

2009

HARVARD-YENCHING  
INSTITUTE WORKING  
PAPER SERIES

FRIENDSHIP AND EQUALITY IN TAN  
SITONG'S CONCEPT OF PINGDENG

Chen Jeng-Guo | Academia Sinica

## **Friendship and Equality in Tan Sitong's Concept of *Pingdeng***

Jeng-Guo Chen

Academia Sinica

Paper presented at AAS conference, San Francisco, 7 April 2006

*Draft paper: please do not cite without the author's permission*

(1)

It is commonplace for modern historians that the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 was a watershed of modern Chinese intellectual revolution to the extent that the time-honoured Chinese cosmology, in which China was posited the centre of the universe, was crumbling. With the collapse of that cosmology, social, political and intellectual disorders mounted prompting many intellectuals to seek for restoration or a new order of things. Tan Sitong (1865-1898), a man not only of ideas but also of action, figured in this movement with a brief but memorable career, ending in heroic martyrdom when the Empress Dowager ordered his execution in 1898.

Chinese reactions to Western challenges certainly started much earlier than 1895. A group of mandarins, associated with Zhang Zhidong, had launched since the 1860s a series of institutional reforms and innovations, though at level of provincial governments, in hope that they could strengthen and accordingly defend the country. This phase of reform, generally described as the Self-strengthening Movement, was preoccupied essentially, as its prime architect, Zhang Zhidong suggested, with applying Western knowledge in the realms of industrial and commercial innovations. The crisis facing China was not limited to industrial backwardness, however. China's defeat at the hands of Japan in 1895 provoked many Chinese intellects to go beyond Self-strengthening and focus on the question of how to create "wealth and strength" for the nation. Benjamin Schwartz convincingly argued that Yan Fu consciously

interpreted, by purposively translating Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nation* closely in line with "wealth" at the expense of the idea of liberty, in the face of the bitter defeat of *Zhongguo*. But many intellectuals, including Yan Fu himself, knew well that wealth, social order, and morality were equally requisite for a healthy country.

I am not able to explore, in the limited space of this paper, how both the general anxiety and intellectual vigour of Tan's generation led to a spate of radical reform proposals and activities. Suffice it to say that Tan Sitong and his contemporaries had a deep-seated belief that social and political reforms were intimately intertwined with the moral identification of a new regime, though they might disagree on character and constitution of the regime.<sup>1</sup> Departing from this commonly shared recognition of inseparability of social, political and moral reforms, Tan called for a program of reform that was still more audacious and more packed with moral identity than the proposals of many of his contemporaries. Indeed, Tan's political proposals were directly based on an ethical approach toward formulating a program for reforming China. In so doing, he came to a new conceptualization of friendship that stood in a sharp contrast to the Chinese tradition in which, in Tan's view, familial structure, princely politics and social manners were a debased and inhumane trinity of evils, as it were.

In Tan's view, the predicament that China faced in the last years of nineteenth century was a gravely profound crisis that went beyond the weaknesses in China's military, constitution, politics and/or economy that most observers identified. What China suffered was a wholesale degradation: the racial, moral, social, and political inabilities of the Chinese people were merely intrinsic result of the absence of autonomy or self-independence. Tan further maintained that moral virtue of

---

<sup>1</sup> Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890-1911* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), pp. 66-103; 汪暉,《現代中國的興起》<下卷第一部>,頁 905 以下.

self-independence of a people necessary for their revival had to stem from a social and ethical precondition of 平等 (*pingdeng*, or egalitarianism) or the complete equality in every aspect of life of all human beings.

First of all, Tan's *pingdeng* refers to a cosmopolitan equality. To Tan, the degenerate and chaotic status quo in China might have specific historical and local origins; but they indicated universal human conditions. Accordingly, the best way to apprehend the problems was from a holistic view. Tan reached his conviction of universal equality of humans, partly through the works of Kang Youwei 康有為, from his eclectic readings of Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Blending eschatology of Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism, Tan held that the world was in a progress of spiritual purification. The earth would someday be destroyed, human quintessential existence of spirit would, however, remain everlasting. Before this point where the human beings would have achieved eternal happiness and enlightenment, however, it was necessary to build a purified or eschatological kingdom on the earth first.<sup>3</sup> In the context of cosmopolitanism, problems found in China had to be overcome and removed—not out of nationalistic sentiments to vie with Western rivals but rather to achieve that universal goal of eternal happiness.

