

## Writing on the Duality of Tan Sitong's Thought in the Age of Transition

### -- Reading Hao Chang's "Martyr Spirit and Critical Consciousness: An analysis of Tan Sitong's thought"

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#### Abstract

Tan Sitong was a thinker of special historical significance, whose short life was filled with glorious deeds that left a profound impact on future generations. Tan lived in the last four decades of the 19th century, which coincided with the transformation and great changes in modern Chinese society. Tan felt deeply the shock, confusion, and emptiness brought to Chinese people by the disintegration of the traditional order and the collapse of traditional cultural values, and he himself undoubtedly accelerated the shaking and collapse of the old order. This book reviews Tan's experiences and works, sketches his intellectual development and mental journey, and explores how Tan, as an intellectual, responded to the stimuli of his times and the feelings of his life. His unique spirit appears in different guises in some of the major trends of 20th century thinking, reverberating in the hearts and minds of Chinese intellectuals.

#### Keywords

Tan Sitong; Hao Chang; Martyr Spirit; Critical awareness.

#### 1. Introduction

Professor Xu Jilin said that Mr. Hao Chang is a hedgehog scholar with very rigorous logic and interlocking exposition. His writings are so rigorous that they are like solving mathematical equations, and specialized readers will appreciate the meaning of chewing on them and play with them by their own imagination, but general readers will find them boring. Because the logic is too strong, and filters out some of the wonderful pieces of ideas that can't be integrated in. But that's the joy of reading such works beyond your comfort zone.

Modern China was a process of transformation from a traditional society to a modern one. During this period, under both external and internal pressure, China's politics, economy, society and culture, were undergoing drastic and profound changes. Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao once lamented that China's traditional culture was gradually disintegrating under the impact of the world tide, and the Chinese had to seek ways of transition in this process. [1] At the same time, the status and role of intellectuals were also undergoing significant changes, gradually transforming from traditional scholars to modern intellectuals. The period of Wu Xu was an important stage in which Chinese intellectuals began to take shape and emerge onto the stage of history. In a sense, we can regard the group of reformers as the representatives of the first generation of Chinese intellectuals. In this work, Mr. Hao Chang chooses to portray the inner world of Tan Sitong, aiming to explore the connection between his inner changes and the general background of the transition era.

### 1.1. Response to the Situation of Life - Chivalry and Family

The first is the outline of his character, birth and environment, which the author calls the life situation. Regarding the order of the mind, Hao Chang was inspired by Voegelin, an authority on the study of Western intellectual history, who believed that behind the socio-political order, there is a deeper order of the mind. Influenced by him, Hao Chang combines the history of political thought with the spiritual history of intellectuals, and he discusses Tan Sitong from three aspects: the ideological scenario, the historical scenario and the life scenario, The author sums up the greatest characteristic of his character as rich emotion and bold temperament. [2] As a young man, Tan loved poetry, and at the same time, he had chivalrous spirit that "I want to draw my sword and sing, but there are a few chivalrous bones that can resist rubbing." [3] With his father's travels around the world, he was able to deeply appreciate all the social conditions, and at the same time, he was able to deeply feel the great change of thought of "The winds of Europe and the rains of America whizzed to the East". This was an important part of the creation of his thought. Because of the impact of Western thought, it is not surprising that he chose traditional culture - Song and Ming Confucianism, which became an important part of Tan's thinking through the learning style of Liuyang.

His response to his life situation can also be seen in his nostalgia for his mother who died early (which can be perceived implicitly in his poetry), "I went through trials and tribulations as a teenager, and three relatives died in five days." [4] His poetry and life are colored with a pale color (we can see that the tone of his poetry is mostly gloomy and depressed). This is partly an expression of his sensibility, partly a search and struggle for the meaning of life, and this family change sets the tone for the romantic color in his thoughts.

