



# The Formation and Evolution of Yan FU's View of Japan

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**Abstract.** China and Japan, neighbors separated by a strip of water, have a long history of exchanges of more than 2,000 years. Since modern times, Chinese people's view of Japan has undergone complex changes according to the trend of Sino-Japanese relations, and Yan Fu's view of Japan is one of the representatives. This paper attempts to discuss the formation and evolution of Yan Fu's view of Japan by analyzing Yan Fu's life activities, political theories and letters. After searching and textual research, Yan Fu's view of Japan has a strong sense of patriotism, based on reality, and embodies the pragmatic characteristics.

**Keywords:** Yan Fu · Yan Fu's View of Japan · Sino-Japanese War · World War I

## 1 Introduction

Yan Fu (1854–1921), originally named Zongguang with a courtesy name Youling, later renamed as Fu with a courtesy name Jidao, was born in Houguan County, Fujian Province. He is a famous thinker, translator and educator in modern Chinese history. Yan Fu played an enlightening role of warning the world in China's modern national salvation movement, and was the pioneer of modern China's awakening to the world. As one of the first Chinese to seek truth from western countries in modern Chinese history, he systematically introduced western sociology, politics, political economics, philosophy and natural science to China. The Sino Japanese War of 1894–1895 was a key point in Yan Fu's life. In 1894, the Sino Japanese War of 1894–1895 broke out, the Beiyang Navy was completely destroyed, and the business of enriching the country and strengthening the military, which was painstakingly managed by the Westernizationists, declared bankruptcy. Yan Fu's heart was deeply hurt by the sacrifice of his former classmates and friends as well as the further oppression of the country and nation by the great powers. After the Sino Japanese War of 1895, he put more energy into the study of Chinese and Western culture, hoping to learn from western culture and explore a way for China's self-improvement. Yan Fu not only made great achievements in the study of western culture, but also had great reference value and historical significance in his cognition of Japan, which left an important reference for us today.

## 2 Internship Period: Coastal Defense Crisis, Be on Guard Against Japan

Before the Sino-Japanese War, Yan Fu had an encounter with Japan, but it was not pleasant. Yan Fu had heard from his elders that during the Ming Dynasty, the coastal areas of Fujian and Zhejiang were frequently invaded by Japanese pirates. However, these only remain in oral circulation. What really brought Yan Fu into close contact with Japan was the military conflict in 1874.

In 1871, Yan Fu graduated from Fuzhou Ship Administration School as the first graduate of the school. He worked as an intern on the Destroyer Jianwei and Yangwu for five years. In May 1874, Japan abruptly invaded China's Taiwan on the pretext of the killing of ryukyu drifters in Taiwan. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%BC%82%E6%B5%81%E6%B0%91/7314063>. The death of ryukyu fishermen in Taiwan was purely a matter between China and Ryukyu and had nothing to do with Japan. However, Japan took this opportunity to make trouble, insisting that Ryukyu was its vassal state and sending troops to Taiwan was to avenge ryukyu refugees. When the alarm came, Yan Fu, Liu Buchan, etc., received an urgent order, cancelled the original Dragon Boat Festival holiday, immediately returned to the "Yang Wu" warship. Despite the Qing Government's explicit announcement that Taiwan belongs to Chinese territory, Japan sent troops to invade Taiwan, which is a provocation and trample on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. On May 29, "The Qing Government appointed Shen Baozhen as the Imperial Envoy to handle the coastal defense of Taiwan along with other places, and to manage affairs of various countries as the Minister of Foreign Affairs" [1]. Yan Fu also felt the seriousness of the situation. When Japan suddenly sent troops to attack Taiwan, the Qing Government took effective measures, and the Government's response and disposal were more timely and appropriate. Moreover, Shen Baozhen was familiar with and proficient in coastal defense construction, naval personnel training and shipbuilding industry. He was ordered by the Qing Government to handle Taiwan affairs for Imperial Envoy, which was also a wise choice. On June 17, Yan Fu went to Taiwan to "measure the seaports of Taitung, Beilv and Lai Suao, investigate the local topography, draw maps and strengthen the defense" [2]. Although Japan was becoming stronger and stronger, it was still fledgling and did not have the determination to wage war with the Qing Dynasty. In addition to the defense deployment of the Qing Government, the public opinion pressure of western countries and the prevalence of malaria in the Japanese army, Japan and the Qing Government began to negotiate. After eight rounds of negotiations, in October 1874, the Qing Government signed the "Beijing Special Treaty" with Japan, compensating Japan 500,000 taels of silver in the name of "pension" and "buying roads and barracks" in exchange for Japan's withdrawal, which was actually a diplomatic failure of the Qing Government. When this incident was over, Yan Fu continued to practice in "Yangwu" warship according to the previous plan, and toured the East China Sea, yellow Sea and Bohai Sea.

