qing era. When it comes to the approach to international order, those turbulent years and decades brought about a dramatic change. In particular, they had witnessed what can be called a triumphant march of social Darwinism (SD). This new approach facilitated resistance against Western imperialism and mobilisation against foreign domination. It also legitimised the alleged superior position of its adherents in relation with other significant social groups, both outside and within its borders.¹ Among others, the associated feeling of humiliation suffered from foreign powers became an enduring trait of Chinese identity, fuelling nationalism, sacrifice, and the desire to regain a privileged status in world politics.²

Han-centred nationalism, permeated by SD thought, continues to shape China's contemporary ethnic policies against 'internal others' (e.g. Uyghurs) as well as foreign policy aimed at regaining China's historical position of power in international relations. When it comes to foreign policy, the SD outlook plays an important role in backing both Chinese claims to consolidate control

¹Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 264–6.

²Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2013), pp. 7–8.

over territories and peoples viewed by the Chinese as inherent parts of 'Greater China' (Tibet and Xinjiang) and its broader claims concerning the region of the South China Sea, or parts of Korea. These territorial grievances are driven predominantly by self-perceived Han Chinese superiority and the desire to bring back Chinese civilisational supremacy in the region, rather than by purely utilitarian, political, or economic considerations.³

Moreover, SD notions appear to be applied in China's appeals to non-white peoples' racial solidarity against Western imperialism, dating back to the Maoist era. The most recent example of such thinking is China's prominent diplomat Wang Yi's address to Japanese and Korean officials. Wang urged China's neighbours to cooperate with China, implying that, due to a sense of racial superiority over the yellow race, Europeans and Americans will never treat Asians as equal to them: 'No matter how blond our hair is dyed or how sharp our noses are shaped, we will never become Westerners, so we have to know where our roots are.'⁴ Analyses of popular narratives, unmodified by diplomatic rigours, seem to confirm this. Chenchen Zhang, a student of Chinese popular social media discourse on international relations, argues that netizens discussing global politics, East–West relations, racial hierarchies, Han supremacy over other ethnic groups, and the issues of democracy and human rights apply SD clichés largely mirroring theories that prevailed in the early 20th century.⁵ The fundamental contextual difference, however, is that China's status has changed radically since then. With its 'healthy' and pragmatic attitude, as well as its authoritarian efficiency, China is now seen by nationalistic netizens as sitting 'at the top' of this food chain at the expense of the 'Occident', constructed as effeminate and weakened by woke culture and other progressive ideologies. The advantageous turn of the tables is thus attributed to Beijing's skilful implementation of SD-inspired domestic and foreign policies.

In the following, we study the origins of the aforementioned Chinese intellectual tradition. We conceive of SD as a pathbreaker in the history of Chinese international thought and explore the hitherto sparsely discussed process of the reception of SD in China. In doing so, we emphasise the critical adjustments of the original Western SD ideas to the late Qing empire's specific, historically determined needs. We also demonstrate the impact of pre-existent, predominantly Confucian tradition on the process of reshaping Western SD in China. In this context, we emphasise an overwhelmingly voluntaristic character of Chinese SD. Shaped in this way, we claim, Sinicised SD facilitated resistance against external threats to eventually serve as a justification of Han Chinese domination in relations with other peoples. Our work thus contributes to both the history of Chinese international thought and the broader debate on the globalisation of international political theory and International Relations knowledge production.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section elaborates on the enduring relevance of SD in the history of Chinese international thought. The third section offers an overview of the historical circumstances of the 'arrival' of SD in China in the late 19th century. The fourth section introduces the figures of the three intellectual leaders of the Darwinian turn in China: Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao. The fifth section touches upon the logic of the modification of Western SD in the Chinese context. The sixth, seventh, and eighth sections, respectively, analyse three broad aspects of Chinese SD: struggle and survival in the domain of international relations, races and nations with their interactions, and state-building. The last section concludes the article.

³John M. Friend and Bradley Thayer, *How China Sees the World: Han-Centrism and the Balance of Power in International Politics* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2018), pp. 46, 76–8.

⁴[Wang Yi: China, Japan and South Korea must know where their roots are. No matter how blond our hair is dyed or how sharp our noses are shaped, we will never become Westerners] 王毅: 中日韩要知道自己的根在哪里, 头发染得再黄、鼻子修得再尖也变不成西方人', Ifeng.com, available at: {<https://news.ifeng.com/c/8R8v7AihJjg>}.

⁵Chenchen Zhang, 'Right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics? Identity, otherness and global imaginaries in debating world politics online', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:1 (2020), pp. 88–115; Chenchen Zhang, 'Race, gender, and occidentalism in global reactionary discourses', *Review of International Studies* (2024), pp. 1–23, doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000299.

Social Darwinism in Chinese history of international thought: Enduring relevance

Throughout this paper, we use the term social Darwinism with reference to sets of ideas providing causal explanations of the social world by transposing claims derived from biological evolutionary theory. The term was introduced to the broader public in Richard Hofstadter's influential 1944 work *Social Darwinism in American Thought 1860–1915*.⁶ The mutual inspiration of 19th-century social and biological theories is a complex phenomenon which has received broad scholarly attention.⁷ The concept of SD was used to describe a plethora of theories, often mutually contradictory, including ideologies inconsistent with Darwin's hypotheses (e.g. social Lamarckism).⁸ While the overwhelming impact of SD on China has been discussed extensively by sinologists,⁹ intellectual historians,¹⁰ and political theorists,¹¹ International Relations scholars have so far paid little attention to this topic. We argue that SD became a pathbreaker in the history of Chinese international thought. Its surge marked an unprecedented discontinuity with China's centuries-old traditions of thinking about international politics. As Anna Wojciuk argues, the emergence of these new ideational structures was also a critical step behind the Qing empire's effective efforts to confront threats on the part of the Western powers and Japan. It was only upon the adoption of SD that Beijing eventually engaged in balancing, reacting to threats then present for over 50 years. SD prompted China to build and mobilise internal resources through administrative, educational, military, and fiscal reforms, in addition to purely constitutional changes. According to Wojciuk, during the last decade of the empire and, subsequently, the republican period, the SD-inspired foreign policy maxims were shared by the entire Chinese elite, no matter how divided it might have been.¹²

⁶Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

⁷E.g. Naomi Beck, 'Social Darwinism', in Michael Ruse (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 195–201; Peter Bowler, 'Malthus, Darwin, and the concept of struggle', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37:4 (1976), pp. 631–50; Gregory Claeys, 'The "survival of the fittest" and the origins of social Darwinism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61:2 (2000), pp. 223–40; Derek Freeman, 'The evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer', *Current Anthropology*, 15:3 (1974), pp. 211–37; John Greene, 'Darwin as a social evolutionist', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 10:1 (1977), pp. 1–27; Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); James Allen Rogers, 'Darwinism and social Darwinism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33:2 (1972), pp. 265–80; Michael Ruse, 'Social Darwinism: The two sources', *Albion*, 12:1 (1980), pp. 23–36; Robert Young, 'Malthus and the evolutionists: The common context of biological and social theory', *Past and Present*, 43:1 (1969), pp. 109–45.

⁸An earlier theory of evolution, according to which organisms can pass on to their offspring characteristics acquired through use or disuse during their lifetime.

⁹Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1964); James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1983); Joseph Levenson, *Liang Ch'i Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Whitefish: Literary Licensing, 2011); Rune Svarverud, 'Social Darwinism and China's relationship with Korea and Japan in the late 19th and early 20th century', *International Journal of Korean History*, 2:1 (2001), pp. 99–122; Vladimir M. Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: The Beginnings (1880's–1910's)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁰Clemens Büttner, 'The boundaries of the Chinese nation: Racism and militarism in the 1911 revolution', in Iwo Amelung (ed.), *Revisiting the 'Sick Man of East Asia': Discourses of Weakness in Late 19th and Early 20th Century China* (New York: Campus, 2020), pp. 283–333; Gao Like, '[An analysis of Liang Qichao's thought of social Darwinism] 梁启超社会达尔文主义思想析论', *Tianjin Social Sciences*, 5 (2018), pp. 142–50; Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890–1911)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Elizabeth Sinn, 'A study of the influence of social Darwinism on the ideas of history in China, 1895–1906' (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 1979); Jilin Xu, 'Social Darwinism in modern China', *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 6:2 (2012), pp. 182–97; Haiyan Yang, 'Encountering Darwin and creating Darwinism in China', in Michael Ruse (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 250–8.

