Abstract

An Exposition on Tan Sitong’s Ren Xue

Tan Sitong (谭嗣同, 1865 - 1898 AD) was an important reformer in the late Ching Dynasty. At that time, China appeared hopelessly unable to hold herself in the face of Western invasion. The treatise, Ren Xue (仁学), is an inspirational essay written by Tan as an attempt to find a solution to China’s confrontation with the Western power.

This thesis attempts to explore Tan’s conscious response towards traditional and Western cultures in order to search for new identity. Structurally, it covers the following aspects: firstly, the intellectual development of Tan. Ren Xue was constructed by formulating ideas from different thoughts, not only from traditional Chinese learning but also from the teaching of Buddhism, Christianity and Western science. To see how these thoughts influenced Tan, one must distinguish at least two kinds of situations -- the existential situation and the historical situation during the transitional era. Secondly, some major concepts and their interrelatedness which Tan had acquired to construct his own theory, namely, "Ren" (仁), "Ether" (以太), "unobstructedness" (通) and "Mental power" (心力) are examined. Finally, analysis and criticism of the political, social and economic thoughts of the treatise are forwarded.

Culturally, the source of Tan’s political and social criticism cannot be simply identified as either the Western or the Chinese cultural tradition alone. The complexity of his radicalism suggests the inadequacy of such concepts as "Western impact", "traditionalism", or "cultural identity", commonly used in current study to explain the thinking of modern Chinese intellectuals.