

# Chapter 12

## Yan Fu's Daoist Reinterpretation of Evolutionism



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**Abstract** This essay investigates the interlacing of Daoist Philosophy and Victorian Evolutionism in Yan Fu's comment on and reinterpretation of both Lao Zi's *Daode Jing* as well as Wang Bi's annotation of this seminal Daoist classic. Following some preliminary comments, I will discuss in Sect. 12.2 how Yan Fu's commentary shows the intersections of many trends in the intellectual and political culture of Late-Qing China (1840–1911), including the search for ways to strengthen the nation, the acceptance of Western knowledge, the revival of Pre-Qin Chinese (Pre-221 BCE) thought, and the tradition of annotating the *Daode Jing*. In Sect. 12.3, I will examine how Western science and evolutionary biology draw Yan Fu's attention to the latent concepts of “desire,” “nature” and “force” in the *Daode Jing*. I will further address how, through the metaphysics in Wang Bi's annotation and reconstruction of Lao Zi's thought, Yan Fu draws a connection among the function of desire, the operation of the Dao and the forming of myriad things to argue about the impetus or inner driving force in the process of evolution. Section 12.4 deals with how Yan Fu redefines the natural way of the Dao in Lao Zi's political thought of non-action through Spencer's theory of the development of a social organism and how, in terms of the working of the force of the Dao, Yan Fu reinterprets evolution and survival in natural selection as a “natural way” in the nationalist agenda of strengthening the country. This essay, thus, demonstrates how Yan Fu accepts Darwinism and Spencerism through Lao Zi's and Wang Bi's metaphysics and therefore constructs a Daoist and nationalist discourse of evolutionism.

### 12.1 Introduction

Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921), as we saw in the preceding chapter, was a renowned Chinese nationalist commentator on Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, interpreting Huxley's ethics from a Xunzian-Confucian standpoint. Yan Fu also wrote a

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