

Yan Fu and Liang Qichao's Alienation from Rousseau's Ideas: with Focus on the Understanding of "Democracy", "Equality" and "Liberty"

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The fact that the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) were known by the modern day Chinese people who regarded them as the symbol of "revolutionary spirit" is mainly due to the efforts of Yan Fu (also spelt as Yen Fuh or Yen Fu [1854-1921]) and Liang Qichao (also known as Liang Ch'i-ch'ao [1873-1929]). To spread Rousseau's ideas, the former or Yan Fu wrote an essay entitled "Equitable Comment on *The Social Contract*" and the latter or Liang Qichao published "The Learning of Rousseau". Although we are not intended at present to question the motives behind their writings, we do plan to call the readers' attention to their comprehension of Rousseau's thought. Judging from their interpretations of some of the key Rousseauian concepts such as "democracy", "equality" and "liberty", we can see that their understanding of Rousseau is far from being correct or complete.

I. Democracy

As far as Rousseau's concept of democracy is concerned, Yan Fu made the following statement: "If the power comes from the bottom, then the power of a ruler is entrusted to him by the people. The emperor is nothing but a servant to his subjects. In a state or nation with a population of millions of people, the citizenry is the most dignified although each individual person remains humble." The theory, after the baptism of revolutionary tides, rapidly gained acceptance. The core of its meaning is the "supremacy of the populace", or the supremacy of popular sovereignty. In the eyes of Yan Fu, this concept can be traced back to Mencius in China. "May I ask that among the advocates of democracy from ancient time till now, who has ever put forward any idea that is more sophisticated than that included in the adage 'People are the most important element, next come the government and state, and the least is the ruler himself?' I have yet to see." That is to say, Mencius in China is on a par with Jean Jacques Rousseau in France.

It has to be pointed out that the time in which Yan Fu lived is one that has been baptized by numerous years of despotism. Under that political system, the supremacy of people versus that of kings and governments has long been decided. Yan Fu might have overlooked this common knowledge, that is, the more a country or nation calls for enhancing the status of its people, the lower the status of the people must be in real life. What is more, Yan Fu only had a very superficial understanding of the connotations and substances of the people-centered doctrine advocated by the Chinese thinkers in the past millennia.

Yan Fu must have failed to take notice of the following questions: Question one, why has there been such a continuous wave of revolts and uprisings on the part of the Chinese peasants? Question two, why did more and more Chinese intellectuals start to promote democracy after China had been defeated in the Sino-Japanese War of

1894-1895? If people had already been treated as the “center” of the state, why did Yan Fu himself have to call on the Qing government in such an earnest manner to “encourage the Chinese people to build up their bodies”, “develop their wisdom” and “improve their sense of morality?” And why did Liang Qichao have to trumpet his view that “caring for and educating the Chinese people is the most essential of all essential undertakings?” It seems to me that the people-first principle that can be traced to the ancient time in China is nothing but empty talk. Is it right and credible to correlate the people-first concept with Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty? What is more, how many people at that time really understood the meaning of Rousseau’s view of popular sovereignty when it was used as a revolutionary slogan in China? Another point is that when modern Chinese intellectuals tried to interpret the Western concept of “democracy”, they coined a term “*minquan*,” literally meaning the right or power of the people, in addition to straining the Western concept with the people-centered idea. Generally speaking, the power of the people is relative to the power of the kings. At the beginning of his essay entitled “A Study on Ancient Parliaments”, Liang Qichao says, “Why are the Western nations so strong and powerful? The answer lies in their parliaments. The parliaments! And what are the parliaments established for? The answer is that they are intended to bring together the power of the kings and power of the people. Only in this way can the kings and people communicate.” Liang also believes sometimes that between the powers of the monarchs and people, there exists a “power of official gentry”. Sometimes, Liang thinks that *minzhu* (meaning people as masters rather than masters of the people) is the opposite of monarchs; sometimes he thinks they are not opposite concepts. On the other hand, Yan Fu believes that *minquan* (the right or power of the people) and *minzhi* (commonly known as the right of the people) are the same. He also believes that that right, that is, the right of the people, is controlled in the hands of the people themselves. A country in which people have their own rights is naturally a democratic country, and in this sense, the right of the people means democracy. But sometimes, Yan Fu treats *minzhu* as the “right of self-government” too. What is more, Yan Fu also takes that *minzhu* (people as masters) is a political system that is opposite to *junzhu* (monarchs as masters or monarchism). In view of Yan and Liang’s different understandings of “*minzhu*” and “*minquan*”, it is hard for us to say that they truly understood the meaning of Rousseau’s concept of the supremacy of popular sovereignty.

