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BOOK REVIEW

Évolution et Civilisation en Chine: Le darwinisme dans la culture politique chinoise

Lilian Truchon

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The *Beagle* never reached the China Sea, but it would be difficult to claim that Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) ideas lacked impact in China. As a long stream of scholarship has been teasing out for decades, “darwinism” and “social darwinism” have been powerful intellectual forces in China ever since the end of the 19th century. Many of the most prominent Chinese thinkers and political activists of the late Qing dynasty gave space to Darwin and the issue of evolution in their reflections. And the discussion, rejection, or integration of so-called Darwinist ideas have formed a typical theme for studies concerning key modern intellectuals. However, since the publication of James Reeve Pusey's *China and Charles Darwin* in 1983, almost no scholarly work has tried to address this phenomenon from a more wide-ranging and elevated perspective. When I discovered that Lilian Truchon had dedicated a massive study—764 pages!—to this topic with his *Évolution et Civilisation en Chine: Le darwinisme dans la culture politique chinoise*, I therefore had great expectations. My hopes were, however, somewhat dashed.

The book under review is divided into two parts: the former, which is tellingly the longer, is concerned with darwinism in China at the end of the Qing dynasty—including a cascade of chapters about Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Ma Junwu, Sun Yat-sen, Zhang Binglin, and anarchist thinkers—while the later covers in two chapters the period from the foundation of the Republic in 1912. If the book has some merits regarding its philosophical content, and offers a synthesis of an important segment of western scholarship on the topic, I must unfortunately say that it fails to provide much novelty from the general perspective of Chinese intellectual history. Its very dense chapters provide in-depth discussions of key Chinese authors' positions on biology, evolution, racism, and eugenics, but taken together they do not carve out a better and more thorough narrative about China and its relation to Charles Darwin. To clarify my statement, I should disambiguate Truchon's general project: this book is not about Darwin in China, it is a philosophical critique of how Darwin's anthropology has been confused with the doctrine of later scholars, notably Huxley and Spencer, a critique in which the Chinese corpus serves as a pretext. Though this idea is adumbrated in the

introduction and pervades the entire book, its most manifest expression can be found in the conclusion, with the following sentences:

“We have to go back once more to what we have explored and defended throughout our work through the example of China: the illegitimacy attached to the fact of making the great naturalist responsible for any kind of sociobiology, be it liberal, conservative, or revolutionary. Unfortunately—besides the fact that it attests how wrong is the idea according to which a new translation of a work always goes beyond the previous one—the defective quality of successive Chinese translations does not seem to enable the elementary and necessary act of textual analysis, which is the only action that could cast light on Darwin’s discourse with regard to civilisation.” (p. 711)

Not only is China merely an “example”, but it is clear that Truchon aims rather at restoring the perverted meaning of Darwin’s original ideas than at clarifying what the Chinese did with or what they made of Darwin—albeit he sometimes has interesting insights regarding this matter. When the author formulates a critique of previous scholarship, and most notably Pusey’s, he therefore engages less with elements or articulations missed in the Chinese corpus than with a lack of understanding in the original doctrines and the extensive variety of positions elaborated in the West. And in this regard, Truchon does an excellent job of identifying the specificities and particularities of each of the European naturalists, biologists, and scholars he summons up; to him it is pure anathema to put Darwin, Lamarck, Spencer, and Huxley into the same bag. As a consequence, this entails a perpetual denigration of labels such as “social darwinism,” or in truth any other term that associates Darwin with something else. Lilian Truchon is thus applying Patrick Tort’s research on the anthropology of Darwin and its conclusion that there is no “social darwinism of Darwin” to judge the Chinese corpus. But I have to wonder what is the point of criticising the Chinese for not understanding Darwin properly, when Western specialists had to await Tort’s 1980s studies to rediscover the Darwinian anthropology that had been ideologically buried under Spencer’s ideas. In short, despite providing many individual elements to its reader, the book does not provide a compelling general narrative.

Évolution et Civilisation en Chine is published in a book series that specialises in the history and the philosophy of science, a fact clearly justified by the long and precise explanations on the field of biology in 19th-century Europe as well as the thoroughgoing explanations of the thought systems of Western scholars. Truchon really goes to great pains to explain precisely to his readers what the original theories were about (even when they were not properly understood by the Westerners of that time), but it seems to me that he has failed to undertake the same effort on the Chinese side. Though he writes extensively on several thinkers who presented Darwin to the Chinese readership, trying to present the coherence of everyone's thought, there are not, to my eyes, many fresh discoveries regarding the topic. The book even seems from time to time to be a repetition of what has been written elsewhere. And the explanation for this is quite easy to understand: Truchon does not know or hardly knows Chinese. The bibliography actually quoted is almost devoid of any Chinese—a statement valid for both the primary sources and the secondary scholarship. The only Chinese books that one can find are in fact always quoted, translated into French, from English-language scholarship such as Pusey's book, or from documents already available in French (e.g., Yan Fu's 1895 manifestos translated in Hoang 1977). There are only a few exceptions, in the chapters on Ma Junwu and the use of darwinism in the communist era, for which he has obviously received some help. The author cannot bring new documents to the discussion because he is limited to materials that have already been made available in English or French—and there is here something odd in denouncing Pusey's lack of understanding of Darwin's ideas, when almost all the translations produced by Pusey in his book are re-translated into French here.

