Chapter 6

Translating Liberalism into China in the Early Twentieth Century: The Case of Yan Fu

Max K.W. Huang

Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism

Which model should the Chinese adopt to build a new order? This was the question that echoed down the corridors of the twentieth century and is still debated today: “Where should China go?” (Zhongguo xiang hechu qu 中国向何處去). The translations of Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921), as well as his original writings, presented a blueprint for China’s future. In particular, his translations of J.S. Mill’s On Liberty (Qunji quanjie lun 群己權界論 (The boundary between self and group)) in 1903 and Edward Jenks’s A History of Politics (Shehui tongquan 社會通詮 (A general interpretation of society)) in 1903–4, although less influential than his translation of Thomas Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics (Tianyanlun 天演論 (The theory of natural evolution)), offered a wealth of new views about social and political issues. His blueprint can be regarded as the origin of modern Chinese liberalism.

Mill’s On Liberty was originally published in 1859. In 1871, Nakamura Masanao 中村正直 (1832–1891), a translator, educator, and leading member of the People’s Rights Movement in the Meiji period, translated it into Japanese. His translation was entitled “The Principle of Liberty” (Jiyū no ri 自由の理).1 Influenced by Nakamura’s Japanese translation as well as a French translation entitled La liberté, Ma Junwu 馬君武 (1881–1940), a Chinese student in Japan, started translating it into Chinese in 1902 and published the first Chinese translation of Mill’s book in 1903 at the Kaiming 開明 Press in

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1 This book is included in Meiji bunka zenshū 明治文化全集 (Complete works of Meiji culture) (Meiji bunka 1927). Ziyou had been widely used in classical Chinese to indicate lack of restraint. For instance, Yan Fu quoted a poem written by Liu Zongyuan saying “I want to pick a Ping flower, but I am not ziyou.” See Yan [1903] 1975, iii. In Japan, the term jiyū (derived from the ancient Chinese ziyou) to denote “freedom” or “liberty” was used as early as 1862 in A Pocket Dictionary of the English and Japanese Language (Ei-Wa taiyaku shūchin jisho 英和対訳袖珍辞書) compiled by Hori Tatsunosuke 堀達之助 (1823–1894) (Hori 1862). The Chinese then adopted this modern usage. See Saitō 2005 and Yanabu 1982, 173–92.
Shanghai. This translation was also entitled “The Principle of Liberty” (Ziyou yuanli 自由原理) (Ma 1991, 28–80). Liang Qichao read the manuscript and wrote a preface for the book. He said: “I have read more than ten of Mill’s works and found that this is the most suitable one; our nation can take it as a remedy” (Huang 1981). It is not known if Yan Fu was aware of Nakamura’s and Ma Junwu’s translations. He seemed to agree with Liang, however, that Mill’s On Liberty was medicine for China’s troubles. In 1899 he started translating the work directly from an English edition. Yan’s decision to translate it grew out of the political situation in the aftermath of the 1898 coup d’état. His aim was to correct several Chinese misunderstandings of liberty, as well as to make clear certain contrasts between China and the West which he had first perceived when he was a student in England in the 1870s. Yan took up the translation during the “dark period” between the 1898 coup d’état and the Boxer Uprising in 1898–1901. The prevailing atmosphere of repression surely stimulated this undertaking (Schwartz 1979, 131). Yet in translating Mill’s book Yan was less concerned with “political freedom” than with “individual freedom in an ethical sense.” In 1906, he wrote:

The meaning of political freedom is different from that of individual freedom in an ethical sense. “The boundary between self and group” translated by me several years ago was concerned with the freedom of the individual in relation to society, not with political freedom. Political freedom is opposed to control. What the political scientists have shown is that when a group of people are controlled by a government and this government’s control is excessive, liberalism arises in order to resist it. As for “The boundary between self and group”, the author talks about individual opinions and behaviors controlled by other people’s opinions and behaviors. This is more important [than political freedom], and, although it may occasionally also be related to government, it will not be so in a direct way… (Yan 1986, 5: 1282)

Yan’s focus, then, was not on political tyranny. To be sure, given the political tyranny of the day, he may have just been prudent. On the other hand, believing that popular enlightenment was the key need of the time, Yan sympathized with Mill’s emphasis on the tyranny of convention and public opinion.

Yan’s translation of Mill was thus aimed at readers outside the political center, especially “young ones.” At this time, Western concepts of liberty had already aroused much attention in China. As Liang Qichao put it in 1902,  

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.