

Non-linear Modernisations: A Comparative Paper on Ottoman and Chinese Intellectuals on the Issues of Progress, Science and Modernity (1860s-1910s)

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines the interactions between the role of tradition (religion, culture) and modernity (democracy, liberalism, science) in the intellectual landscapes of the Ottoman Empire and Qing China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author investigates the concept of modernity and its meanings for the intellectuals of the time, questioning whether the modernity means acceptance of Western techniques as a model or if there is room for adaptation with traditional values for these intellectuals. The historical context of the "sick man" and "saving the empire" rhetoric in both the Ottoman Empire and Qing China were vivid topics of the 19th century. Both of these empires experienced reform periods in the mentioned century, which led to a discussion of their intellectuals to what degree should the empires be "modernised." These debates included with some advocating for the incorporation of Western ideas to only in a limited manner, while others sought radical reforms, influenced by the experiences in the West and Japan. The article focuses on some key figures that were categorized as radical and conservatist intellectuals. The paper looks at the writings of the intellectuals like Kang Youwei, Namık Kemal, Chen Duxiu, and Beşir Fuad and gives a historical background. It argues that even seemingly radical figures exhibited a nuanced stance, acknowledging certain traditional values while advocating for modernization, like Yin-Yang symbolism. The opposite of this phenomena is valid for the so-called conservatist figures. That means, tradition and modernity does not always create a dichotomy but creates an amalgamation in the non-European world.

Keywords: Modernity, Ottoman Empire, Qing China, Intellectual History, 19th Century

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Introduction

Modernity cannot be defined with one word or concept. Because of the fluidity of the term, it is not possible to offer a single definition. Is it possible to become modern by adapting only Western techniques, such as the technological developments in the Europe? That means, metaphorically, is it possible to drive the train with the “eastern mind?” Or was one should be mentally westernised to start the engine of the train? These questions flew over the head of Chinese and Ottoman intellectuals, especially in the 19th century when both empires suffered from crises. This paper argues that modernization in non-Western countries did not follow a linear path or can be explained by a conflict-resistance theory. Modernity and tradition both contained elements of each other, and intellectuals offered solutions to save their empire by blending each terms together.

Historical Context of “Two Sick Men”

The long 19th century contained many “sick men,” which were defined by the European imperialism. The “sick man of Europe,” or “sick man of the West Asia,” the Ottoman Empire, was one of the most immediate examples of such a description. Starting from the early 18th and to the 19th century, Ottomans lost in the military struggles, lost their territories in the independence wars of its different subjects, and suffered humiliating losses against the European powers in the battles. The reforms in the 19th century, beginning during Mahmud II's reign, aimed to modernise the all social, economic and political spheres of the Ottoman Empire. From state schooling to adapting the French civil and penal code, Tanzimat Reforms in the 1830s aimed to “heal” the empire by creating new institutions. Mainly the new-schooling system will introduce new ideas, such as materialism and western science, to the masses of the Ottoman Empire. The heyday of these debates was the reign of Abdülhamid II, who was considered as both autocratic but also knew how to adapt the changes of the 19th century, favoring of the modern ways to enhance his position in the throne, such as by using the mass education and press (Fortna, 2003; Yosmaoğlu, 2003). Under this atmosphere of the late 19th century, the Ottoman intellectuals, comprised of many different groups, from materialists to more conservatists had the opportunity to hear out their voices.¹

The other “sick man of East Asia,” Qing China, was suffering from the Opium Wars and disastrous Taiping rebellions in the mid-19th century. Qing China followed a similar path to the Ottoman Empire to “heal” itself. During the Late Qing period, a series of institution-based reforms were made, from opening foreign language schools to opening an arsenal. (Elman, 2005, p. 360) The era was called as “Self-Strengthening Period” (zhiqiang yundong) and covered 1861-1895 until the defeat against Japan.² “Traditional learning (jiu xue) for the essentials, new learning (xin xue) for its usefulness,” as Zhang Zhidong emphasised (Tsaba, 1990, p. 59) the viceroy of Huguang, was the fundamental concept of the Self-Strengthening period. However, especially after the defeat against Japan in the last quarter of the 19th

¹ For the 19th century modernization of the Ottoman Empire, see, Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, vol. II: Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975*. Bernard Lewis, *Emergence of Modern Turkey*.