If there were no states, wars would cease, jealousies would become extinct, conspiracies would be abandoned, distinctions of persons would be nullified, *pingdeng* would prevail. Although *Tianxia*, the earth under heaven, would still exist, it would function no more. If monarchs were abolished, social equality would be brought into being; while universal principles prevail, wealth among people would be distributed equally. No matter how extensive a territory was, all people would belong to one family and be as one person. People would regard his or her own family

---

<sup>2</sup> Tan conscientiously distinguished Confucianism from Confucius's teachings. The former included the latter and some other valuable intellectual schools in pre-Chin, such Mohism. Tan certainly derived many his constituent ideas of his critique of Chinese society from his Western readings and informants of social philosophy. See Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, pp. 66-103.

<sup>3</sup> 《仁學》·《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 367.

as merely a hotel-lodge, and see other persons as siblings.)<sup>4</sup>

His cosmopolitan framework of mind led Tan to adopt an imperialist approach to condemn Chinese “provincial” shortcomings. Tan agreed with imperialist racial prejudices that most Asians were physiologically debased and decadent. Under these pitiful but inconvenient circumstances, the best way to revive the Asian nations was to reform their countries at the hands of foreigners, removing the existing rulers and substituting virtuous ones instead.<sup>5</sup> As well, Tan urged the United States to change its policy of isolation and to campaign for a railway project starting from Korea through China, Afghanistan, and Persia, to Turkey: so that Asia and Europe would be able to communicate efficiently.<sup>6</sup> As “politically incorrect” as Tan’s imperialist sentiment might sound to many today, Tan was certainly consistent in conceptualizing *pingdeng* through cosmopolitan eyes. The connection of Asia and Europe by railway represented, to Tan, the physical embodiment of *ren* (仁, humanity), with which he described his idea of universal equality. In somewhat opaque language, apparently redolent of his ontological concerns, Tan described *ren* as inadvertently equal to *tong* (通)—a state of connecting through without a single obstacle. Tan argued, “The feature or phenomenon of connecting through is equality. It is necessary to respect soul in order to be able to connecting through. While equality prevails, material bodies can be soul-like.”<sup>7</sup> On the individual level, “connecting through” was an analogue of being sympathetic, or even empathetic, for others: being able to feel

---

<sup>4</sup> 「無國則畛域化，戰爭息，猜忌絕，權謀棄，彼我亡，平等出；且雖有天下，若無天下矣。君主廢，則貴賤平；公理明，則貧富均。千里萬里，一家一人。視其家，逆旅也，視其人，同胞也。」《仁學》，《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 367.

<sup>5</sup> 《仁學》，《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 359.

<sup>6</sup> 《仁學》，《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），pp. 359-61.

<sup>7</sup> 「仁者通也」，「通之象為平等」，「通必尊靈魂；平等則體魄可為靈魂」。《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981）。Elsewhere, Tan specified four categories of “connection through”: 「上下通」、「中外通」、「男女內外通」、「人我通」。《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 364.

others' sufferings. This was the essential teaching of Confucian humanity or *ren*. At the social level, as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 rightly argued against prevailing opinion, Tan's actions and ideas and his ultimate martyrdom should not be seen as patriotic virtues. Rather, Tan died not only for a race, a country or a man, but for the whole world. On the other hand, it would be trivial to argue for what he died for, because in Tan's view, it was the same to die for a man or for the whole world. "Why? Because *ren* means *pingdeng*, which carries no thread of difference or distinction; therefore, it defies distinguishing or identification, it defies the idea of the greater or minor."<sup>8</sup> But Liang overlooked in this case the importance of "connecting through" in Tan's thought, which was simultaneously ethical and social, spiritual and physical, and imperialist and nationalistic.

Although Tan Sitong was sympathetic with imperialist projects that he witnessed and envisaged in Asia, his idea of *pingdeng* was a far cry from modern Western notions of equality. Western ideas of equality have a long and complicated history that lies outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, Western equality is, by and large, concerned with economic rights and political rights. Different schools of philosophy might disagree on how equal human beings were or should be, but they shared a tendency to believe that equality had to be measured by legal forms in one way or another. From the natural law tradition and the notion of property rights to modern constitutionalism, the notion of equal moral capacity in political choice or cooperational competition, legality is the predominant feature of Western conceptualizations of equality. Modern Western imperialism, inheriting the dual concept of *dominium* and *imperium*, also evolved around the contractarian frame of mind. Equality was represented in equality of treaties and reciprocity of trade. On

---

<sup>8</sup> 梁啟超，〈仁學序〉，《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 374。「何也？仁者，平等也，無差別相也，故無揀擇法也，故無大小可言也。」

the other hand, Tan Sitong's concept of equality is not bounded with legality or right to possession. In Tan's ideal world of *pingdeng*, every person regarded his or her own family as mere hotel lodging. He or she was passing temporarily on the earth so that there was no need for possessions. In short, Tan's idea of equality has little in common with a Lockean notion of individualism, which is in part derived historically from the idea of equity in political economy. Possession stemmed from desire. Tan argued that nothing but eradication of the fountain of desire, namely, ego, could give rise to true *pingdeng*.