¹¹Leigh Jenco, *Changing Referents: Learning across Space and Time in China and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Maria Adele Carrai, *Sovereignty in China: A Genealogy of a Concept since 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹²Anna Wojciuk, 'Balancing is in the eye of the beholder: Explaining the critical case of late imperial China', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 530–53; see also Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State 1885–1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 24–146.

Sinicised SD was the first stream of globalised international thought in China. In the spirit of David Armitage's framework, the case we analyse is an example of the transnational process of the formation of modern international political theory, having occurred in a country previously upholding its own and, to a lesser extent, regional intellectual traditions.¹³ SD's special place in the history of Chinese international thought is due to the fact that its introduction paved the way for various concepts and ways of thinking about international politics hitherto absent from the Chinese discourse. These included, in particular, concepts of sovereignty, power politics, and the 'image' of the international system in which no entity was destined to lead or enjoy a special status. These approaches were fundamentally distinct from previous Chinese understandings of the Middle Kingdom's relations with the outside world – an amalgam of the rich and diverse traditions of Legalism, strategic thought,¹⁴ Buddhism, and – most importantly – Confucianism. As such, SD was, in our view, a manifestation of the globalisation of international thought, a process in which political ideas about relations between large groups of people could be no longer produced only locally. At that stage, China's foreign policy was confronted with events incomprehensible to previous patterns of thought; the 'old' concepts apparently ceased to offer politically effective prescriptions for how to approach the growing challenges. The terms adopted to describe the experience of the time were therefore foreign ones, creatively translated and transformed in order for them to neatly correspond with earlier political ideas.

Our work is part of a wider strand of research seeking to integrate intellectual history into the study of world affairs, including, in particular, historically critical non-Western and non-canonical works.¹⁵ (In a somewhat similar way, SD has been assimilated in the Arab world, as described by Cemil Aydin.¹⁶) Quoting Sun Yat Sen, Charles Mills points out that the contemporary International Relations debate suffers from a relative lack of awareness of how important the evolution-theory-derived categories of race, whether justifying white domination or opposing it, were in the early 20th century.¹⁷ We believe our work facilitates a better understanding of how foreign knowledge of the time, including racial categories, influenced Chinese international thought, and, in turn, how this thought was redesigned to enable China's more effective response to the threatening international phenomena of that period. We show that this intellectual output was nonetheless of a contingent nature, even if presenting itself as a set of objective and scientifically confirmed 'truths'.¹⁸

Furthermore, our article shows how ideas 'travelled': who brought them, what content they carried, and how they were assimilated and domesticated. Following in Martin Bayly's footsteps, we emphasise the importance of 'intermediaries, translations and networks' for this process.¹⁹ Our three protagonists, Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao, were typical cultural mediators navigating a triangle comprising China, Japan, and the West. Their travels, readings, and translation projects were crucial for the analysed process. Their renown in the region made them, in turn, knowledge brokers for contemporaneous thinkers in other countries, such as Korea or Vietnam. For Yan, Kang, Liang, and their intellectual circles, this process of translation, circulation, and

¹³David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁴Alastair I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁵William Bain and Terry Nardin, 'International Relations and intellectual history', *International Relations*, 31:3 (2017), pp. 213–26; Duncan Bell, 'International Relations: The dawn of a historiographical turn?', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3:1 (2001), pp. 115–26; Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁶Cemil Aydin, 'Globalizing the intellectual history of the idea of the "Muslim world"', in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 159–86.

¹⁷Charles W. Mills, 'Race and global justice', in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Empire, Race and Global Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 94–119 (pp. 94–5).

¹⁸Richard Devetak, '"The battle is all there is": Philosophy and history in International Relations theory', *International Relations*, 31:3 (2017), pp. 261–81 (p. 263).

¹⁹Martin J. Bayly, 'Global intellectual history in International Relations: Hierarchy, empire, and the case of late colonial Indian international thought', *Review of International Studies*, 49:3 (2023), pp. 428–47 (p. 432).

intercultural functioning under conditions of cooperation and contestation was a mode of shaping new understandings of the Chinese self in international relations and transcending the identity of an unthreatened and indestructible hegemon.²⁰ Early 20th-century Chinese international thought, based on the theory of evolution, was characterised by a focus on natural selection through racial competition (*zhongzu jingzheng*). It largely resembled ideas put forward by Herbert Spencer and Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck – oftentimes without an acknowledgement of their source (Lamarck was particularly rarely mentioned).²¹ But, unlike with Spencer, it conceived of struggle as the one between groups rather than individuals. Finally, unlike numerous deterministic versions of Western SD, Chinese social evolutionary theories were voluntaristic. This seems crucial in the light of the fact that SD played the role of turn-of-the-20-century Chinese reformers' ideational 'weapon'.

The works of leading Chinese intellectuals of that time were (sometimes incoherent) assemblages of ideas, constantly evolving depending on circumstances and audiences.²² Distinct lineages of SD were not clearly demarcated. The point of emphasis was elsewhere – on China's survival, modernisation, and adaptation to the changing international situation. While Chinese SD developed in the idiosyncratic context of late Qing rule, close associations with intellectual currents influential in Europe and North America at that time were nonetheless maintained. As Torbjørn Knutsen's rare account shows, SD indeed impacted speculation about international relations in turn-of-the-20th-century Europe and North America²³ (see also Duncan Bell's work on Anglo-America of that period).²⁴ Darwin's ideas featured in the thought of, among others, liberals (Walter Bagehot, William Graham Sumner) and nationalists. Among the nationalists, the founders of geopolitics (Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer)²⁵ are especially worth mentioning.²⁶ Liberal Darwinists dominated numerically, having become especially influential in the UK and the USA. Yet their theories emphasised domestic market economies rather than international issues. Nationalists, such as Ernest Haeckel, Ludwig Gumplowicz, or Friedrich Ratzel, developed the most complex SD-inspired international thought, popular especially in Germany and Austria. Haeckel believed that nations were like living organisms which must struggle for survival. Among them, Germans were a superior *Volk*, capable of maintaining that status only if they preserved racial purity and eliminated devastating doctrines, such as liberalism. Ratzel analysed interactions between large human groups in geographical space, developing the notion of *Lebensraum*. The topic of Darwinian inspirations in Western international thought still remains to be systematically explored by the field of International Relations.²⁷

As we mentioned above, certain structures of SD thought are nowadays still present in Chinese discourse on relations between large groups of people. We thus aim to make arguments from the

²⁰Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 9–16.

²¹Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 64, 68.

²²Chenchen Zhang, 'Situating interpretations of nationalism, imperialism, and cosmopolitanism: Revisiting the writings of Liang in the encounter between worlds', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27:3 (2014), pp. 343–60.

²³Torbjørn Knutsen, *A History of International Relations Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 176–83.

²⁴Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

²⁵Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 17, 28, 36, 71.

²⁶Michael Heffernan, 'Fin de siècle, fin du monde?: on the origins of European geopolitics, 1890–1920', in David Atkinson and Klaus Dodds (eds), *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 27–51 (pp. 45–46).

²⁷Claeys, 'The "survival of the fittest" and the origins of social Darwinism', p. 226; Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League* (New York: Macdonald, 1971); Hannsjoachim W. Koch, 'Social Darwinism as a factor in the "new imperialism"', in Hannsjoachim W. Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 319–42; D. Collin Wells, 'Social Darwinism', *American Journal of Sociology*, 12:5 (1907), pp. 695–716.

past understandable and relevant to contemporary readers.²⁸ We also bring to the contemporary debate the knowledge of historically important ideas that can help explain contemporary world politics. Given contemporary China's increasingly assertive behaviour in international politics, understanding this background knowledge may contribute to a more complete explanation of the People's Republic of China's foreign policy.