² The Self-Strengthening Movement was a set of reforms initiated by the Qing dynasty in China, aimed to strengthen the country after the devastating Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). This movement focused on opening new institutions, maintaining social order, and improving the economy with a limited Westernisation. However, its success was limited, and China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895 marked the end of the Self-Strengthening Movement. See, Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 244-246. John K. Fairbank and Denis Twitchett, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol.11, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

century, some Chinese intellectuals looked for more radical solutions to “save the empire” and left the reconcile policies such as merging traditional Chinese knowledge with Western science (Elman, 2005, p. 392).

Rather than reconciliation, new intellectuals, who were deeply influenced by the Japanese “Meiji Restoration”³ and educated in Europe and the United States, were influenced by western ideals first, and later they attacked the tradition. In the context of China, the tradition meant Confucian ideals. However, Confucianism had drastic attacks from the times of the 1850s to 1910s. Chen Duxiu, who had a traditional degree and an education in modernised Japan and Europe, highlighted the parallel between being old and wise in traditional Chinese thinking in his “Call to Youth” in *La Jeunesse* in 1915. On the other hand, according to Chen, Englishmen and Americans gave prominence to the youth. He advocated that just like the new cells of the body, in the process of metabolism, the old ones will be removed from the body (Schoppa, 2017, p. 164). Hence, the saviour of China would not be the “old and wise” people but the young ones. In addition, these young ones would be the ones who will destroy “old and rotten.” The comparison of Chen the Western and the Chinese way of thinking is important since Chen favours the Western way of thinking for the progress of China.

“Yin-Yang” and the Intellectuals of the Non-Western Empires

Let us turn back to the train and machinist dilemma. The “machinist”, i.e. the intellectual (or people) and the “train”, i.e. the modernisation dilemma became such an intermingling question that intellectuals of the late 19th and the early 20th century fought tooth and nail against each other. One group of these argued that in order to modernise and save the nation, it is also necessary to adopt western ideas, and leaving aside the traditional behaviours and culture. Some expressed reservations about the proposed changes, even though they agreed that a shift in thinking is necessary. They believe, however, that progress can coexist with tradition.

However, modernity is not a notion that can be reduced to “modern” versus “traditional” conflict. Modernity, especially in non-Western countries, experienced peculiarly, includes both western thinking and traditional ideas. Even the most ardent supporters of total westernization, materialists and positivists, had the potential to show how tradition influenced their mindset. The same is true for the other side of the coin. Intellectuals who, on the surface quite conservative and bound to tradition did not remain docile towards modernity in terms of philosophical and scientific ways. In Qing China and Ottoman Empire, rather than a conflict of modernity and practice, there was the flux of both traditional and modern ideas and adaptation of these ideas by the intellectuals. In that terms, “Yin and Yang”⁴ depicts the situation of the late 19th and early 20th century Ottoman and Chinese thinkers.

³ Japanese experienced a similar occupation and economic threat that China in the middle of the 19th century. American Commodore Matthew came to Japan in 1853, demanding the breaking the isolation of Japan and also wanting trade opportunities for the United States. Although they somehow repealed the first negotiations, in 1858 they could not delay the treaties and had to sign them. Consequently, eight trade ports were made available to trade and the Japanese lost its tariff control This had consequences for the Tokugawa Bakufu. The Satsuma-Choshu alliance overthrew the Tokugawa emperor and the Emperor Meiji would ascend to the throne in 1868. From this date, Japan underwent a modernity process called Meiji Restoration that was a product of the alliance of the Meiji cadres. See, Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to Present*. Mikiso Hane and Louis G. Perez, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*.

⁴ The Yin and Yang symbol embodies harmony by depicting the balance between opposing forces in the Eastern thought. See, Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, June 25). *yinyang*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yinyang>.