When the consciousness of self-caring is eradicated, then the ego is submerged; when the ego is submerged, then distinctions die away, then *pingdeng* emerges; when *pingdeng* is obtained, human beings are able to understand one and another completely, as mirrors reflecting the other without any dirt on them, thus the perfection of connecting others and myself.<sup>9</sup>

Though he mentioned in passing "equal distribution of wealth," Tan's vision lacked a truer jurisprudential scheme.<sup>10</sup> The Western idea of equality was individualistic in nature, while Tan's idea of equality was situated in the simultaneous coexistence of the self and others. Perhaps in a utopian fashion, Tan sought to enlighten his readers to be sensitive to human conditions and sympathetic/empathetic with others. To Tan, the language of love had long been forgotten in Chinese moral philosophy—at least since Han dynasty. It is in this context of a rediscovery of the language of love that Tan conceptualized equality. Appealing for subjective enlightenment, Tan rediscovered and emphasized the word "love" from Chinese and

---

<sup>9</sup> 「今求通之，必斷意識；欲斷意識，必自其腦氣之動法。外絕牽引，內歸易簡，簡之又簡，以至於無，斯意識斷矣。意識斷，則我相除；我相除，則異同泯，則平等出；至於平等，則洞澈彼此，一塵不隔，為通人我之極致矣。」《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 365。（「意識斷，則我相除；我相除，則異同泯，則平等出；至於平等，則洞澈彼此，一塵不隔，為通人我之極致矣」）。

<sup>10</sup> In contrast, situated in the Western tradition of legality, Marx was well aware that the equal distribution of wealth would be impossible without jurisprudential reform or revolution.

Christian classics.

Confucius called it *ren*, origin, humanity; Mo-tzu called this universal love; Buddha called this the limitless Buddha-nature, grace; Jesus Christ called this soul, loving others as self, and treating enemies as friends; scientists call this the power of love, power of attraction. They are all the same thing.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is also critical to note that Tan's concept of equality nurtured what can only be called a civic virtue, a concept barely touched on by his contemporaries. As this paper will discuss further, the intermediate zone in which equality and civic virtue mutually supported each other was friendship. Tan was probably the first writer in China to address overriding importance of friendship over the other social relationships sanctioned in the Confucian tradition. Tan's notion of equality conveyed unmistakably a romantic flavour of fraternity and a serious concern with republican civic virtue, despite the fact that he did not consciously develop the idea of civic virtue *per se*. Tan repeatedly opposed the prince against people, the prince being thoroughly imbued with the sins of self-interestedness and corruption. The prince in China held no vision of the good but sucked the wealth and enjoyed the power of suppression over people. Ranks of profession were created to sap all the energy of people by rigid rules of rituals and manners.<sup>12</sup> Tan generally described Chinese princes as *dufu* (獨夫, tyrants). The tyrant invented a cage of complicated rituals to make his subjects ignorant and incapable of being self-independent. "To weaken *Tianxia* [i.e., the people under heaven], the prince certainly complicates rituals and manners ... so that all his subjects will not have energy remaining to even think about

---

<sup>11</sup> 《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 293-4. 「孔謂之仁, 謂之元, 謂之性; 墨謂之兼愛; 佛謂之性海, 謂之慈悲; 耶謂之靈魂, 謂之愛人如己, 視敵如友; 格致家謂之愛力, 吸力, 咸是物也。」

<sup>12</sup> 《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), pp. 346-7.



resisting him.”<sup>13</sup> Only through knowledge could the Chinese overturn their suppression by tyranny. “If the Chinese people obtained the requisite knowledge, there would be no harm even if their country was sacked. No one would dare to mistreat them, no matter who was chosen to sit on the throne” (且民而有學，國雖亡亦可也。無論易何人爲君，必無敢虐之).