Lilian Truchon seems to be a very competent philosopher who has a great mastery of the western corpus associated with Darwin and his successors. However, his reading of Chinese history is a caricature: he reproduces the bygone model of a traditional culture being challenged by the novelty of the historical situation (something that may be a side effect of his being highly dependent on scholarship that is sometimes forty to sixty years old). I do not have much against specialists in western intellectual history

trying to explore the Chinese corpus—after all if sinologists endure much pain to translate Chinese materials, it is in the hope that non-sinophone colleagues will read them. But it is very troubling that a specialist in 19th-century British thought engages in such work, a work presented as historical, without being aware of the methodological predicament of his inquiry. It seems to me that, besides being unequipped to explore clearly the references to Darwin in the original sources—and perhaps one day liberate us from our too narrow reading of what only the great scholars said of Darwin, and approach it as a phenomenon that pervaded the entire Chinese society, really exploring Darwin in “Chinese political culture”, to pick up on the subtitle of the book—the author takes on the issue of the transnational circulation of ideas without being aware of methodological innovation in the field: his work still harbours a culturalist if not orientalist outlook toward China.

If one wanted to sketch in a few words the general trend that characterises how intellectual history has studied the circulation of works, ideas, and concepts across borders, one could affirm roughly that the field has made its way through three stages or paradigms: diffusion, reception, and circulation. At first the issue was to take the source material as something almost sacred and consider if it was accurately received and understood abroad. Then the focus switched toward how local scholars appropriated a foreign doctrine or ideas in their own specific context to wrestle with their own specific problems. Finally, in recent years, more research has been dedicated to the exchange or the transfer in itself, bypassing in a sense both the perspective of a misunderstood producer and of an active receptor. This has notably been the case with the rise of transcultural studies, an evolution with which *Évolution et Civilisation en Chine* has not kept pace. Indeed, the book is obsessed with the issue of fidelity to the original, and keeps complaining about Darwin not being understood properly. The guiding assumption of the Chinese not understanding the genuine Darwin is even presented as a historical mistake—in his introduction, Truchon even openly asks in passing *à qui la faute?* But the fact is, as he notes himself, “neither Huxley nor Spencer understood Darwin’s anthropology” (p. 82), so is it a problem that the Chinese did not either? Could it not teach us nonetheless something of what was happening in

China at that time? The answer is obviously positive, but when the author dabbles in this matter, a new methodological predicament impedes his research.

The work under review offers a blatant negation of China's having a long and complex intellectual history: Chinese thought or culture is essentialised into an imagined stagnant traditional form. Truchon reads through almost ahistorical eyes the question of what the Chinese thought of evolution before the introduction of Darwinism. Not only does he display from time to time a patronising and orientalist tone, but the Chinese conception of evolution often seems reduced to general ideas attributed to atemporal schools of thought. He also insists greatly on the weight of Xunzi's text, completely ignoring the fact that Xunzi was far from being regarded as orthodox. Xunzi may have been very important in Yan Fu's appropriation of Darwin, but that does not mean that Xunzi epitomises an essentialist Chinese attitude toward evolution. Although there are references to Chinese intellectual history, and sometimes Truchon pays attention to the context and clearly sees that "Chinese thought" is not as monolithic or stationary as it might seem, this vigilance fades away when dealing with philosophical arguments: much is reduced to stereotypical positions on the monism of Chinese thought, or Chinese not being able to distinguish a natural and a moral world.

In the end, the problem is probably that this book is not a historical investigation. It is the work of a philosopher who, faced with the case of China, tries to clarify or to give coherence to sets of ideas developed by leading Chinese scholars when they discussed the theme of evolution with regard to Darwin. Aside from some inexactness and oversimplified elements here and there, Lilian Truchon does not say anything utterly wrong; he is right in highlighting that Chinese conceptions of Darwinism rest on a confusion between what Darwin really wrote and the conceptions put forward by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). And he sometimes gives very interesting presentations and explanations of how Chinese scholars dealt with specific issues or terminology, and very consciously draws parallels and comparison with what Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley were developing in their own systems. But I fail to see the point of identifying these family resemblances, because saying that this Chinese scholar sides with that British scholar on a specific point while opposing him on another in a pure realm of ideas

does not really reveal to us how Darwinism, or whatever you want to call this stream of discussion that took Darwin as a real or imagined departure point, fared through history in China. We are confronted with disembodied ideas discussed in a pure realm of speculation.

This book review being written for the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, I thought that the priority was to answer the question of what scholars working on China could find in it, and not to insist on its general value in terms of philosophical discussion, for which I would not in any case be competent. Truchon's book is clearly a thoughtful response to ongoing debates in the field of epistemology and history of science in the West. I have nevertheless some doubts regarding whether it could bring much to historians working on Modern China, except perhaps to academics who have specialised in the key scholars mentioned in this text, or people looking for a synthesis for each of the authors investigated. One should praise the author for trying his best to find coherence and systematicity under the brushes of the Chinese he was studying, and he has sometimes clearly formulated some valuable insights—I was in particular really interested in his chapter on Ma Junwu, and in the last part of the book dealing with Darwin in China between 1911 and 1979, which flesh out many original elements. In a nutshell, the individual chapters of this book can be of interest, but threaded together they do not succeed in clearly setting out the historical challenges of Darwin's reception in China as a result of a deficient and outdated model of Chinese history.

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