CHAPTER 7

Contemporary Meanings of the Sui-Tang Period (581–907)*

As discussed in Chapter 1, the late Qing reformer Zhang Zhidong used the *ti-yong* formula to find a common ground between the radicals who asked for sweeping changes in government and society, on one hand, and the conservatives who worried about the crumbling of the Chinese traditional system, on the other. By linking the foreign *yong* to the Chinese *ti*, Zhang reproached the radicals by asking them to relate their demands for reform to the existing Chinese system. Conversely, by emphasizing the centrality of the Chinese *ti* in accepting the foreign *yong*, Zhang convinced the conservatives that the goal of modernization was to support and enhance the existing Chinese system.1

Though it was intended as a flexible framework for reform, in much of the twentieth century the *ti-yong* formula was regarded as the Qing government’s ploy to delay reform. When revolutionary historiography dominated the Chinese historical field, the *ti-yong* formula was seen as a prime example of “the last stand of Chinese conservatism” in stemming the tide of modernizing China. In the words of the intellectual historian Li Zehou, *ti-yong* represented the interests of the landed gentry who were “feudalistic” and “reactionary” in their attempts to counter the reforms.2 And yet, in the 1930s, when revolutionary historiography was gaining influence, the historian Chen Yinke (1890–1990), publicly defended the *ti-yong* formula against the criticisms of the May Fourth cultural iconoclasts. In 1933, he confessed that his concerns were similar to those of the late Qing reformers Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) and Zhang Zhidong.3

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* This chapter is based on a conference paper that I wrote for the 1997 Annual Conference for the Association for Asian Studies. The title of the paper was “Matching the Foreign *Yong* with the Chinese *Ti*: Chen Yinke’s Studies of the Sui-Tang Period (581–907).”
1 For the significance of *ti-yong* in late Qing reforms, see Wang Ermin 1969, pp. 1–15; Xue 1991, pp. 40–162.
2 Li Zehou 1987, pp. 80–81.
3 Chen Yinke 1980b, p. 252. The original is: 思想囿於咸豐同治之世，議論近乎曾湘鄉張南皮之間 (My thought has been confined to the reigns of Xianfeng [1851–1861] and Tongzhi [1861–1974]. My opinions are close to those of Zeng Guofan and Zhang Zhidong).
Chen Yinke’s self-revelation is significant on two fronts. First, he reintroduced the late-Qing reform formula to address the cultural debate in 1930s China. By emphasizing a dialogical relationship between Chinese indigenous needs (ti) and foreign influences (yong), Chen promoted a spirit of moderation when many of his contemporaries were awash in radicalism and cultural iconoclasm. Second, although Chen claimed that he inherited ti-yong from the late Qing reformers, his understanding of the Chinese ti and the foreign yong was much broader and deeper than theirs. Living in a time when both the imperial system and the Confucian orthodoxy had been discredited, he could no longer anchor the Chinese ti upon the ancient classics and Confucian ethics as Zhang Zhidong had in the Quanxue pian. More significantly, having spent close to twenty years studying in Japan, Germany, and the United States—longer than many self-proclaimed “westernizers” of the May Fourth Movement—Chen’s understanding of the West was superior to that of the late Qing reformers. Unlike them, he would not confine the foreign yong to armaments, railroads, telegraphs, international laws, and constitutional monarchy. And yet, he insisted that he was intellectually linked to the late Qing. How could someone so steeped in Western culture support ti-yong in 1930s China? How could ti-yong, a seemingly mechanical and narrow view of cultural interaction, be the basis for building a modern nation in the global age?

To understand Chen’s purpose in reintroducing ti-yong to address the cultural debate of 1930s China, I will examine his two works on the Sui-Tang period (581–907): A Brief Study of the Origins of the Sui-Tang Political System (Sui-Tang zhidu yuanyuan luelun gao隋唐制度淵源略論稿) and A Study of the Political History of the Tang Period (Tangdai zhengzhi shi shulun gao唐代政治史述論稿). Although these two works were published in the early 1940s, they were written in the 1930s and delayed in publishing due to the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). In current scholarship, these two works are often taken as purely historical narratives, detailing the development of Chinese political and social systems from the sixth to the tenth centuries. In this chapter, I will read them

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4 For more on the writing and publishing of the two works, see Jiang Tianshu 1997, pp. 198–99. In addition to Sui-Tang zhidu and Tang dai zhengzhi shi, Chen Yinke also wrote a third account of the Tang, entitled Yuan Bai shi jianzheng gao《元白詩箋證稿》(A preliminary study of the poems of Yuan [Zhen] and Bai [Juyi]). Written in the 1940s and published in 1950, Yuan Bai shi jianzheng gao contained Chen’s studies of the lifestyle and aesthetic sensibilities of the Tang cultural elite. The trilogy formed the core of Chen’s study of Sui-Tang China as an “open empire” of multiculturalism and social mobility. For an insightful analysis of this trilogy, see Wang Rongzu 1997, pp. 107–151.