It is important to note that over the years, especially after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey and the May Fourth movement of China, and the related 1923 debate of science, science as the path-finder debates increased like never before. Hanioglu succinctly shows the materialist essence of Kemal Atatürk's, one of the key founders of the republic of Turkey, statement on science as the guide of life "[h]ayatda en hakiki mürşid ilimdir (the most truthful guide in life is science) (Hanioglu, 2005, p. 82). According to Atatürk and most of his compatriots, science can be the only salvation and guide of the people and the state. 1923 debate of Science in China also followed similarly with Turkey. In that debate against the "traditionalists" or "metaphysicians," intellectuals like Hu Shi argued that science can teach and show life's essence and meaning (Kwok, 1965, p. 156).

Hence, I will present a small glimpse into this flux of modernity and tradition debates. I will follow a chronological timeline and compare the Ottoman and Chinese intellectuals on the issue of modernity and tradition, with more inclination toward the topic of science. "Mr. Science," who was an important figure of the May Fourth Movement⁵ together with "Mr. Democracy," in fact, did not emerge in 1919. Its legacy dates back to missionaries of the past dynasties, but for the sake of the length of my paper, I will limit myself to a period of 1860-1910s, which is still actually a pretty long period, but appropriate to see the changes and interactions of thoughts, both in the Ottoman Empire and China.

Tradition, Progress and Science

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a period of fervent intellectual exploration within the Ottoman Empire and Qing China. Confronted with the West's progress in technology and societal structures, intellectuals in both regions sought to understand the role of their own traditions. This introspection aimed to determine if these traditions hindered, or perhaps even facilitated, their path towards progress. The Young Ottomans, a group advocating for a constitution in the Ottoman Empire, faced exile in the early 1860s for their beliefs. While living in France, (and even before that time) they were greatly influenced by French political ideals, which they saw as a model for reform in their homeland. (Fortna, 2003, p. 15; Ülken, 2013). As Hanioglu argues, later generations thanks to the modernisation efforts of Abdülhamid II in a ironic way, were under the influence of western thoughts like scientific materialism. The number of printed scientific books in the reign of Abdülhamid II surpassed those related to religion (Hanioglu, 2008, p. 157).

However, it is also important to note that modernisation in education does not necessarily mean the cause of flourishing western ideas. As Fortna explains well, the modernisation of education in the Ottoman context did not exclude or reduce the importance of the tradition for the students or the state, contrary to the modernist approach to history (Fortna, 2003, p. 12). Since tradition and modernisation went hand in hand, Ottoman intellectuals were deeply in a sea of thoughts, like the questions we asked at the beginning of this chapter. Kang Youwei, a Chinese reformer, critiqued the Ottoman approach to modernization. He argued that the Ottomans despite their efforts to implement Western-style education they merely imitated superficial aspects of Western society. According to Kang Youwei, French is the foreign

⁵ May Fourth Movement was a movement that was initiated by the students and young intellectuals happened after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and they were against the sign of treaty of Versailles, which would lead to the loss of Chinese territories to Japan. These young nationalist students and intellectuals were more iconoclast and offered a more radical set of solutions for the problems China had experienced. See, Vera Schwarz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement*, University of California Press, 1987.

language of the Ottomans who can speak other than Turkish; the political thoughts and ideologies also came from the French intellectuals to Ottoman lands, Ottomans thought what the French did (revolution) all the time, but this is only a change in the external side. In Kang Youwei's view, the limited number of students enrolled in these modernized schools, coupled with prevailing 'backward' ideas, hampered true progress. Kang Youwei notes that even though the constitution is enacted, because of the imitation of the exterior side, the backwardness in the Ottoman Empire will not be fixed (Fidan, 2013, p. 6).