It should be said that Yan Fu went to Taiwan with Shen Baozhen and experienced the baptism of war. This was a kind of military experience, which showed yan Fu's responsibility to defend his country. After the incident, Yan Fu became more aware of the gloomy situation of China's coastal defense and Japan's ambitions for Taiwan. In 1879, Japan annexed Ryukyu by force. Yan Fu was deeply distressed and issued the

statement, “in less than 30 years, all the vassal states have been lost, and we will be at a dead end” [3]. In 1877, as one of the first batch of overseas students of the Chinese Navy, Yan Fu went to study at the Royal Naval Academy in Greenwich, UK. During his three years in Britain, Yan Fu not only studied the knowledge related to the Navy, but also had a great interest in Western thought, politics and philosophy, and devoted a lot of energy to these fields. This experience laid a solid foundation for his translation career.

### **3 The Sino-Japanese War: Reflect on the Failure by Taking Japan as a Mirror**

In the Sino-Japanese War, the Beiyang Navy suffered a disastrous defeat, and many years of coastal defense achievements were destroyed. A number of Yan Fu’s comrades shed blood on the sea and died heroically. Yan Fu, the general director of Tianjin Naval Academy, was filled with grief and indignation, and expressed his concern: “The first war severed China’s closest vassal state, the second war imposed martial law on Shengjing City, the third war occupied China’s strongest coast, and the fourth war destroyed the navy of Weihai” [3]. In the face of the fierce war, Yan Fu had always advocated the struggle against Japan and protracted anti-Japan war, refused to sue for peace. Yan Fu thought that signing the treaty was to save Japan from poverty and in turn to subsidize the enemy to bully China unceasingly. However, this slight voice did not cause the attention of the imperial court.

The Sino-Japanese War woke up the Chinese people, particularly Yan Fu. But besides feeling sad, Yan Fu also had deep thoughts about the war between the two countries. When the war began, Yan Fu paid close attention to the decisions of the Qing Government and the changes of the battlefield situation. Yan Fu summarized the failure of the Qing Government as “a Beiyang Navy to resist the entire Japanese army”, “generals are not skilled in the strategy of war, soldiers are not often trained, ammunition is insufficient” and “steal from the western bluff, but in fact still follow the shortcomings of China’s system”. Additionally, Yan Fu also had a personal opinion on why Japan won. First, Japanese espionage was adequate. Japan made extensive preparations for planning war, including spying in China. Yan Fu believed that Japan’s intelligence work had reached the level of “China’s mountains and rivers, the ability of generals and our advantages and disadvantages, almost none of which they do not understand” [3]. Second, the Meiji Restoration took the western approach. The Meiji Restoration, which began in 1868, put Japan on the road of industrialization, and its national strength continued to increase, but it was also a road of military expansion. For decades, Japan had changed its costume and reformed its system to “depart from Asia for Europe”. Yan Fu described Japan’s imitation of western policies as “revitalizing Asia and rejecting Europe”. “If China is strong, Japan will unite China against Europe, if China is weak, they will enslave China. No matter how strong or weak China is, Japan can compete with Europe”. Third, Japan fought the war with the strength of the whole nation. “During the Sino-Japanese War, the Emperor of Japan stationed himself in Hiroshima, caring for the wounded, and the empress also led concubines to weave cloth and dispensed medicine for the soldiers.” [3]. In this war, Japan, from the “sovereign” to the “people”, all planned to go to war with China, with the goal of defeating the Beiyang Navy. On the other hand, the authorities

of the Qing Dynasty, facing the crisis of national perish and family destruction, still held birthday parties on a large scale.

Although Yan Fu talked about Japan's reform many times, he did not advocate learning from Japan. Yan Fu believed that Japan's westernization had such defects as "seeking quick success and instant profits", "unstable foundation" and "adopting military force". "Instead of resting its people and cultivating their foundations so that they can grow naturally, Japan wants to conquer the world by force" [3]. In Yan Fu's opinion, although Japan's reform was quite effective, it was a wrong move to resort to force because its people did not make progress, its people's strength did not increase, and its people's morality was not harmonious. Therefore, "Japan's learning from the west without paying attention to cultivating the foundation of its country can not be said to be a success, let alone an example for China" [4]. "After the Sino Japanese War of 1894–1895, Yan Fu was determined to devote himself to the propaganda work of seeking truth from foreign countries" [5].

#### **4 In the Early Days of the Republic of China: Exposing Japan's Ambition and Do Not Fight Easily**

In 1914, The first World War broke out, and the main battlefield was in Europe. Many European countries were involved in the war, and the Western powers had no time to pay attention to the East. Therefore, for Japan, this war was a good opportunity for them to speed up their pursuit of interests in China and even East Asia. Japan continued to put pressure on China both militarily and diplomatically. At the beginning of the war, Japan took the initiative to declare war on Germany, but instead of fighting in Europe, it set its sights on Jiaozhou Bay, which was then occupied by Germany. At that time, Germany was at war with Britain, France and other countries, and was too busy to escape from the European war to fight with Japan. Therefore, Japan successfully occupied Jiaozhou Bay.