Social Darwinism enters China: Broader picture

Following its huge popularity in the West, SD was diffusing to numerous other locations, including in East Asia.²⁹ By the end of the 19th century, it had gained a strong foothold in various areas of the world, allowing hierarchies of enlightened civilisations to be sustained – or evolutionary racialism for that matter, between the 'civilised' and the 'backward' – and justifying imperial exploitation. The Darwinian thought that 'travelled' to Asia tended to emphasise race as a set of factors combining biology, geography, and culture, being the primary precondition for a group to fit in civilisational progress or form a nation-state.³⁰ In particular, SD was the first Western and the first so-called 'scientific' theory adopted in China and, more broadly, the first Western social ideology to exert a major impact in the Middle Kingdom. Although SD was not an ideology officially subscribed to by the Chinese state, we argue that, in the late Qing period, it played a pivotal role as the trigger of the profound transformation of Chinese ideas on global politics and China's place within the international system. Throughout that process, SD was being transformed, adapted, and questioned by those who transplanted it into the local context.

Not only did SD become extremely popular, challenging local background knowledge about international relations, but it also played a fundamental (and very unique) practical role. As China had very few professional scientists at that time, the thought of Darwin was originally transplanted exclusively as an uncompromisingly radical social ideology rather than as a scientific theory.³¹ Nonetheless, it appears to have fully benefited from an enormous authority of Western science among the contemporary Chinese. Unlike the normatively constructed Confucianism, Sinicised SD functioned as a reliable scientific theory, developed and 'proven' by Western scholars.³² 'Disclosing' nature's secrets, it 'revealed' universally applicable natural laws. Consequently, while traditional Confucian literati established their elitist role by demonstrating proficiency in the canonical texts, the new elite's legitimacy was derived from their adherence to the contemporary Western intellectual fashion. Furthermore, the group of Chinese able to speak on political matters significantly expanded in that period. After 1895, politics, hitherto confined to a narrow circle of high-ranking literati and the emperor, opened up to new voices from lower-level intellectuals and the broader public.

For several years, SD dominated Chinese intellectual imagination, and its influence persisted far into the future. Darwin's name had become commonly known among intellectual circles, and Chinese equivalents of popular slogans expressing SD became broadly present even in everyday discourse.³³ Both among elites and in the popular imagination, they played a critical role in overcoming many 'everlasting' premises about the Chinese special role in the world order and

²⁸ Ian Hall, 'The history of international thought and International Relations theory: From context to interpretation', *International Relations*, 31:3 (2017), pp. 241–60 (pp. 254–5).

²⁹ Michio Nagai, 'Herbert Spencer in Early Meiji Japan', *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 14:1 (1954), pp. 55–64 (p. 55); Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent, 'Introduction: The study of comparative political thought', in Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent (eds), *Comparative Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–23 (p. 17).

³⁰ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 20–1.

³¹ Peter Buck, *American Science and Modern China, 1876–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³² Gao, '[An analysis of Liang Qichao's thought of social Darwinism]', p. 150.

³³ Erh-min Wang, 'The self-awakening of intellectuals in the late Qing', *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History*, 2 (1971), pp. 1–46.

understanding how a good society should work. Upon studying more than 500 autobiographical memoirs of the period, Cao Juren, a student of modern Chinese intellectual history, concluded that virtually all the authors were influenced by Yan Fu's *Tianyan lun*, a translation of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*.³⁴ It became widely read, with about 30 editions appearing within 10 years of its publication. James R. Pusey observes that the well-known Spencerian slogan *you sheng lie bai* (the superior wins, the inferior loses) was echoed in countless essays and, for decades, became an argument for almost any course of political action, especially reform.³⁵

By the 1900s, the theory was so popular among the literate classes that Wang Guowei wrote in 1905 that the names of Darwin and Spencer were on everyone's lips. The notions of 'survival of the fittest' and natural selection, translated from Huxley as 物競天擇 (*wujing tianze*), were found even in popular literature and readings for junior high schools.³⁶ Many people attached nouns such as competition, selection, and choice to their own and their children's names. A contemporary translator of Liang Qichao, an intellectual leader of the Darwinian turn, concluded that 'even Napoleon at the height of his power could not have captivated a larger number of men in his armies than the numberless youths whom Liang held under the influence of pen'.³⁷ Yuehtsen Chung argues that, for many Chinese intellectuals, SD replaced traditional Confucian notions of an ethical cosmic order.³⁸ In the same spirit, Jilin Xu notices that, in the process of adoption of evolutionary theory, the traditional social order was subverted and replaced by a new one, predicated on the rule of violent international competition, based on ruthless, brute power.³⁹ The mental outlook it brought, so explicitly granting power priority over everything else, was fundamentally at odds with the previously dominant, traditional Chinese view of the universe and human history. Normative distinctions between moral and immoral actions, dominant in Confucian mainstream narratives about statecraft, were substituted by the opposition of the strong and fit who will survive and those who are weak and destined to extinction.

Later, Hu Shi would recollect that the Darwinian discourse had been like a severe blow that had made the people aware of the gravity and the enormity of the Chinese situation: 'within just a few years, these ideas spread like wildfire and inflamed the minds and blood of many young people. Evolution, competition, weeding out, natural selection, and other terms gradually became familiar clichés in newspapers and essays, gradually became the conventional platitudes of most patriots.'⁴⁰ Yang Du observed that 'ever since Darwin and Huxley proposed the theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, every aspect of social life has been affected. Few human affairs can be exempted from the law they have established.'⁴¹ SD inspired and educated the public, supporting virtually all political movements present in China in that period, from Confucian literati, to communists, from nationalists to liberals, including Taoists, Legalists, and Buddhists. Among others, SD heavily influenced Mao Zedong. In 1935, in the caves of Yan'an, he confessed to the journalist Edgar Snow that he had 'worshiped' Kang and Liang and 'read and reread those books until [he] knew them by heart'.⁴²

³⁴Yang, 'Encountering Darwin and creating Darwinism in China', p. 253; Xiaoxing Jin, 'The evolution of social Darwinism in China, 1895–1930', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 64:3 (2022), pp. 690–721 (p. 702).

³⁵Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, p. 4.

³⁶Chen Liwei, [Winners, Losers, and Survival of the Fittest: Japanese and Chinese Language Contributing to the Spread of Evolutionary Theory in China] 優勝劣敗, 適者生存]: 進化論の中国流布に寄与する日本漢語 (中條屋進名誉教授退任記念号) (Tokyo: Seijo University Press, 2015), p. 259.

³⁷Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 46–50.

³⁸Yuehtsen Juliette Chung, 'Better science and better race?: Social Darwinism and Chinese eugenics', *Isis*, 105:4 (2014), pp. 793–802 (pp. 795–6).

³⁹Xu, 'Social Darwinism in modern China', p. 182–97.

⁴⁰Translated quote taken from Li Yu Ning, *Two Self Portraits: Liang Chi Chao and Hu Shih* (Bronxville: Outer Sky Press, 1992), p. 100.

⁴¹Translated quote taken from: Xu, 'Social Darwinism in modern China', p. 184.

⁴²Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 137.

Intellectual leaders: Kang Youwei, Yan Fu, Liang Qichao

SD was brought to China by three leading intellectuals and reformers of that period: Kang Youwei, Yan Fu, and Liang Qichao.⁴³ Pursuing the goals set by an earlier generation of intellectuals, the so-called self-strengthening movement, all of them wanted a restoration of *fuqiang*, that is, 'wealth and power' of the Middle Kingdom. In order to make that big dream come true, they first needed to comprehend the sources of power and prosperity in international relations. Following the undoubted failure of the generation of 'self-strengtheners', a new group of public intellectuals, oftentimes their students, developed Sinicised SD, a novel approach to international thought, allegedly distinct from everything China had known before. SD with Chinese characteristics brought a powerful prescriptive message: success in gathering 'wealth and power' in world politics could be achieved if actors behaved according to the rules of struggle for survival. Familiarity with this set of maxims and the implementation of the recommendations was an alleged source of strength in world politics.⁴⁴ This recipe for survival brought hope and optimism for the elites and the people of that time. It is therefore unsurprising that Sinicised SD became politically powerful in China, having prompted an even stronger urgency for domestic reforms and a reorientation of foreign policy practices.⁴⁵

Each of the aforementioned three Chinese social Darwinists was distinct in his thought. To an extent, the ideas pursued by each of them also evolved over time.⁴⁶ Yan Fu was primarily a translator of Western social philosophy; his renditions oftentimes proactively reshaped the original content, adapting it to the Chinese context. Kang Youwei was an intellectual radically reinterpreting Confucian thought in an effort to find in it entirely novel meanings. Alongside other activities, Kang served as an advisor to the emperor and his ideas informed what is known as the One Hundred Days Reforms. The third 'heavyweight' of this generation, Liang Qichao – the most prominent and widely read intellectual of the period, sometimes called the 'paradigmatic thinker of his time' – vigorously embraced and propagated the SD introduced by Yan and Kang. As a journalist, editor-in-chief and co-founder of major journals, public intellectual, and reformer, he consolidated the influence of SD in the late Qing Empire, despite his most active period having been spent in exile in Japan. Yan and Liang tended to emphasise their distinct epistemological status and Western origin as an advantage, whereas Kang sought to spread new ideas by incorporating them into the Confucian tradition.