Seeking the Science and Ideal Government in the Roots

Ottoman intellectuals grappled with the complex relationship between progress and tradition. Tradition in the empire was deeply intertwined with Islam, raising a question that scholar Ernest Renan posed: could this close association explain the perceived lack of modernization in some Islamic societies? The answer, however, is not so simple. The Young Ottomans, embraced Western ideas and advocated for reform, others viewed Islamic principles as the foundation for a progressive Ottoman society. This debate highlights the diverse perspectives within the Ottoman intelligentsia on how to navigate the path towards a modern future. Did Islam “always harass science and philosophy?” (Renan, 1883, pp. 16-17). Some intellectuals, like the famous Young Ottoman Namık Kemal, fervently opposed Renan's opinions on Islam. In his famous *Renan Müdafaaamesi* (Refutation of Renan's Allegations Against Islam), Namık Kemal argues that Islam and the followers of Islam always favoured nature and mathematic sciences. Even the Quran has verses that prove the authenticity of scientific knowledge, like the orbiting of the Sun or the pouring down of the rain (Kemal, 2018, p. 21). The two influential Muslim philosophers and physicians Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d.1037) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d.1198) took charge of the state and the government. Were these figures not the signs of the philosophy's and philosopher's importance in Islamic lands? Namık Kemal asks (Kemal, 2018, p. 41). For Namık Kemal, Islam is not an obstacle; rather it serves as the fuel of progress, with the “scientific” roots and the importance attached to science and philosophy in Islam.

Chinese intellectuals in the 19th century also had different views on the need for progress. Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao had similarities with their Ottoman compeers. They offered the 1898 Reforms, which was a shortly-lived reform program implemented in the reign of Guangxu Emperor. They also tried to adapt western terms into the traditional set of thoughts or sought to “revive” tradition (Confucianism in the Chinese context). Tan Sitong, one of the reformists and politicians of the 1898 reforms,⁶ promoted the reconciliation of Western thinking and Confucianism. Having been influenced by the Western missionaries' translations, *Jinwen Jingxue* (the Current Text Confucianism) and Buddhism, Tan offered a new term, *yitai*, which means aether alongside the Confucian *qi*. According to Tan, *yitai* “... has no visible form, no sound, no smell or taste” and “penetrates everywhere and connects everything.” (Wright, 1994, p. 553) Tan explains that every different set of minds offered different names for this substance. that Confucius called this matter “ren” (loving-kindness), Buddha as “Buddha-Nature” and “...compassion and mercy.” Jesus Christ called it the *Holy Spirit*. Scientist call this substance “affinity” and “gravitational attraction.” (Wright, 1994, p.553) According to Tan, what bounds husband and wife, fathers and son, family, nation, and the world is this substance, *yitai*. Tan accepts that atoms form the human body, but when the atoms dissolve, one substance remains: ether or *yitai* (Wright, 1994, p. 553). One can see how

⁶ He was one of the executed figures of the reform initiative, *liù jūnzǐ* (six gentlemen).

Tan Sitong uses the atomic concept of the living organism, but at the same time, he sticks to the traditional *qi*.

Kang Youwei was the central figure of the 1898 *Wuxu* Reform. He submitted fervent essays to Emperor Guangxu to initiate a reform. Eroğlu argues that Kang saw Confucius as a reformer of his time and questioned the authenticity of the Confucian texts after his death. According to Eroğlu, Kang believed Confucian texts had elements of change and reforms (Eroğlu, 2006, p. 262). In an essay that Kang wrote to Guangxu Emperor on January 29, 1898, he urged for a set of reforms that would be initiated by the emperor. One of the main highlights of his essays was forming new institutions and the existence of corrupt ministers in the palace. Interestingly, though he admired the institutions of the Three Dynasties, he finds them too “ancient” to adapt to the present, therefore there was a need to reform these institutions in China. Comparing the French and American governments, Kang portrays changes of these two governments that happened long ago, and their customs are different from Chinese tradition. Hence, these countries also cannot be taken as a model for China. On the other hand, Russian Empire and especially Japan can be a model for China, with its Meiji restoration and similar customs to China (Bary & Lufano, 2011, p. 362) So, as Elman argues rightly, Kang Youwei promoted Confucian texts to govern the state (Elman, 2005, p. 398), but in the meantime, he proposed a modernisation based on the Japanese model. Despite their distinct cultural contexts, Kang Youwei's quest for national salvation through Confucian texts and Namık Kemal's emphasis on science's compatibility with Islam share a common thread: both sought renewal through a reinterpretation of their respective traditional and religious texts.