Thus, again, for Tan Sitong civic virtue was necessary not for the sake of national defense or imperial glory as Western political theorists in the early modern had consistently propagated. True, Tan stated that under the circumstances of his time the Chinese had to be immediately concerned with wars. The people had to converse on wars day and night in order to eliminate their effeminate qualities and become spiritually and physically vigorous.<sup>14</sup> But Tan was less concerned with national glory than racial revival. Tan forthrightly remarked that, in comparison with Westerners, the Chinese physiology was shabby, debased, degraded, and barbarian-like. Chinese physiology foreshadowed calamity through which the race was going to suffer.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in Tan’s view, even if the Chinese were saved by their own efforts in the future they should not stop there; they had to lift up other repressed races, because without a universal mind and cosmopolitan project, the energy the Chinese could germinate to rescue themselves in the first place would not be sufficient.<sup>16</sup> Taking an imperialist cum cosmopolitan view of the crisis besetting China, Tan adopted the prevailing biological-social theory of his time and viewed the world through a racialist angle. Because of this, however, he was able to go on to envision qualities citizenship

---

<sup>13</sup> 《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 362. 「君主之弱天下也，必爲正繁重之禮與俗，... 則天下必無暇分其精力，思與君主對抗。」

<sup>14</sup> 譚嗣同，〈言治〉，《譚嗣同全集》(上冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), pp. 235-6. 「故夫戰，不可不夙講也。... 夫不自欺，忠也；救文勝之敝，而質賴以存也。」

<sup>15</sup> 譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 356. 「且觀中國人之體貌，亦有劫象焉。試以擬諸西人，則見其萎靡，見其猥鄙，見其粗俗，見其野悍。或瘠而黃，或肥而弛，或萎而佝僂，其光明偉秀而有威儀者，千萬不得一二。」

<sup>16</sup> 譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 358. 「以心挽劫者，不惟發願救本國，并彼極強盛之西國，與夫含生之類，一切皆度之。心不公，則道力不進也。」

without the state or even a sovereign.

(2)

Even though Tan Sitong's mode of thinking was firmly cosmopolitan, he was by no means blind to China's immediate problems. In Tan's view, which was in sharp opposition to the grain of Western philosophy of history, China's chaotic conditions indicated that world history at this time was in the phase of chaos (據亂世). In the near future, Tan believed, history would turn to evolve toward the state or the phase of ascending peace (升平世), and then the phase of universal peace (太平世).<sup>17</sup> In other words, a restoration of order of things in China was, at the same time, a historical restoration of the world order. The reason why China was degraded into "chaos" was because the Chinese princes in sophisticated and malevolent fashion deployed "names" to constrain and suffocate the people. The "three bonds and five binding threads" (三綱五常) perfectly exemplified how the device of "names" constraining Chinese people's capacity of *ren*. The three bonds refer to the relationship between prince and minister, father and son, and husband and wife. The prince guides his minister, the father his son and husband his wife. Tan Sitong remarked that the invention of the bonds led to the universal corruption of *ren*. The prince thus controlled his ministers by this "name," ministers brought the people under their yoke by "name," the father oppressed sons by "name," men constrained their wives by "name," and brothers and friends opposed one another by "name." As a result, *ren* could be hardly retained.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the five binding threads or five relationships—prince-minister, father-son, husband-wife, and also older and younger

---

<sup>17</sup> 譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 370.

<sup>18</sup> 「仁之亂也，則於其名。... 又況名者，由人創造，上以制其下，而不能不奉之，則數千年來，三綱五常之慘禍烈毒，由是酷焉矣。君以名桎臣，官以名軛民，父以名壓子，夫以名困妻，兄弟朋友各挾一名以相抗拒，而仁尚有少存焉者得乎？」譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》(下冊)(北京中華書局, 1981), p. 299.

brothers, and friend and friend—had the same effect though to a lesser degree.

Nevertheless, among the five relationships, Tan clearly identified friendship as the most, and, indeed, the sole relationship in traditional Chinese ethics that deserved preservation. And his reason is because friendship embodied equality. Historians know well that Chinese discourses of friendship have never been cultivated to the height that Western history witnessed. Norman Kutcher has recently and convincingly argued that friendship in traditional China was conscientiously suppressed by official scholars and literati alike because it carried the potential danger of subversion to the Chinese socio-political structure, a structure that was based on hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Kutcher further rightly remarks, most of Chinese appraisals of friendship tended to reduce friendship to mere utility suitable for the social reality of hierarchy. In this way, the emotional and affectionate nature intrinsic to true friendship was, at best, overlooked, and, at worst, actively suppressed.<sup>20</sup> The conspicuous absence of popular friendship-contracting in China was, to Tan, particularly lamentable because it led directly to the lack of Chinese experience of *pingdeng*.