Kang, Yan, and Liang encountered SD primarily during their visits and studies in Meiji Japan, the first East Asian country where Western SD writings were introduced, gaining high popularity. Kato Hiroyuki was a major proponent of this approach among Meiji intellectuals, and he was a crucial inspiration for Yan and Liang.⁴⁷ In his collection of books, Kang had a number of works by Japanese evolutionists,⁴⁸ including many texts of the biologist Ishikawa Chomatsu, a disciple of Edward Morse, an American professor of zoology and a correspondent of Darwin, who in 1877 brought the theory of evolution to Tokyo University.⁴⁹ Later, Darwin's theory and its social

⁴³The group of SD translators from Japanese and English was, of course, wider and included numerous less influential intellectuals, such as Yang Yinhang, Yang Tingdong, Huang Yingqi, Yan Yongjing, and Zhang Binglin. Additionally, at that time, there were hundreds of translations and adaptations of various SD texts from Japanese, English, and publications combining loose interpretations of works in these languages, many of them by anonymous authors. Republicans in particular among the social Darwinists hid their identities because under late Qing rule it was dangerous to call for a radical change of the political system and especially for revolution.

⁴⁴Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, p. 45; Jin, 'The evolution of social Darwinism in China, 1895–1930', p. 704.

⁴⁵Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, pp. 6–8, 58; Yang, 'Encountering Darwin and creating Darwinism in China', p. 253.

⁴⁶Zhu Lin, '[Chinese historiography in Liang Qichao: The evolution of "despotism" and the criterion of "politics"] 梁啟超における中国史叙述-「専制」の進化と「政治」の基準 (一)', *Bulletin of the Institute for Humanities Research*, 52 (2014), pp. 95–115.

⁴⁷Masaaki Kosaka, *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo: Pan-Pacific Press, 1958); Nagai, 'Herbert Spencer in Early Meiji Japan', pp. 180–7.

⁴⁸E.g. Ariga Nagao, Yatabe Ryokichi, Inoue Tetsujiro, Kikuchi Dairoku, and Sugiura Jugo.

⁴⁹Svarverud, 'Social Darwinism', p. 109; Sinn, 'A study of the influence of social Darwinism', pp. 130–2.

applications were included in the University of Hong Kong curriculum. This is where Sun Yat Sen became familiar with it.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Chinese social Darwinists travelled to the West; Yan studied in Britain, Kang visited Europe, and Liang the United States and Australia (and after the First World War – Europe), albeit most of their key works on SD had been written prior to those trips. On the other hand, Chinese SD diffused further in the region. In particular, it had a profound impact on Korean intellectuals, gaining the status of the dominant national socio-political ideology of the early 20th century and, again, serving as a justification for a fundamental break with the Confucian past. Similarly, Chinese SD ‘travelled’ to Vietnam, inspiring local nationalism, in particular through the works of Phan Bội Châu, written in direct collaboration with Liang.⁵¹

Social Darwinism in China: Logic of modification

Popular Darwinism was a creative assemblage of numerous, sometimes incoherent, interpretations and adaptations of Western authors. In fact, even if inspired by selected imported concepts, they were products of their Chinese authors, modified to fit into the Chinese tradition. Translations from Japanese were even more creative than the ‘pre-transformed’ adaptations of Western SD texts by Japanese authors. In the course of their translation into Chinese, they were further reinterpreted in a way that the authors viewed as suited to the needs of China at the time.⁵² Rather than being passive, intellectuals translating notions and theories exercised their own agency. They thus tended to appropriate the ideas, sometimes recasting basic meanings.

SD, including its international thought angle, was unknown in China until the late 19th century. However, just like with any other rich, ancient tradition, the statements of the Chinese classics could be interpreted post factum in accordance with the needs of the new fashion. For example, the ‘Pledge of Zhonghui’ contained moral-obligation-based justifications of military interventions of the self-claimed ‘civilised’ peoples in ‘uncivilised’ territories. Kang repeatedly quoted that passage, including in the early 1898 memorial to the Guangxu Emperor, as a warning for the declining empire, allegedly doomed to foreign annexation and subjugation unless it found a remedy for the disorder and ignorance.⁵³ It is hard to establish to what extent Kang’s thinking at that time was driven by SD discourse. Still, in 1901, his eminent student Liang fully incorporated Darwinian thought in an essay on modern international conflicts and modes of subjugation through colonialism. He argued there that ‘Darwin had replaced the mythological adviser Zhonghui as an authority on “national ruin”’.⁵⁴ Importantly, although the Confucianism-dominated decades of the 1870s and the 1880s had seen debates about limited reforms in China, necessary to self-strengthen in a world of aggressive Western powers, the ideas that the struggle generated by expansion and war could actually be a positive necessity never appeared in public discourse. At the same time, because of its drawing a clear connection between the natural and the social world, SD resembled Confucianism structurally. Thus, when Confucianism eventually started to be seen as an ‘obstacle on the path to progress and survival’, SD was its ‘natural’ successor.⁵⁵

Leigh Jenco argues that, actually, not only did the Chinese thinkers introducing Western theories to China (including those classified as ‘social Darwinists’) exercise agency in developing

⁵⁰Luke Cooper, ‘The international relations of the “imagined community”: Explaining the late nineteenth-century genesis of the Chinese nation’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:3 (2015), pp. 21–4.

⁵¹Svarverud, ‘Social Darwinism’, p. 101; Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 55–6, 83–4, 150, 182.

⁵²Song Xiaoyu, [Translating Evolutionary Theory at the End of the Qing Dynasty: The Introduction of Evolutionary Theory from the West and Japan] 清末における進化論の翻訳: 西洋と日本からの進化論導入 (Nagoya: Nagoya University, 2018); Song Xiaoyu, [Acceptance and resistance to the theory of evolution among late Qing intellectuals: Focusing on Hiroyuki Kato’s theory of political evolution] 清末知識人における進化論の受容と抵抗—加藤弘之著、楊廷棟訳『政教進化論』を中心に—, *ICCS Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, 11:2 (2019), pp. 46–64.

⁵³Sebastian Riebold, ‘The idea of “intellectual warfare” and the dispersion of social Darwinism in late Qing China (1897–1906)’, in Iwo Amelung (ed.), *Discourses of Weakness in Modern China* (New York: Campus, 2020), pp. 335–77 (pp. 340–1).

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 353–4.

⁵⁵Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 12, 91.

conscious theorisations for domestic audiences, but, throughout this major creative absorption process, they also developed one of the most remarkable discourses about how, and why, it is important to study foreign theories and learn from cultural others, and what is worth learning.⁵⁶ On the basis of new referents, they put forward specific political, social, and technical ideas, which served as constitutive sources of knowledge. Reformists' commitment to transform China according to foreign inspirations facilitated the movement of ideas and practices across historical and cultural boundaries. They 'urged not just the hybridisation or translation of Western ideas into Chinese contexts but the total re-alignment of local institutions and ways of life to accord with what they believed to be "Western" models'.⁵⁷ Unlike the earlier generation of the 'self-strengtheners', they did not believe that a purely instrumental 'transplantation' of certain Western knowledge, limited to areas of science and technology, could change the lot of China. The necessary reforms were so fundamental that they could not be accommodated in the existing Confucian framework, no matter how capacious and flexible this framework seemed to be. The new, profoundly different institutions they advocated were perceived by them as facilitating new actions, including new modes of knowledge production, and as ones which, in fact, enabled the effective thriving of the West in the domain of world politics.