Hence, Namık Kemal, Tan Sitong and Kang Youwei; these “conservatist” figures of their times did not oppose western (or westernised) values at all. They sometimes specifically adopted the way of the West and sometimes thought the salvation lay in the ancient, but the “ancient” needed a reform. Hence, “conservatism” does not necessarily mean the rejection of western values in science or government (constitutional monarchy) but an adaptation of the tradition and the modern.

Negotiating Modernity: Tradition in Radical Thought

Having read about some “conservatist” figures, one may ask about the mindset of the intellectuals who were labelled as “modernist” or “radicals” The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed the flux of ideas, incoming western ideas such as progressivism and materialism. Both Ottoman Empire and Qing China, with their reforms on education, sending students to Europe, Japan and the United States, though China especially sent its students to the last two. Hence, when the students encountered the “modern,” they either tried to adapt the modern way but also attacked the tradition harshly, in an urge to save the nation or change the society. The fellowship programs like Boxer Indemnity of China gave the opportunity, and the students sent to this program later founded the Science Society of China in 1915. *Kexue*, an affiliated journal of the Science Society of China, advocated that only science will rescue the [Chinese] people (Wang, 2002, p. 302). In the case of the Ottoman Empire, from the 1860s, many scientific journals and societies flourished, namely the journal of *Mecmua-i Fünun* (Society of Sciences Journal) or *Cemiyet-i İlimiyye-i Osmaniye* (Ottoman Society of Sciences) which introduced and popularised science. Furthermore, intellectuals wrote in the newspapers and published books to show their stance towards science.

In the Ottoman Empire and Qing China, some intellectuals saw tradition as the cause of backwardness. Probably, we cannot find better examples for such a category rather than Beşir Fuad and Chen Duxiu. Both figures were ardent proponents of modernity and attackers against tradition. But having charges against traditions does not mean these figures did use any traditional rhetoric in modernisation.

Chen Duxiu argued, "... if we support Mr. Science, we must oppose old arts, old religion.... In their [the Westerners'] effort to champion Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, how many disturbances have been caused and how much blood has been shed?.. In supporting these two Messrs., we will not be cowed by the oppression of government and by the jeers and attacks from society—even if we have to spill our blood and lose our lives" (Fan, 2022, p. 280). On the other hand, Beşir Fuad, the avant-garde of the Ottoman intelligentsia, literally died for science by writing what he had done and felt during his suicide. A pioneering figure of the late Ottoman intelligentsia, Besir Fuad stands out for his unwavering commitment to scientific materialism. His act of suicide, accompanied by detailed notes on his physical and psychological experience during the action, exemplifies his dedication to science. Rejecting metaphysical explanations for human existence, Beşir Fuad embraced a materialist worldview, seeking to propagate the principles of scientific inquiry (often referred to as 'scientism' in the late 19th century) among the Ottoman literati through his writings. For example, his article "Heart" harshly criticised the lyric poets who saw the heart as more than a "muscle" (Hanioğlu, 2005, p. 36). According to Beşir Fuad, literature should be "realistic", and writing lyrical poems are easier than creating scientific articles (Hanioğlu, 2005, p. 36). Nevertheless, even such an ardent materialist did not directly attack Islam but took Christianity as a dogma to defend science's supremacy safely. (Hanioğlu, 2005, p. 36; Poyraz, 2014, pp. 16-17). Because, as Poyraz explains well and quoting from Orhan Okay, he could not attack Islam in the time he lived. After approximately 30 years, when Kemal Atatürk said, "*en hakiki mürşid ilimdir*" (the most truthful guide in life is science), Atatürk had a legacy of scientism in Ottoman Empire. Beşir Fuad on the other hand was one of the first examples of his generation, who were exposed to scientism, modernism and materialism. But his attacks on tradition never took the shape of attacks on Islam, which would be a great disturbance for him, both among the intelligentsia and within the state.