Tan argued that the reason why friendship was the only ethical bond that should be preserved was because friendship-contracting emerged from three principles: equality, freedom, and voluntariness. In short, friendship meant “retaining self-autonomy or self-independence”.<sup>21</sup> Tan went as far as to suggest that friendship had to be the guideline for the other social relationships; the lord and minister, father and son, husband and wife, and brothers all had to treat one another in the manner of a man and his friends. When the principle of friendship prevailed, *pingdeng* would be realised.

---

<sup>19</sup> Norman Kutcher, “The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendship in the Confucian Context,” *American Historical Review*, (2000), pp. 1615-29.

<sup>20</sup> Kutcher, “The Fifth Relationship,” pp. 1618, 1620.

<sup>21</sup> 譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 350.

We may not name a “country,” but we shall all live in the same country; we may not name a “family,” but we shall all live in the same family; we may name not a “person,” but we all shall incorporate into the same person. Only if friendship is regarded as the sole principle, the other four relationships will be abolished automatically. Only if we understand that the other four relationships have to be abolished, can friendship come to prevail.<sup>22</sup>

It is not going too far to say that Tan Sitong was by this time the most outspoken moralist crowning friendship with unreserved eulogies. The Chinese had long acknowledged superiority of Western technology. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many literati and scholars alike still insisted that Chinese society led Western societies in ethics, as the latter did not cherish familial or human bonds as much as the Chinese did. In an essay-like letter to Bei Yuanzheng 貝元徵, Tan Sitong indirectly criticized such opinion as unfounded. From his characteristic cosmopolitan viewpoint, Tan warned fellow Chinese not to be complacent with unnecessary patriotic prejudice, not to regard the Chinese as residing in the center of the world and civilized, and not to disdain others as barbarians. Likewise, it was a sign of undue pride for Chinese to describe Westerners as caring nothing about human bonds. In contrast to Chinese complacency, maintained Tan, Westerners cultivated human relationships in a sophisticated way. Indeed, democracy was the zenith of their cultivation.

How can it be possible to establish a state without human bonds? If [the European countries] could achieve such orderly and strong states without human bonds, why would they need them? Actually, it is impossible to establish orderly and strong states without human bonds; however, it is the Westerners who care about human bonds the most and do so more precisely than the Chinese. Is not democracy the most public-minded

---

<sup>22</sup> 譚嗣同，《仁學》見於《譚嗣同全集》（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 351。「無所謂國，若一國；無所謂家，若一家；無所謂身，若一身。夫惟朋友之倫獨尊，然後彼四倫不廢自廢。惟明四倫之當廢，然後朋友之權始大。」

among all the human bonds?<sup>23</sup>

It is but a slight exaggeration to argue that, as a moralist, Tan regarded friendship as a panacea for the survival of his country, for it provided an antithesis of the hierarchical social relationships. We have seen that Tan consciously rediscovered the idea of love on which his concept of friendship must be based. But the reason Tan believed friendship should take the predominant role in reshaping Chinese society was more than sociological or sentimental. To Tan, friendship was the ethical counterpart of *pingdeng*, which was the chief requirement for a renewal of Chinese politics. Tan's highly critical stance toward Chinese politics and manners was reminiscent of Montesquieu's description of Oriental despotism.<sup>24</sup> According to Montesquieu, in Oriental societies women were enslaved by their men as people by their lords. Montesquieu's image of the harem figures perfectly Tan's description of Chinese society that was sectioned into unconnected islands of families.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, men and women in China were callous toward one another, namely, forsaking all principles of *ren*.

Montesquieu's theory of the harem and Oriental despotism was taken and developed by many Enlightenment figures of the next generations. For instance, Adam Ferguson in his famous *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) remarked that the bureaucratic system in Chinese empire hindered people from caring for one another. "Social spirit" withered corrosively. Ferguson predated Karl Marx in identifying a tendency of human alienation in manufacturing societies.<sup>26</sup> His

---

<sup>23</sup> 譚嗣同，〈論學者不當驕人〉<<譚嗣同全集〉>>(下冊)>(北京中華書局，1981)，原光緒 24 年 3 月，p. 401。「夫無倫常矣，安得有國？使無倫常而猶能至今日之治平強盛，則治國者又何必要倫常乎？惟其萬不能少，是以西人最講究倫常，且更精而更實。即如民主，豈非倫常中之大公者乎。」

<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Montesquieu's thesis has its origin in Aristotle's *Politics* and *Ethics*.