At the same time, the reformers approached modernisation very pragmatically, introducing modifications as they saw fit. They considered adoption of new institutions and cultural patterns only if those changes could help make China powerful and wealthy again. Indeed, hundreds of politicians and intellectuals from various generations and political options discussed the restoration of *fuqiang* – 'wealth and power' – in the international context. Concepts such as constitutionalism, democracy, and education were worth considering, but only as potential vehicles to wealth and power rather than as autotelic values.

Struggle and survival in international relations

Sinicised SD put survival and power in the centre of world politics. Success or failure in the struggle depended on the will of a given group and a skilful adaptation to the changing context. Unlike some of its Western versions, SD with Chinese characteristics avoided determinism and, as such, was instrumental in mobilising for the building of national strength. When Liang, Kang, and Yan wrote about the struggle for survival between groups, they meant a conscious one, one that valued self-cultivation, self-strengthening, self-improvement, and self-reliance. In the evolutionary process, humans were empowered to act and could influence their chances of succeeding.

Following the defeat in the 1895 war with Japan, Yan Fu, in the *Zhi bao* newspaper, published an article entitled 'Yuan qiang' (Whence strength), pointing to the need for urgent reforms. In his discussion of the notions of natural selection and survival, he referred to Darwin but actually used Malthusian arguments (without mention of the latter scholar). In Yan's view, the Chinese classics underestimated the importance of the perpetual struggle that brought change and dynamism to societies. In his eyes, human greed knew no bounds; human groups reproduced incessantly, never satisfied with the wealth and power they had accumulated. Chinese classics were wrong to call for self-restraint, Yan argued, while Western intellectuals encouraged competition, viewing societies as striving for progress and development. He pointed out that the danger facing China at the time was not a temporary problem, but rather a symptom of an essential mechanism driving inter-group relations, a symptom that was not properly diagnosed by traditional Chinese international thought. The analysis of Western sources of power and wealth led him to conclude that the Chinese position was inferior, characterised by weakness, poverty, and backwardness. Yan argued that the West's superiority stemmed from its successful internalisation of Darwin's theory, leading to an awareness that all species must struggle for their own existence.⁵⁸ Consequently, Yan believed

⁵⁶Jenco, *Changing Referents*, pp. 2–5.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 66, 94, 103–4.

⁵⁸Büttner, 'The boundaries of the Chinese nation', pp. 288–9.

that, in order to compete with the Western powers and Japan, China would have to undergo a profound, unprecedented change, transforming its people mentally, physically, and morally, and thus remodelling the entire society, government, and military.⁵⁹ 'Whence strength', a prolegomenon to Yan's whole intellectual contribution, profoundly impacted Chinese thought for the following three decades.

The first work comprehensively introducing this new approach to change was Yan Fu's *Tiānyān lùn* [The theory of heavenly evolution], published between 1896 and 1898. It was a selection and assemblage of motifs from Huxley, Spencer, Malthus, and Darwin, but not taken directly from those authors. Instead, Yan proposed a paraphrased version of Thomas H. Huxley's 1894 lectures on evolutionary theory. He reinterpreted the fundamental concept of 'heaven' (*tian*), which until then meant the moral principle legitimising the cosmic imperial order. Yan used it to describe the principle of evolution. *Tiānyān lùn* argued that evolution was a universal process, encompassing biological, intellectual, moral, social, and political realms. Change was natural and inevitable; constant adjustment was an imperative. The rewards for timely and effective adjustment were survival and progress; failure to adjust led to extermination. The strength of European states was an outcome of their centuries-long evolution, forcing adaptation and efficiency in a competitive process. The Old Continent, divided into small countries, formed conditions for continuous, voluntaristic reforming in search of the most effective modes of functioning of survival-oriented polities. Those adverse conditions facilitated the European powers' gaining an advantage over China, a polity experiencing centuries-long existence in a relatively uncompetitive environment.

Upon reading *Tiānyān lùn*, Kang Youwei developed his philosophy of progress, aiming at a reconciliation of Confucian thought with SD. This resulted in, again, a voluntaristic approach to both social change and the interpretation of history. In his renowned 1897 essay, *A Study of Confucius as a Reformer*, he retroactively inscribed the idea of progress into classical texts. The purpose was to undermine the intellectual foundations of the old political order, which he saw as anachronistic in a changing world. At the same time, it was well fortified with built-in mechanisms to resist reform. Unlike mainstream interpreters of Chinese classics, Kang claimed that canonical texts, including those of Confucius, authorised radical change. Jenco notices that, paradoxically, that interpretation of ancient texts facilitated their own negation, as 'reformers used the theory of inevitable change found within them to justify their displacement in favour of Western knowledge'.⁶⁰ This way, Kang developed a historical relativisation of the Confucian order, in accordance with which China could not continue as a dynastic empire; instead, it should enter the phase of sovereign nation-state to eventually reach great unity under which borders, a cause of wars and human suffering, would lose their significance. At a more abstract level, Kang actually developed a creative approach to history, according to which the nature of the past was neither certain nor given. Instead, it was a constant object of investigations, which people were actively referring to every time they thought or talked about history. In a similar vein, current reforms were legitimised by new interpretations of the past, creating potential for transformation of future generations.

Liang Qichao, another early reader of *Tiānyān lùn*, was profoundly influenced by Yan and his own teacher, Kang. The introduction to the first issue of the widely read journal published by Liang began with the declaration that change was necessary for survival. 'Without change, heaven, earth, and man would in the same hour all cease to exist.' Just as Yan did, Liang also saw human beings' agency in this natural process of change: 'whether it will be changed for better or for worse depended on the way of man.' Progress was unstoppable, but not for everyone; some actors were bound to lose out in the process. The rise of one nation was the fall of another. The statement: 'The strong flourish; the weak are destroyed' was illustrated by the example of Poland and India, both

⁵⁹ Yan Fu, '[Whence strength] 原強', in Wang Shi (ed.), *Yan Fu Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), pp. 5–15 (p. 14).

⁶⁰ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, p. 105.

having failed to reform and adjust themselves to the circumstances of the international environment and therefore having disappeared from the map.⁶¹ The theme of countries that did not reform, which led to their annihilation (*wangguo*), often returned later in political debates. Sometimes, Liang even fabricated translations in order to mobilise his nation to fight for survival: 'Mr. Darwin has said, every living thing, no matter of what kind, must frequently change its form and make it beneficial to itself, for only thus may it survive.'⁶² Those who ignored the rules of international relations, failing to adapt to contemporary challenges, were doomed:

if we change we will be changed. If we do not change we will be changed. If changing we are changed, the power of change will be in our hands, and we will be able to preserve our country, our race, our religion. If not changing we are changed, then we give up the power of change to others, who will harness us and drive us like beasts of burden.⁶³

Thus, Sinicised SD, unlike its Western and Japanese counterparts, emphasised the possibility of the weak becoming powerful in international relations.⁶⁴

In his main pro-reform treatise, *Bianfa tongyi*, Liang followed in Kang's footsteps, backing his own radical propositions with citations from ancient books, including the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*). Despite being arguably the most Darwinian and 'Westernised', Liang creatively adapted Chinese tradition in his efforts to reform China. By combining foreign 'scientific discoveries' with a creative reinterpretation of the past and the classical intellectual heritage of Confucianism, he described the conditions for China's entry into the modern international order.⁶⁵

Races and nations in interaction

Chinese social Darwinists, especially Yan and Liang, developed a new sociological practice: a study of groups or groupings (*qun*), which, in their view, were undergirding Western prosperity. In accordance with that notion, China could not succeed in international relations unless it implemented a similar approach. States, nations, and races played a central role in the logic of struggle. Patriotic unity was considered to be the most effective form of interaction between subjects of the same state.⁶⁶ Overall, this set of ideas constituted fundamental inconsistency with the individualist core of mainstream Western SD.