Chen Duxiu, was a radical intellectual who got a traditional education and disgusted by the imperial examination system, *keju*, of China. He experienced his first "western" style of education in Shanghai, went to Japan. It is exciting but not surprising to see that Chen read Kang Youwei's and his student Liang Qichao's articles in *Shiwu bao* which impressed him with their reformist ideas (Tsaba, 1990, p. 109) With his compeers in Japan, Chen founded the Chinese Youth Society, and after his return from Japan, he formed a revolutionary youth society in his hometown Anqing in 1903 (Tsaba, 1990, pp. 112-115). An impassioned believer in the youth, Chen always considered youth as the saviour and especially after the failure of the 1911 revolution to make China a republic (because Yuan Shikai attempted become an emperor after overthrowing of the Qing dynasty) urged him to find solutions to "save" China. Believing that culture and thought would determine the political and economic superstructure, Chen Duxiu published the iconoclast *La Jeunesse* in 1915.

Chen Duxiu saw Confucian doctrine as oppressive as it blocks individualisation because of notions like filial piety or widow chastity (Bary & Lufrano, 2011, p. 468). Vernacularisation of Chinese in writings was another prominent aspect of Chen's modernisation understanding, as he advocated that "classical literature exaggerates and piles word after word and has lost the fundamental objective of expressing emotions and realistic descriptions." In the word of

Chen, classical literature is “ornaments with no use.” With respect to their contents, these writings include anything but aristocrats, kings, ghosts or spiritual beings (Bary & Lufrano, 2011, p. 477). In that terms, Chen Duxiu's opinions on literature resemble Beşir Fuad's views on “realistic” literature.

However, even though Chen was an iconoclast, he also had his reconciling and compromising stance against Confucianism. Hence the complaints of Liang Qichao's and Chen's charges against Confucianism as a despotic, autocratic doctrine that inhibits progress and not taking the wisdom and modern values Confucianism was partly right but also partly wrong, as Chen Weiping asserts. Chen Weiping claims that Chen Duxiu and his followers were quite aware of the Confucian values' importance as these values (moderation, goodness, respect, frugality, forbearance, trustworthiness, righteousness, and a sense of honour and shame) were practised in the world by all people “who practice morality” (Chen, 2017, s. 178). Liang Shuming will later remunerate Chen Duxiu because the New Culture Movement and *La Jeunesse* understood the importance of Confucian values and the oppressiveness of rites by saying, “at that time, he was the only person who saw things so clearly!” (Chen, 2017, s. 178). After becoming a professor in the Peking University, Chen Duxiu also tried to calm the “radical” side of the New Culture Movement by stating that New Youth followers took the example of Cai Yunpei⁷ to show respect to both new and old schools and paid attention to academic discussion (Chen, 2017, s. 179). Even though Chen Duxiu was one of the leading figures of the iconoclastic New Culture Movement, he tried to balance the “radical” veins of the movement and was well aware of Confucian values. His rejection of Confucianism does not mean abolishing traditional “values” but a need for urgency to adopt a new “doctrine” and “learning method.” According to Chen, this doctrine was science and modernisation. But although being critical of Confucius's doctrine and classical literature, Chen Duxiu still respected some of the values of Confucius and the followers of the “old school.”

Conclusion: Non-linear Modernisations

This paper aimed to show how two non-European empires' intellectuals interpreted modernization and offered solutions to “save” their empires from the upheavals and problems they had to face to, such as rebellions, crises and imperialism threat. These solutions varied from a limited reform from taking the technology of the West to the change of a mentality. However, both the so-called conservatist and modernist intellectuals of the time implemented some elements from their culture to the modernity definition. Hence, this analysis highlighted the interconnectedness of tradition and modernity, reflecting the Yin-Yang symbolism which the concepts cannot be understood by isolating them.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks to Özge Delibalta for her assistance during the writing period and to Professor Hale Eroğlu for her classes on Chinese history in Bogazici University, which inspired the development of this paper. The author is also grateful to Chen Gong, PhD candidate in Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, for providing with invaluable feedback, and checking factual information. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

⁷ Cai Yuanpei was served as minister of education both in the time republican China of Yuan Shikai and in the time of the New China. He was also the director of Peking University from 1916 to 1926 and the founder of the Acedemica Sinica. See, Lizhong Zhang, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), 147-157.

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