Yan Fu had independent thinking and personal views on the Japanese occupation of Jiaozhou Bay, showing a matter-of-fact attitude. Yan did not advocate a precipitate war with Japan, but he thought the Government should not act rashly. "Japan encircled Tsingtao and captured Jinan. The situation is so uncertain that there is no alternative but to bide its time" [3]. Yan Fu also believed that state affairs were different from ordinary struggles. Under comprehensive consideration, it was not time for China and Japan to break up.

In the early days of the Republic of China, taking advantage of the changes in China's political situation and the fierce battle of the first World War, Japan pressed and devoured China step by step in order to implement the annexation of China. On January 18, 1915, The Japanese minister to China presented the "Twenty-One Demands" to Yuan Shikai in person. Yuan shikai, in exchange for Japan's support for the restoration of the monarchy, sent Lu Zhengxiang, the foreign minister, and Cao Rulin, the deputy minister, to secretly negotiate with Japan. As Yuan's diplomatic adviser, Yan paid great attention to the negotiations and knew that the situation was dangerous. "The terms offered by Japan are extremely harsh, and if China accepts them, it will not be far from the day of national subjugation" [3]. As for the terms proposed by Japan, Yan Fu knew that

they were unacceptable, and if China accepted them, it would be tantamount to national destruction.

On March 31, 1915, Yan Fu wrote in a letter to Xiong Chunru: “Although Japan is an island country, it has been learning from the West for 30 years. Since the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, Japan has defeated Both China and Russia, greatly increasing its national self-confidence. There are wise people in Japan, but only a few. Japan is short of natural resources, they see our country’s vast territory and abundant resources, and their ambition on China is obvious. That’s what I think is most dangerous” [3]. In May, Japan was ready to issue an ultimatum on whether Yuan Shikai’s Government would accept “the Twenty-One Demands”. Yan wrote to Xiong Chunru again, pointing out that “Japan wanted to take the opportunity to plot against China, just like Britain occupied India, pretended to be China’s mentor, controlled and oppressed China, and competed with Western countries” [3]. It is fair to say that Yan Fu’s perception of Japan’s ambitions and analysis of its future direction has a lot to recommend. He believed that although Japan had won both the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, and its military front was in full force and its strength was rising rapidly, there were still a few enlightened people in Japan and its own resources were poor, so Japan may not be able to maintain a long-term victory. Japan dreamed of controlling China and seizing its human, material and financial resources so that it could compete with the Western powers. At the same time, Yan fu reiterated that China should not start a war with Japan at this time. “If the two countries go to war, they will fall into the trap of Japan, because Japan still has 60000 troops stationed in China” [3].

The reason why Yan Fu didn’t agree with Japan at this time should be the result of weighing the advantages and disadvantages. First, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan’s national strength increased, and won a huge amount of reparations through the Sino-Japanese War, and there were still 60,000 troops in China, the war was not good for China. Second, China did not yet have the strength to fight Japan. War “depends first on financial resources, second on weapons, third on navy and army, if one of them is excellent, Yan Fu will not give up” [3]. China should hide its strength and bide its time for the future. The day of revenge was not absent, but yet to come. Third, the Shandong issue should be resolved through diplomatic channels. Yan Fu observed the changes of the war situation by reading newspapers and magazines, and believed that China should declare war on Germany and join the Group of the Entente countries without too much hesitation. After winning the war, China could try to recover its interests through diplomatic channels. Yan Fu took Japan as an example. Since the conclusion of the “Anglo-Japanese alliance”, Japan had benefited greatly, as evidenced by the Russo-Japanese War. However, China broke off cooperation with the British navy due to the expulsion of the British naval officer Lang William M, which gave Japan an opportunity to form an alliance with Britain. It was clear that Yan Fu’s view of Japan was not only an understanding of Japan, but also a reflection and proposal on China’s policies at that time. “Yan Fu’s dual identity as a soldier and a thinker, coupled with his integration of public and private interests as the president’s diplomatic adviser, his observation and judgment on the first world war left us an important historical document of that era, and his opinions were indeed extraordinary and insightful” [6].

## 5 Conclusion

In the late Qing Dynasty, corruption, rebellion and other signs of the decline of the Qing Dynasty had caused growing unease among many sensitive intellectuals. Yan Fu was one of the representatives of these intellectuals. Yan Fu's view of Japan was not only his own view of Japan, but also hoped to take Japan as a mirror and gave China corresponding reference and enlightenment by analyzing Japan's reform measures and diplomatic strategies, so as to promote China's self-improvement movement. With the change of the situation, the connotation of Yan Fu's view of Japan also evolved. It was based on the grasp of the domestic and foreign situation and the analysis of the war situation. It reflected the characteristics of pragmatism, and although it had a limited influence at that time, it still had reference value. The formation and evolution of Yan Fu's view of Japan reflected the determination and hope of the Chinese Navy, the conscience of Chinese intellectuals, strong feelings of family and country and valuable national spirit. It was also a process of the evolution of the thought of an advanced intellectual who valued family and country and cared about the country and people.

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