

**EXCERPTS FROM "LEARNING FROM THE WEST"**  
By Yan Fu

**Introduction**

As the Qing empire suffered military defeat and economic encroachment at the hands of the Western powers and Japan in the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars searched for the roots of their country's weakness, for the keys to the power of the West and Japan, and thus for whatever actions the Qing empire and the Chinese people could take in order to make their country rich, powerful, and able to stand up to external enemies.

One way of accomplishing these goals was to learn more about Western physical and social sciences, philosophy, religion, and culture. To this end, many Chinese scholars devoted themselves to study of Western things and to the translation of Western books. Yan Fu (1854-1921) was one of the nineteenth century's most noted translators of Western books into Chinese.

In the essay from which the excerpts below were taken, Yan discusses learning from the West in terms of two concepts from Chinese philosophy: *yong* (concrete techniques) and *ti* (the cultural foundation or context of those techniques).

**Selected Document Excerpts with Questions**

From *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923*, by Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 150-151. ©1979 Harvard University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

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I think the greatest difference between China and the West, which can never be made up, is that the Chinese are fond of antiquity but neglect the present. The Westerners are struggling in the present in order to supersede the past. Chinese consider that a period of order and a period of disorder, and a period of prosperity and a period of decline are the natural course of heavenly conduct of human affairs; while Westerners consider that daily progress should be endless, and that what has already been prosperous will not decline, and that when things are well governed, they will not be in disorder again — all of which they take as an absolute law of academic thought and political ideas. ...

The foundation [*ti*] and the use [*yong*] mean the same thing. The body of an ox should have the use of carrying heavy things; the body of a horse should have the use of carrying something to a distance. I have never heard that the ox is the body or the foundation, while the horse is for use. The difference between Chinese and Western knowledge is as great as that

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between the complexions and the eyes of the two races. We cannot force the two cultures to be the same or similar. Therefore, Chinese knowledge has its foundation and function; Western knowledge has also its foundation and function. If the two are separated, each can be independent; if the two were combined, both would perish. ...

**Questions:**

1. What images or stereotypes does Yan Fu employ in describing China and the West?
2. Are those images or stereotypes valid today?
3. What do Yan Fu's ideas, as expressed in these excerpts, indicate about China's future, as Yan Fu sees it from his perspective in the nineteenth century?