### 1.2. Response to Historical Situation - State of Mind in the Age of Transition

Tan's inner struggle and pursuit can be seen in the intertwined and changing styles of learning between East and West. He was in an "era of transition" and, as a result, his mind was agitated by a wide range of ideas. These include the flourishing of Confucianism with the merging of the Han and Song dynasties, the resurgence of pre-Qin scholarship, the rise of Dacheng Buddhist thought, and the introduction of Christianity. Therefore, the author summarizes Tan's spiritual life from youth to longevity in three points: first, a strong moral consciousness, which is entwined with his sutra thinking. The second is his sense of the universe, similar to what the author calls "transcendental consciousness" in which he still tries to find a cosmic order in traditional thought. The third is a religious mind. This religious mind is more clearly revealed in another aspect of his inner life. [5]

This response is also reflected in a romanticized look at life in the face of death. Tan studied Zhuangzi to relieve his brother's death in Taiwan, and studied Buddhism with Yang Renshan in Nanjing, which led him to attach great importance to spiritual cultivation, believing that the reconstruction of spiritual order could resolve the suffering in life and thus save the human world. In his letters to Ouyang Banjang, he also mentioned that soul and compassion are the central ideas of all religions. [6] This view of the universe not only brought him relief from life and death, but also enabled him to find a new purpose and meaning for life. On the surface, every life in this world appears to be transient and isolated from each other, but in reality all lives belong to a single, all-inclusive whole. Within this whole life, there is an inseparable affinity and connection between individuals. Through love and compassion, individual lives can transcend their individual isolation and alienation and become part of the larger life of the oneness of all things. This realization of the meaning of life also gives him a new sense of mission, which is to give his life with love and compassion to save humanity, so that they can transcend the fragmentation of small lives and return to the original harmony of the universe.

### 1.3. Killing Oneself to Become Benevolent - From Conservative to Radical

He once used Zhang Zai's famous words, "To establish the heart for heaven and earth, to establish the life for the living people." to express his sense of mission. Tan believes that this sense of mission is the embodiment of the spirit of "Benevolence" in Confucianism. However, his "Benevolence" was obviously a combination of the chivalrous spirit of Mozi, the Mahayana bodhisattva spirit of saving all beings, and the missionary spirit of the Christian priest who took risks and committed difficulties. Judging from his attitude during the coup d'état, Tan had actually made up his mind to "kill himself for mercy", and one of the sources of this martyr's spirit was his personalized recognition of "benevolence". Another source of this martyr's spirit is the romanticism caused by the trauma mentioned above. [7] His definition of the ultimate meaning of personal life reflects the transcendental aspect of his thinking, where the only way to achieve eternity is to break away from the earthly world, and death seems to be the best option. In his view, the soul, not the body, is the essence of life. Thus, the way to overcome the fear of death acquires a new philosophical argument: death is no longer scary not only because fame is more valuable than life and can be immortalized by means of fame; more importantly, the soul does not perish even though the body perishes, and death itself doesn't exist. [8] On the one hand, this is to dispel the world's blindness that life is good and death is bad: since the soul is immortal and there is still an afterlife, it can motivate people to be benevolent and change their ways, but also to overcome the fear of death and inspire people to become benevolent and righteous. The moment of death is the beginning of eternal life, which is one of the signs of Buddhahood.

### 1.4. Renxue and the Debate between China and Minority Nationality

The author argues that the expansion of Tan's definition of benevolence also occurred later in his life, which is greatly related to his critical consciousness and can be glimpsed in Renxue. He saw benevolence as a moral value, a cosmic concept that encompasses the three principles and the five rules, with the only exception of ritual. [9] This idea originated from Zhang Zai and developed from Wang Fuzhi, and its central idea has three characteristics: First, everything in heaven and earth is a cohesion and union of emotions, and human society is no exception, it must be like a family, with no separation of emotions, and must also be like an organic human body, with direct interconnection and induction. Secondly, this social organism with intermingled emotions and spiritual coherence must include all human beings. Therefore, the ideal society is "All under heaven are of one family.", "The people are my brothers and I share the life of all creatures". The ideal society is a commonwealth full of love. [10] This kind of love is more similar to Mozi's love for all. This was an important part of Tan's world consciousness, which, together with the equality of Buddhism and Taoism and the love of Mozi, and the interplay of Western democratic ideas and Christian teachings, finally produced an unprecedented change in Tan's inner world. This explains why his attitude toward rites of passage with its hierarchical distinctions was one of extreme rejection. "To dethrone rites with benevolence." is an excellent manifestation of his critical consciousness, because the rule of ruler and subject is against the spirit of Benevolence, which he strongly rejects and criticizes. "Fight for the net" means that in order to embody the spiritual belief of benevolence, all external systems, customs and theories that hinder benevolence need to be transcended and denied. It can be said that "all those who are different from me are heretics". It is important to note that Tan attaches special importance to the ethics of friends, which is not unrelated to his love of making friends in his travels.