II. Equality

Rousseau’s idea of equality mainly implies that equality is not meant to be uniform, but is a basic principle that must be followed by people in all strata of a society. The perpetual pursuit of equality in real life, however, is tantamount to a protest against inequality. The principle of equality must be based on a social contract and maintained by law. After the French Revolution, Rousseau’s definition of equality became a fundamental tenet and principle.

Judging from his presentation of Rousseau’s idea of equality in “The Learning of Rousseau”, Liang Qichao takes that equality does not mean that every individual is

the same and equal. Equality is balanced by the legitimacy of laws. However, if we dig deeper into the meaning of his following passage, we still cannot conclude that he understood the true meaning of Rousseau's concept of equality. Liang says, "Each individual is born with equal rights. They see the same things, hear the same things, taste the same things, make the same movements and think the same things." As a matter of fact, anyone with five normal senses can do things as Liang says no matter under which social or political system he or she lives. The concept of "each individual being born with equal rights" is a sort of transcendentalist frame of reference rather than some sort of empirical experiences listed by him. It is a perpetual criticism of inequality and a persistent driving force for the pursuit of justice too. Even if we treat this phrase as a goal in real life, the meaning of the so-called "equal rights" is not what Liang thought to be. We all know that Rousseau's concept of equality is founded on the premise of a "state of nature." And since Liang Qichao was not aware of this, his understanding of Rousseau was naturally incomplete.

As far as Yan Fu's understanding of equality is concerned, he made the same mistake as Liang Qichao did. Viewing from his criticism of Rousseau's idea of men being born equal, we can see that Yan's so-called equality means that everything is completely the same among the individuals, and that there is no difference or conflict of any kind among the people. This absolute identity of reality derives from his treatment of equality merely as a kind of substantial equality to the point of neglecting the fact that in the eyes of Rousseau, equality is a sort of legitimacy. However, Yan's match of equality with law more or less indicates that he has mastered the general ways with which to achieve equality.

Seeing from our arguments above, we need to address the following two questions: How come that such sophisticated Chinese people as Liang Qichao and Yan Fu would simply treat equality factually as uniformity or identity? What are the differences of opinion between the Chinese and Western scholars regarding the concept of equality?

In the opinion of this author, Liang Qichao and Yan Fu's secularized definition of equality is quite representative in the traditional Chinese society. But why is such a secularized concept of equality so prevalent in China? There are several reasons: first, as the peasant economy is the dominant way of life in the traditional Chinese society, the population is scattered far and wide. In order to maintain the hyper-stability of the society and make the people feel content with their lot, the rulers carry out a policy of egalitarian distribution; second, since time immemorial, China has started to value the idea of grand unification of the country and for this purpose, it has done its best to eliminate its rivals and opponents and resent differences; third, the Confucian thought of cosmopolitanism, used in tandem with the Buddhist doctrine of universal equality imported to China later, has provided many people, especially those at the lower strata of society, a spiritual resource in their resistances and protests against the irrational institutions. This phenomenon has objectively consolidated the mindset of the people in seeking common ground and eliminating differences; and fourth, the long-term oppression of the populace by the political system of absolute monarchy has backfired, resulting in a deep hatred of the people for the hierarchical system and a yearning to

replace that system with an absolute egalitarian one. This mindset makes sure that the understanding of equality in the traditional Chinese society remains at the visible and phenomenal level. Thus, equality has become a goal that can be quickly accomplished in life. Should inequality prevent its realization, the people would rise up and wipe out inequality with radical actions. But the more people try to solve the problem of inequality with the same equality, the greater the inequality they will get in return.

III. Liberty

In “The Learning of Rousseau”, Liang Qichao introduced much of Rousseau’s view of liberty. On the whole, he takes that Rousseau put a great emphasis on liberty. It is a pity, however, that he is not aware that in the view of Rousseau, liberty is divided into two categories: natural and social. Yan Fu mentioned Rousseau’s idea of liberty too. He thinks that “group liberty is achieved when the independent community can stand up against its hostile neighbors and administrative liberty is accomplished when the equal citizens can abide by the law.” Of course, Yan’s “group liberty” and “administrative liberty” are somewhat different from Rousseau’s division of liberty: in the opinion of Rousseau, social liberty mainly refers to political liberty, which is akin to Yan’s “administrative liberty”. However, Rousseau’s idea of natural liberty is “men are born free”, a concept Yan opposed firmly. As a matter of fact, Yan Fu himself normally subdivided the concept of liberty into “individual liberty” and “national liberty”. Regardless of how they understood Rousseau’s view of liberty, we cannot avoid this question, how is liberty defined in China and the West?