In *On Grouping*, an 1897 essay, Liang complains that '400 million people of China means to have 400 million countries, which is to say there is really no country at all', implying that Western nations' strength came from their grouping capabilities in the form of nation-states. 'The perfection of the West's methods of grouping has taken place within just the last hundred years, and so its rise followed.' Furthermore, he argues that:

the struggle of groups is especially sharp when they are close to one another in strength and also in proximity ... As for the weak and small countries like Denmark, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland, they can survive even though they are surrounded by stronger European powers, because their own grouping abilities are comparable to those of the great nations. If a country located in a strategic area does not have the grouping abilities ... then it will be

⁶¹ Yan Fu, 'Whence strength'; Liang Qichao, '[On destruction of Poland] 波兰灭亡记', *Current Affairs* (1896).

⁶² Translated quote taken from William de Bary and Richard Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 295.

⁶³ Translated quotes taken from Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, pp. 92–3, 109.

⁶⁴ Song, 'Acceptance and resistance to the theory of evolution', pp. 63–6; Gu Xieguang, '[Catalogue of translated books] 译书经眼录', *Hangzhou Jinshilou* (1934) in Xiong Yuezhi (ed.) [*A Compendium of New Learning in the Late Qing Period*] 晚清新学书目提要 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chubanshe, 2007), p. 341.

⁶⁵ Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 18–19.

⁶⁶ Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, p. 13.

gradually weakened to the point that its race will die out. This is the fate of Muslims of Turkey, the Brown race of India, and the Indians of America.⁶⁷

Liang's 1902 essay on the historical development of humankind shows SD's impact on China's thinking about international politics in terms of degrees of civilisational development. Based on the ability (or inability) to organise lasting political entities, Liang divided the world population into two general categories: historical and non-historical races. The former were considered active in the search for expansion and subduing the latter by force. Conversely, non-historical races were deemed as passive and bound to a gradual 'disappearance from the stage of world history'. His observations were firmly grounded in evolutionary theory: 'For thousands of years there has been a process of rise and fall of various races (*zhongzu*), this is a nature of history.'⁶⁸ Among the historical races, Liang distinguished only whites and (broadly understood) yellows, who were further subdivided into peoples with a prominent or insignificant impact on global history. The former category comprised peoples whose culture and military force transcends the boundaries of their states, wielding an impact on global development. In his inquiry, Liang ascribed the principal role in shaping the world's civilisation to ancient Greece and Rome, concluding that the white race held 90 per cent of the contemporary world's territorial sovereignty (*tudi zhuquan*).⁶⁹ Under colonialism, he emphasised the unity of the yellow race as a critical factor for survival of people in East Asia. (He nonetheless did not rule out the possibility that the yellow race would outperform the white 'lazy and arrogant' one in future.⁷⁰) Liang brought the racial dimension to the foreground, ignoring China's internal diversity, especially the potential rivalry between the Han, the Manchus, and other groups inhabiting the empire. Following this reasoning, Liang's associate, Zhang Binglin, conceived of the struggle between human races in terms of their capacity for grouping – the key factor in determining their varying fortunes. Therefore, Zhang posited, the yellow people, with their high levels of social organisation, were outperforming the black, the brown, and the red, but, for the same reason, the yellow races were held down by the white, a race with a supreme capacity to organise as a group.⁷¹

Yan Fu's most influential line of thought saw little space for the individual.⁷² He subordinated the freedom of the individual, as well as individual energies, to the needs of the group. In 'Whence strength', he explained that once individuals start believing that the group is their own, they will see no conflict between an individual and a group. In this way, individual interests will be 'naturally' identified with the group. Yan used Spencerian ideas of communal bonds as analogous to a living organism. Only such a properly integrated organism could successfully withstand the 'survival of the fittest' environment. 'Social organism' became a powerful metaphor: 'a country is like a body, and China will be strong if only it would ... pull itself together and act as one body'. If not, 'at very best, it will be enslaved; at worst – it will be exterminated'. The world was one of the warring social organisms. The way to make the organism strong was to cultivate people's physical prowess, knowledge, intelligence, and their virtue. 'When it is a question of one's own life or the life of the species, then one should sacrifice oneself to preserve the species.'⁷³

⁶⁷ Liang Qichao, *Thoughts from the Ice-Drinker's Studio: Essays on China and the World*, translated with an introduction and notes by Peter Zarrow (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2023), pp. 8, 11–12.

⁶⁸ Liang Qichao, '[Relations between history and race] 历史与人种之关系', in *Liang Qichao Debates on National Learning* 梁启超讲国学 (Nanjing: Fenghuang Chubanshe, 2008), pp. 134–40 (p. 134).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–36, 140.

⁷⁰ Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, p. 51.

⁷¹ Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, p. 110.

⁷² See, however, Sha Li, 'Yan Fu, John Seeley, and the idea of liberty', *Modern China*, 48:4 (2022), pp. 814–45; Li Qiang, '[Yan Fu and the transformation of modern Chinese thought: Reflection on Schwartz's "In Search of Wealth and Power: Yan Fu and the West"] 严复与中国近代思想的转型——兼评史华兹《寻求富强：严复与西方》', *Aisixiang.com*, available at: <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/20978.html>.

⁷³ Yan, 'Whence strength'.

Distinct in terms of his approach to Chinese tradition, Kang nevertheless agreed with Yan's fundamental conclusion: 'heaven blesses only the strong'. China must realise that 'all creatures alone are weak, united – strong'. The Middle Kingdom is a vast country, but its people 'hold aloof and will not group; they are ignorant and will not study ... in study there is strength; in grouping there is strength'.⁷⁴ Kang, a loyal member of the literati class, aimed to promote a new, national, collective Chinese identity, integrating Western concepts and technology into a reinterpreted Confucian heritage, of which he considered himself to be a guardian.

Liang was not bound by an office requiring loyalty to the heritage. Therefore, he was in a better position to introduce nationalist and modern ideas, emphasising a break in continuity.⁷⁵ According to some scholars, Liang emphasised this discontinuity of SD with the entire earlier tradition more firmly than would be required for the merely descriptive purpose. This was precisely because his intention was to promote a radical change. He thus built his discourse in fundamental opposition to everything that had come before, through millennia of Chinese tradition.⁷⁶ His language was blunt:

The myriad years from the time when first there were living things upon the earth until today ... can be described in a single world – racial strife. In the beginning animals struggled with animals, then men struggled with animals, and finally men struggled with men. First savages struggled with savages, then civilised struggled with savages, and finally the civilised struggled with the civilised ... Alas, this is the law of the struggle for survival. Not even a Sage can do anything about it ... According to the law of the survival of the fittest, members of an inferior race must be devoured by a superior one. Day by day, month by month, they will slowly be eaten away until there are no more of them left, and their race no longer lives upon the earth.⁷⁷

Liang shared Yan's view that an individual should completely subjugate themselves to the interest of the nation: 'Freedom means freedom for the group, not freedom for the individual ... Men must not be slaves to other men, but they must be slaves to their group. For if they are not slaves to their group, they will assuredly become slaves to some other.'⁷⁸ Xiaobing Tang claims that, in his creative adaptation of SD, Liang used traditional Confucian belief in the fundamental harmony between public and private, collective and individual interests, which allowed him to easily justify priority given to a group at the expense of the individual.⁷⁹ Thus, this concept of group builds on the traditional Chinese belief in a community modelled on extended family. But, at the same time, SD strips from it the traditional metaphysical connotations. In this new sense, the group becomes a universal category, revealing the logic of history and mechanisms of international relations: 'A barbarian society cannot survive a civilised society. The more advanced the world, the greater the role of collective social power. If one is unable to accept this, only extinction will follow.'⁸⁰ In order to participate in world politics, a group has to transform itself into a modern nation. In an 1899 essay, he attributed the power of modern Western nations to the struggle (*jingsheng*) of their citizens (*guomin*), as opposed to the past wars of aggression driven by the Asian and European rulers' individual ambitions. Instead, 'the original impulse behind the rivalrous wars of Western nations is their citizens' struggle for survival. Given the laws of evolution, there is no stopping in natural selection and survival of the fittest – even if we wanted to. Thus, the current struggles of the Western nations are not a matter of the state, but the people as a whole.' 'The European citizenries developed

⁷⁴Translated quotes taken from Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, p. 58.