At the same time, his ethnocentric worldview and strong arguments between China and Minority Nationality can be seen in his early essay "Zhi Yan", but his exclusionary ideas are in fact sometimes hidden and do not occupy a major position compared to his critical consciousness. His theory of the instrument of the Way has moved away from the traditional

"When the nature remains unchanged, so does the Way". This critical consciousness led to the first shift in his thinking, namely, a change of attitude toward Western culture. He even redefined the Debate between China and Minority Nationality: Ethnic minorities and Han Chinese are geographically distinct, and now ethnic minorities live in the Central Plains, so actually we are the ethnic minorities. [11]

## 2. Conclusion

As the author says, "Tan's thought has its own particularity and its own representativeness. Because of its specificity, we cannot define his thought in terms of the major debates among intellectuals in the Qing dynasty (The debate between modern and ancient article, the debate on revolution and reform), nor can we understand his mentality in terms of some important intellectual trends of the time (such as nationalism and the doctrine of the body and mind of the East and the West). Because of its representativeness, we can see through his thought some intellectual dimensions of early Chinese intellectuals that have been overlooked by historians". His response to the situation of life and the situation of history constitutes almost the whole reason for the formation of his thought: the shadow of death and the emotional entanglement of men and women are the keynote of his situation of life; "Social disorder" is the keynote of his situation of history. In response to these keynotes, Tan showed his world consciousness, idealistic tendency, and transcendental mentality. This constitutes the basic concept of martyrdom, which influenced intellectuals and revolutionaries in the 1930s to a greater or lesser extent. For example, Hu Shih and Yin Haiguang, such as Li Dazhao and Mao Zedong. And compared to the spirit of martyrdom, the source of its critical consciousness was more influenced by the West, which, together with the inherent tension and agitation revealed by Zhang Zai Wang Fuzhi, led to a huge breakthrough in the relationship between benevolence and ritual. This kind of harmony between East and West from traditional religious consciousness, while transcendental consciousness is closer to the claims of Neo-Confucianism, different from the May Fourth intellectuals whose theories originated from modern Enlightenment thought. It is in the midst of this tedious and delicate intellectual struggle that Tan Sidong paradoxically and leisurely went to his death.

More than thirty years have passed since the author wrote this book, and the analytical method of psychohistory he adopts is relatively progressive for the time when it was written. At the same time, he reveals, implicitly or explicitly, the importance of the power of the mind for Confucians, which seems to have some affinity with the second generation of Neo-Confucians. However, it seems that the "External influence and internal response" discourse adopted in the analysis of his thought has not yet broken out of the "impact-response" model adopted by his teachers. For example, when discussing the influence of the external environment on Tan's thought, there seems to be little reference to Tan's independent search. So the book could integrate the "external environment" and the "internal logic" so as to show the richer aspects of Tan's thought.

## References

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- [4] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 38.
- [5] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 35-36.
- [6] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 51.
- [7] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 82.
- [8] Lv Cunkai, "The Style of the Rogue and the Moral Reconstruction of the Late Qing Dynasty - Centering on Tan Sitong and Zhang Taiyan", *Modern Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2018, p. 151.
- [9] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 68.
- [10] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 88.
- [11] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 63.
- [12] Hao Chang, "The Spirit of Martyrdom and Critical Consciousness - An Analysis of Tan Sitong's Thought", Beijing: Central Compilation Press, 2016, p. 101.