Based on my reading of Liang Qichao’s works, I found that he paid little heed to Rousseau’s thought of liberty apart from talking about it in “The Learning of Rousseau”. Yan Fu’s attention to Rousseau’s view of liberty, on the other hand, started from his stance of opposition. In spite of the fact there are many mentions of liberty in his writings, it is not the same as that meant by Rousseau. On the whole, the liberty understood by Liang and Yan is inclined towards that used in the United Kingdom and the United States. The reason why Liang Qichao trumpeted liberty is that he had benefited from reading John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (which was translated into *Ziyou Yuanli* by Ma Junwu (1881-1940), *Qunji Quanjie Lun* by Yan Fu, and *Ziyou Yuanli* by Liang himself).

In the opinion of this author, the liberty mentioned by Liang Qichao is first and foremost a concept opposite to slavery; secondly, liberty is the spiritual life of an individual; and lastly, liberty is closest in meaning to self-governing. If we look at the issue merely from the perspective of his definition of the concept of liberty, we will find that Liang's understanding of it is very similar to Rousseau's. But we must not forget that when Liang first treated liberty and slavery as the equivalent concepts, he did not admit that his view of liberty was Rousseauian. When he later viewed liberty as the opposite concept of slavery, he did not even mention Rousseau. Instead, he cautioned the Chinese people not to follow in the footsteps of the French Revolution when putting the idea of liberty into practice.

How did Yan Fu define the concept of liberty? My research in the past few years found that Yan Fu has made four definitions of liberty: first, liberty is not "wantonness", or "debauchery", or "unlawfulness", or "impoliteness", all of which are the "bad meanings" of liberty; second, the original meaning of liberty is self-government free from any worries; third, self-government is the foundation of liberty; and fourth, liberty comes into existence under the government oppression.

Judging from the definitions above, we can see that both Liang and Yan tended to relate self-governing with liberty, or they both approve the liberty of self-government. This type of liberty of self-governing is really similar to Rousseau's view that law should be made by all the men in the state. The distinction here still hinges on the ways with which liberty has been defined. According to the opinions of Liang and Yan, self-governing means an individual can manage independently his or her business well whereas Rousseau holds that all the people should be involved in law making (rather than individual independence). On the other hand, both Liang and Yan believe that in a country or state, there must be "rulers" and the "ruled."

As to how to realize liberty, Liang Qichao mainly examined the following aspect, that is, the relationship between liberty and submission or sanction. In his view, "Citizens who enjoy genuine liberty must submit to the following three things: one, self-evident truth; two, laws made by the community in which the citizens live; and three, resolutions adopted by the majority of the people." Of the three things

mentioned by Liang, he emphasized the law the most. Yan Fu also considered the accomplishment of liberty from the perspective of laws. This can be seen in his translation of *The Spirit of the Laws* (also known as *The Spirit of Laws*) by Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu (1689-1755). In his essay entitled “Equitable Comment on *The Social Contract*”, Yan employed the relationship between the evolution of the Western laws and liberty to criticize Rousseau’s view that men are born free. Actually, Rousseau has made many brilliant expositions on the relation between liberty and laws. He says, “Men are free albeit subject to the law. This, of course, does not mean that men are subject to any individual, because under that circumstance, I would be subjecting myself to someone’s individual will instead of the laws. I subject myself to the laws because what I am subjecting myself to at this moment is a public will that belongs to me as well as to the others.” Here we see once more that an indispensable element, that is, “public will” appears in Rousseau’s exposition of the relationship between liberty and the law. Although Liang Qichao noticed this point in his essay entitled “The Learning of Rousseau”, he failed to mention it in his later writings such as “On Liberty” and “Liberty and Sanction”. Yan Fu, on the other hand, remained silent on this point. It can thus be seen that Rousseau’s insight on the relation between liberty and law has not entered into their deep ideological realm. From the above argument, we can conclude that to Liang Qichao and Yan Fu, Rousseau’s view of liberty is not that important.