⁷⁵Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity*, p. 54.

⁷⁶Xinmin Liu, *Signposts of Self-Realization: Evolution, Ethics, and Sociality in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Boston: Brill, 2014).

⁷⁷Translated quote taken from Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, p. 181.

⁷⁸Translated quote taken from Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, p. 189.

⁷⁹Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 21, 66–8.

⁸⁰Translated quote taken from Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity*, p. 67.

their power in just a hundred-odd years, but with their power, the Europeans have been able to reach every corner of the Earth, easily extending their dominance and overcoming any resistance.⁸¹

For Liang, the mere size of a group did not automatically guarantee its strength; sophistication and intellectual capacity were much more important. Such qualities resulted from both the size of the human brain and having broader knowledge than others:

Physical organisation honours the principle of grouping. In regard to humans, the more complex their nervous system is, the more intelligent they are, while the simpler their nervous system is, the stupider they are. The more social contact people have, the more open-minded they are, and the less contact, the more close-minded. The more people study, the greater their knowledge; and the less they study, the greater their ignorance. This is why Africans are inferior to Europeans and Asians, country folk are inferior to urbanities and the ancients are inferior to the moderns: the development of knowledge honors the principle of grouping.⁸²

At the same time, it is not enough, in his view, to acquire certain knowledge because, in a co-constitutive relation, knowledge has to ultimately transform the human group (produce institutions typical for advanced groups). Groups that do not have proper institutions cannot produce sophisticated knowledge, necessary to ensure survival. What makes the West so powerful is both its knowledge and the institutional conditions under which the knowledge is produced.

State-building and civilisations

Sinicised SD grants a unique status to the state and its institutions. In fact, putting the state in the centre distinguishes SD with Chinese characteristics from its original Western versions. Unlike with Europe or the USA, in China SD legitimised modern nation-state building. Again, reformers aimed to reject fundamental tenets of Confucianism in favour of the desacralisation of politics and the pursuit of logic in accordance with which only the strong states can survive.

Liang claimed that traditional China did not have 'statehood' in the modern sense of the term. In line with the principle of dynastic sovereignty, the Chinese state was a property of the ruling dynasties. In Liang's view, the deficit of citizenry in China made the country vulnerable to foreign domination:

Today, the land of China is the private possession of one family; foreign affairs are the private affairs of one family; the national calamity is the private humiliation of one family. The Chinese people do not know they have a state, and our state does not know it has people. It might have been able to survive in the earlier world of struggles between traditional states, but how can it survive in today's era of fierce struggles between citizenries.⁸³

Liang described China as being in adolescence, still about to 'mature' and 'show all of its potential to the world in full'.⁸⁴ In his concept of reform, Western-style education, in addition to political and military reforms, were parts of an overarching, comprehensive programme of state-building, necessary to effectively balance against foreign powers. Yan, on his part, emphasised that constitutional monarchy and democracy consolidated Western countries. It was not the empowerment of citizens but the strengthening of state power that was at stake in arguing for popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, and democracy. Yan asserted that when people believed that they 'owned' the country, they were much more willing to give their all, including their lives, for it, as opposed to the situation of sovereignty resting with a dynastic monarch.⁸⁵

⁸¹Liang Qichao, *Thoughts from the Ice-Drinker's Studio*, pp. 11–12, 33.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸⁴Translated quote taken from Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, p. 89.

⁸⁵Sinn, 'A study of the influence of social Darwinism', p. 13.

Hence, in order to survive, China needed profound institutional reforms as ‘the state is the highest form of a group ... Private interests related to oneself, family and class should be sacrificed for the sake of the state. The state is the basis for private attachments, the highest form of universal love.’ Yan hoped that the humiliation Chinese emigrants suffered in ‘white-dominated’ countries would eventually teach them to love their country, for ‘your human rights are gone if your state is gone.’⁸⁶ He believed that a lack of patriotism among citizens was deeply immoral and compared it to a ‘suicide on the national level’. Interestingly, Chinese social Darwinists frequently used typical Confucian moralism to justify their exhortations. Thus, again, although traditional philosophy remained one of the main enemies, it simultaneously inspired creative adaptation of Western ideas to the Chinese context, producing SD ‘with Confucian characteristics’.⁸⁷

Liang was considering which model of state would be the best for China and focused on two doctrines: the ‘social contract’ by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and German-style constitutionalism in the version put forward by Johann Caspar Bluntschli. Liang believed that while republicanism may be good for a smaller country, China needed statism and centralisation; otherwise, it would not be possible to achieve consensus and implement necessary reforms.⁸⁸ In the 1902 essay *New Citizen of China*, he attributed China’s deficit of statism to two factors: its geographical conditions (vast plains), which often prevented political disunity seen in Europe (divided by rivers and mountains), and Confucianism, promoting the vague concept of all-under-heaven (*tianxia*)⁸⁹ at the expense of state consciousness. Yan, meanwhile, argued that China should abandon its long-standing chauvinism against foreigners, which denigrated them as ‘barbarians’, and open up to foreign content, including values, institutions, and ideas. The only criterion of adaptation should be whether it will preserve and strengthen the nation-state.⁹⁰ Transformation of China on the basis of Western cultural learning, in the view of both Liang and Yan, would strengthen and save the country. This institutional reform (*bianfa*) implicated qualitative transformations in personal relationships, material conditions of economic and social production, and standards of legitimisation of knowledge, of adequacy as well as fundamental referents. On the practical side, the comprehensive programme included Western-style education, reinforcement of nationalism, political reform, and the revival of military values.

Chinese SD juxtaposed the vision of social reality driven by struggle and competition to the traditional Confucian idea of order based on harmony and hierarchy. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all believed that moral virtue was an ultimate source of strength, right was might, and it was ultimately the way to peace and prosperity. According to the ancient tradition, even small polities, if virtuous, could thrive. Kang and Yan argued the opposite: morality was not enough. In their view, the sages’ suppression of confrontation and emphasis on harmony had created an intellectual environment in China in which people, and hence state institutions, had degenerated to the point where they were unable to survive a struggle against foreign powers. Yan saw the key Confucian value of harmony as a source of weakness. Chinese SD brought about an unprecedented interest in the outer world and the mechanisms driving international relations, especially focusing on the reasons for the ‘rise and decline’ of powers. This view depicted the world as brutal and unforgiving, but it was *one* world politics, a global theatre of contest for domination, might, and survival, one in which victimisation and violence were natural. The Chinese turn-of-the-century political debate claimed that it had ‘newly discovered’ a variety of states ‘under heaven’. It passionately analysed their incessantly changing fortunes, marked by spectacular successes and downfalls.

It should be emphasised that other countries also used Darwinist categories, and sometimes China directly fell victim to this discourse, providing additional arguments for supporters of a

⁸⁶Translated quotes taken from Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 14, 84.

⁸⁷Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 94–5, 110.

⁸⁸Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity*, p. 123.

⁸⁹Liang, *Thoughts from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio*, pp. 76, 68–70.