<sup>25</sup> A critique of family gained momentum at the turn of the twentieth century in China. Fu Sinian, for example, famously remarked that family was the hotbed of all evils.

<sup>26</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay of the History of Civil Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 67ff.

portrayal of the bureaucratic system of the Chinese empire was an analogue of the manufacturing society, which severed people's sentiments from their labor. Tan Sitong identified a similar symptom of alienation among citizens and people alike, which was duly found in the ritually complicated treatment of people based on rank. Mired in this complicity of reciprocal and mutual treatments, the Chinese were unsociable and ignorant of *pingdeng*. Tan agreed with Xunzi 荀子 that the reason why humans differed from beasts, because they were sociable.<sup>27</sup> He also supposed that sociology was requisite knowledge for studies of *ren*.<sup>28</sup> Though he held a sociological view on human relationships or institutions, Tan did not cultivate any theory of sociability. Having been concerned with political self-independence, Tan rather propagated a universal and heroic friendship, than sociability that was of instrumental friendship, contracted for civil peace in public sphere, such as marketplace, club, café, scientific society and others. As mentioned before, Tan treasured friendship because it embodied freedom and self-independence; and, more importantly, I believed, because those intrinsic values of friendship constituted political liberation from tyrannical regime of China, not only in its political form, but also its ritual framework. By promoting the fifth relationship of friendship, Tan implied that the Chinese ethical system had a constituent power for its own revival. But what he wanted to inspire was not any particular friendship, whether of pleasure, utility or virtue, but universal friendship, for only that could overcome the boundaries of kinship, status, and nationality. As we have already argued, universal friendship could not be achieved without a conscientious suppression of ego; thus, it was heroic. Many exponents of

---

<sup>27</sup> 譚嗣同，〈譚嗣同全集〉（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 443. 「[人]之所以異於禽獸者，以其能羣也。」 In the context of the *Xunzi*, “grouping” (羣) can be understood variously as sociability, association, cooperation and other related notions. I think that in this case and in contexts of *ren*, friendship and *pingdeng*, “sociability” is perhaps the closest in meaning to what Tan tried to convey.

<sup>28</sup> 「凡爲仁學者 ... 於西書當通《新約》及算學、格致、社會學之書。」譚嗣同，〈譚嗣同全集〉（下冊）（北京中華書局，1981），p. 293.

friendship in the West, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, Shaftesbury and others, set off discussions from the assumption that friendship was natural to human beings. But heroic friendship was rare, they said. Those exponents, especially Montaigne, believed that heroic friendship could exist only between two or few individuals who confirmed completely in characters and goodness. It might be hard enough to find another self; it would be even harder to expect a universal friendship of selfless.

In this regard, it is interesting that John Millar, a student of Adam Smith and a great historian in his own right, argued that social distinction or ranks were gradually eliminated with the social progress marked by the stages in societal structures from fishing to pasturing, farming and manufacturing modes of subsistence. For Millar, equality between different walks of soul and sexes was a historical phenomenon. In other words, equality was not gained through the enlightenment of historical agents, but by collective forces of society or history.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to this kind of materialist interpretation of the rise of social equality, Tan believed that the destruction of ego would lead to the state of *pingdeng* or universal equality. Because of his characteristic philosophical idealism, Tan did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that friendship is by and large practiced and acknowledged in society. Friendship is entailed in many other human relationships, including prince-minister, father-son, and husband-wife; but the most significant feature of friendship is that it indicates a community beyond family and the state.<sup>30</sup> Tan pointed out insightfully that the political structures in China paradoxically created a state in which every individual was reserved or incapable of displaying love or friendship. But Tan ironically proposed to deconstruct every collective name of human association. Accordingly, instead of constructing a civil society of the type promoted by many European writers in the eighteenth century,

---

<sup>29</sup> John Millar, *The Origin of Distinction of Ranks*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Both Tan and Aristotle pointed this out.

Tan maintained that the state, family, and even ego had to be defied and overcome on march to the ultimate station of *pingdeng* and universal friendship. This deconstruction of Chinese mind-set of family-centre greatly expanded the horizon for Chinese intellectuals under great stress of national crises, but it hardly provided a viable way to that state of social nirvana that Tan seemed to promise.