⁹⁰Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, p. 50.

radical shift in worldview. Japan, pursuing its expansive goals, joined the Western discourse, justifying domination of the superior 'civilised nations' over 'non-nations'.⁹¹ Vis-à-vis the Chinese, Japan displayed its racial and cultural superiority, in addition to demonstrating military and industrial advancement.⁹² Tokyo, for example, exercised that approach during the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, the first international summit attended by China as a sovereign state (although its sovereignty was partial due to imperial encroachment of Western powers and Japan). The attending states, most notably Japan, acted largely in line with the Western discourse of international law, integrating (in a Darwinist manner) colonial nationalism and hierarchy of states. Accordingly, they deemed China's judicial reforms to be unsatisfactory, thus insisting on their maintaining of the extraterritorial privileges and holding China's progress in check. In his 1907 memorandum to the throne, Lu Zhengxiang, a diplomat and the Qing representative to the Hague conferences, observed that China's low status as an 'uncivilised state' made the country's request for equal treatment conditional, thus urging the imperial court for constitutional reforms.⁹³ The decision of the 1907 Hague Conference infamously reflected China's position as an 'uncivilised state', classifying it, together with several Latin American countries, among the lowest, third-ranking group, with limited rights to nominate its judicial representative to the would-be international Court of Arbitral Justice.⁹⁴

Indeed, SD thinking had profoundly impacted Chinese perception of the international order through the prism of cultural advancement. At the same time, however, it has also shaped the domestic discourse of rising Han ethnic nationalism and the revolutionary transformation of the Qing empire into a nation-state. Zou Rong, in his 1904 essay entitled *Revolutionary Army*, acknowledged that Britain, France, and other countries could destroy China, relying on the higher level of civilisational advancement (*wenming chengdu*). However, in the same manner, Zou tried to delegitimise Manchu rule over the Han Chinese: 'Worldwide minority obey the majority, the fool obeys the wise, the [total] number of the Manchu traitors (*zei*) is only five million which is less than a population of a prefecture. ... In three hundred years, they had barely one or two sages, that is why they should be civilised by us.'⁹⁵ The late 19th-century Qing 'civilising project' in Xinjiang was such a Sinicising effort, exploiting the perceived backwardness of non-Han peoples to justify Han Chinese domination and assimilatory colonialism.⁹⁶ According to Xinjiang's first provincial governor, Liu Jintang, the primary goal of the introduction of Chinese organisational and institutional order, along with Confucian education and Chinese language teaching, was to 'civilise' (*jiao hua*) the local Muslim populations and thereby 'control the barbarians' (*bing yi zhi liang*).⁹⁷ In fact, as Duara posited, 'SD in China translated historical Chinese conceptions of inferior races into a conception of a new global order of a hierarchy of races and nations'. For the republican revolutionaries, absorbing the international discourse of racist evolutionism, constructing a racial nation-state became a prerequisite 'to forge ahead in the evolutionary struggle of life and death'.⁹⁸ In other words, creating a racial nation, with non-Chinese races (e.g. Manchus) being either wiped out or absorbed into China's cultural and political realm, would enhance China's position in the global competition of nation-states. The 'second generation of ethnic polices' in China under Xi Jinping,

⁹¹Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 65–7.

⁹²Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, p. 22.

⁹³John Feng, 'Disciplining China with the scientific study of the state: Lu Zhengxiang and the Chinese Social and Political Science Association, 1915–1920', *History of Science*, 53:1 (2015), pp. 9–20 (pp. 11–12).

⁹⁴Ryan Mitchell, 'China's participation in the Second Hague Conference and the concept of equal sovereignty in international law', *Asian Journal of International Law*, 11:2 (2021), pp. 35–371 (pp. 355–8).

⁹⁵Zou Rong, [*Revolutionary Army*] 革命军 (Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe, 2002), p. 13.

⁹⁶Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁹⁷[Decision regarding the abolition of *hakim-beg* and other offices] 議裁阿奇木伯克等員片 in Ma Dazheng and Wu Fengpei (eds), [*Compilation of Memorials and Documents on Xinjiang during the Qing* 清代新疆稀見奏牘匯編], vol. 2 (Urumchi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 584–5.

⁹⁸Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, p. 141.

with its ultimate goal to assimilate non-Han peoples through 'ethnic unity and fusion', resembles the aforementioned logic. As David Tobin infers, China's most politically influential scholars are pushing for 'fusion' policies to transform China into a nation-state (*minzu guojia*) or race-state (*guozu*), to compete with other states and resist Western attempts to prevent its rise.⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the above, in the process of what Benedict Anderson famously put as 'stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire', the Han Chinese revolutionaries eventually accommodated the Manchus and other non-Han peoples into the broad concept of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua*).¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the ethnic framework of the future Republic of China, as designed by Zhang Binglin (Zhang Taiyan), was debated in line with the Darwinist assumptions and alleged 'civilisational inferiority' of the non-Han peoples. The last were granted a second-rate-citizen status in the would-be state, deprived of voting rights unless 'improved'.¹⁰¹ Zhang made clear, 'it is only possible to allow alien races to assimilate with us when sovereignty is in our hands'.

In addition, Liang was the first in the Chinese context to analyse interstate relations in terms of balance of power: 'when two equal states meet, there is nothing called might, reason is their might. When two unequal states meet, there is nothing called reason. Might is their reason.'¹⁰² For him, power was the substance of the universe and the cause of all transformation. In order to bring China into line with the rest of the world, the power of physics would have to displace the virtues of morality in the social and cosmic universe. In 1899, he wrote: 'the only thing that matters in the world is power. The strong may bully the weak, but this is the fundamental law of nature.' With reference to Hiroyuki's interpretation of Hobbes, he wrote that 'the strong have the power to back up their claim for rights. There is no such thing as right, but only power. Power and rights are called by different names, but they are really the same. Both are about asserting one's own self-interest at the expense of others.'¹⁰³

Chinese reformers often advocated extreme statism. For them, SD implied the deepening of society's dependence on modern institutions, such as the army, school, and press. This ideology thus reinforced the influence of the modernising elite. State-led mass education was fundamental for the reform and regarded as the primary 'patriotic duty'. Knowledge differentiated between 'civilised people' and 'barbarians'; while both of those groups followed the laws of natural selection, the more educated ones were more likely to prevail. Their knowledge also justified their appropriation of the lands of the less advanced people. The former could better use the resources and make a greater contribution to the overall progress. On a more pragmatic level, the reformers believed that literacy made conscripts more cognisant of rules and instructions, and more conscious of their duties.

Conclusion

Scholars debating 'non-Western International Relations' sometimes argue that a truly alternative knowledge should be characterised by the lack of mimicry of 'Western' concepts.¹⁰⁴ What is needed is thus more than the mere hearing of the voices from the Global South; it is also about activating different discourse structures. At the same time, it has been noticed that intellectual and political discourses of the countries challenging the 'West' may be based on tenets whose origins lie in Western thought. Such tenets sometimes permeate the way of thinking predominant

⁹⁹David Tobin, *Securing China's Northwest Frontier Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 6.

¹⁰⁰Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 86.

¹⁰¹Taiyan Zhang, 'Explaining the Republic of China', *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 8 (1997), pp. 28–40.

¹⁰²Translated quote taken from Bary and Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 206.

¹⁰³Translated quotes taken from Xu, 'Social Darwinism in modern China', pp. 184, 187.

¹⁰⁴Kosuke Shimizu, 'Materializing the "non-Western"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28:1 (2015), pp. 3–20 (p. 14).

in non-Western contexts, often having more impact and facing less vigorous criticism than in their places of origin.¹⁰⁵

Our study of Chinese SD offers an analysis of a discourse that ‘arrived’ in China at a historically critical moment, that is, when the Chinese state’s mere survival became seriously threatened. Based on texts written by three leading intellectuals of that period of crisis and change – Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao – we analyse how the reception of Darwinian thought facilitated the shaping of a radically new image of China’s position in the international arena. We emphasise those aspects of Sinicised SD that contributed to its emergence as an influential intellectual tradition, a set of maxims on which to found both China’s effective resistance against aggressive Western powers and Han Chinese domination over other groups of people. In doing so, we point to fundamental modifications to the original Darwinist ideas, carried out in such a way as to make the resulting concepts suit China’s historically determined needs. More often than not, such modifications meant an enrichment of the original ideas with intrinsically Chinese, especially Confucian, tradition.

Finally, we briefly link this intellectual heritage to both contemporary Chinese foreign policy and popular debates among netizens. While Chinese policy experts and scholars tend to emphasise the crucial role of Confucianism, with its values of peaceful cooperation, as an essential component of Chinese decision-makers’ background knowledge and the Chinese approach to foreign affairs, we uncover the lesser known and less advertised international thought tradition, which dominated the social imagination for several decades at the turn of the 20th century. This tradition continues to attract ardent supporters among the society and seems to exert a tacit influence on decision-makers, even if the latter rarely refer to the SD categories in a direct manner.

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¹⁰⁵ Giorgio Shani, ‘Toward a post-western IR: The *Umma*, *Khalsa Panth*, and critical International Relations theory’, *International Studies Review*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 722–34.