

The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passersby¹ Lin Yu-tang's Reverse Writing and Sino-U.S. Cultural Exchanges

*He Ke*²

Abstract

Lin Yu-tang (1895-1976), a Chinese writer who possessed not only an original view of Chinese and Western culture, but also had a good grounding in language skills (both Chinese and English), played the role of communication bridge and cultural ambassador during the Chinese-Western cultural exchanges in Modern Times. Reverse writing, that is writing political essays and novels on China-related topics in English, was far better received by American readers than by domestic readers. This article is to analyze the "The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passersby" phenomenon, to reveal the characteristics of Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges in modern times, and to interpret the contribution and influence of Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing to trans-cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Lin Yu-tang, reverse writing, Sino-U.S. cultural exchanges

¹ This phrase is the translation of a Chinese idiom which means "achievement has no benefits to anyone in local but others like as the fragrance of the flowers is amused by the people who never plant them."

² Lecturer, Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus
Sam1975amaze@yahoo.com.cn.

Introduction

As a Chinese writer, philosopher, translator and poet, Lin Yu-tang wrote more than 35 books in English and Chinese, and brought the classics of Chinese literature to western readers. His informal but polished style in both Chinese and English made him one of the most influential writers of his generation, and his compilations and translations of classic Chinese texts into English were bestsellers in the West.

Lin Yu-tang was the son of a Presbyterian minister. He studied for his bachelor's degree at Saint John's University in Shanghai, and then received a half-scholarship to continue study for a doctoral degree at Harvard University. He left Harvard early however, moving to France and eventually to Germany, where he completed his requirements for a doctoral degree (in Chinese) at the University of Leipzig. From 1923 to 1926 he taught English literature at Peking University. With his individual background and unique facility for both Chinese and English, Lin Yu-tang wrote many political essays and novels on China-related topics in English which were far better received by American readers than by domestic readers. This phenomenon can be best described by the Chinese idiom "The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passersby", which means "achievement has no benefits to anyone in local but others like as the fragrance of the flowers is amused by the people who never plant them."

This article is to analyze the "The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passersby" phenomenon, to reveal the characteristics of Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges in modern times, and to interpret the contribution and influence of Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing to trans-cultural exchanges.

Lin Yu-tang's Reverse Writing

1. Definition of Reverse Writing

When we refer to Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing, we mean that the Chinese scholar and writer, Lin Yu-tang, wrote literary works in English, translating the romantic charm of Chinese culture into an understandable language for western people. Because the mainstream trend of the Sino-Western cultural exchange is "the east learns from the west" or "westernization". Lin Yu-tang's writing, contrary to the mainstream direction, spread Chinese culture to the west. Hence: "Reverse Writing". It is common knowledge that language is a means by which people communicate with each other; and that language is a vehicle for culture. Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing is a trans-cultural creation, a medium of linking Chinese culture and western culture, a kind of intercultural dialogue.

2. Content of Lin Yu-tang's Reverse Writing

As mentioned above, Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing falls into two main categories: the first consists of political essays, the other of novels. Concerning the political essays, *My Country and My People* (*Wu Goo Yu Wu Min*) and *The Importance of Living* (*Shang Hugo De Yi Shoo*) are his most representative works. *The Importance of Living* was a best-seller for 52 weeks in the United States. As for the novels, *Moment in Peking* (*Jing Hue Yan Yen*) is the most popular one.

My Country and My People, also called *Chinese People* (*Chong Goo Ran*), describes what the actual life of ordinary Chinese people is like. The novel is divided in two parts; in

the first half all aspects of Chinese people's life are unfolded, including the ethnic, psychological and ideological characteristics of Chinese people. The second half of the novel focuses on topics about Chinese women, society, politics, literature, arts and other topics. The novel *The Importance of Living* was an extension of some chapters from *My Country and My People*, which had been a favorite of American readers. Lin (1994) points out that the original intention of Lin Yu-tang in writing this novel is:

Tell foreigners how Chinese people appreciate arts, how they sip tea to judge its quality, how they play *drinkers' wager*; how they visit various scenic spots, how they grow flowers and keep pet birds, how they sing of the moon and the wind (write sentimental verse). (p.126)

Moment in Peking, a novel published in 1937, reflects the history of the rise and fall of three large families in Beijing and the joys and sorrows of people of those three generations. In a sense, the most meaningful thing in the novel consists of the Chinese culture which is embodied in the grand history. There are many passages in the novel describing the daily life of traditional Chinese people. The structure of the novel is similar to a well-known piece of Chinese classical literature- the *Story of the Stone (Hong Lou Ming)* written by the writer Cao Xue-qin during the Qing Dynasty. By presenting a lot of lifelike characters, the novel opens up a clearly different world to American readers.

As Gao (2005) states, *Moment in Peking* shows that "Lin Yu-tang did his utmost to display characteristics of Chinese culture within the visual angle of cultural anthropology, and he wanted to create surroundings of real understanding space for readers from different cultural backgrounds to understand the exotic culture." (p.178)

In this way, Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing introduced the life style and psychologic structure of Chinese people to western people, and spread traditional Chinese culture such as Confucianism and Taoism in the western world as well.

Cause of Phenomenon "the Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby"

1. "The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby" Phenomenon

A critic on Lin Yu-tang's work is that: his strongest point is to tell Chinese culture to foreigners and tell foreign culture to Chinese people. Lin (2005) himself agreed with this comment. When referring to "telling foreign culture to Chinese people", that is to introduce western culture into China by translating English into Chinese, there have been many native masters not inferior to Lin Yu-tang. But, for reverse writing in English to show Chinese culture to foreigners, Lin Yu-tang was an outstanding figure among Chinese writers. It is "Reverse Writing" that made Lin Yu-tang's "The Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby" enjoy popularity in western countries.

Lin Yu-tang began his reverse writing in 1935 when the American writer Pearl S. Buck invited him to write the novel *My Country and My People*. The novel became a best-seller instantly after being published in the United States and Lin Yu-tang enjoyed great prestige

afterwards. According to Shi (1990), Nathaniel Peffer, a book reviewer who was famous for his impartial comment at that time, didn't stint any praise when he said: "this book is a masterpiece which uses English to explain and elaborate on Chinese topics with a keen understanding of Chinese culture. I would recommend it to anyone who has interest in China."

In 1937, Lin Yu-tang published the novel *The Importance of Living*, which was held in high esteem by the Book of the Month Club, a club with hundreds of thousands of members in the United States. After having been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish and other European languages, the novel became fashionable for a while all over the west. Findings from Liao (1996) clearly indicate that over 40 editions of the novel have been published in the United States so far.

Moment in Peking is one of Lin Yu-tang's most representative works when he introduces China to western readers. 250,000 copies of this novel were sold in the United States alone in 8 years (from the first edition in 1939 through 1947). When the 40th International PEN Conference was held at Vienna in 1975, *Moment in Peking* was one of the candidates for the Nobel Prizewinners in Literature.

There is one thing worth of consideration, compared to the praise received from western countries, Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing was not much appreciated in China and received comments as "platitude", "lacking profound knowledge about Chinese culture". Tang (1995), a Chinese writer and critic, challenges the view that "Lin Yu-tang looks at Chinese people and culture with the eyes of a western missionary, not the eyes of common foreign people." (p.609). Moreover, Chinese readers charged that Lin Yu-tang's work misrepresents Chinese traditional culture.

2. Cause of the Phenomenon

To what extent did Lin's reverse writing receive such a high reputation abroad? This author thinks the following are the three main causes.

Conform to Trend, Cater for Readers

There is no need for reticence in telling that in modern times the main direction of Sino-Western cultural exchange used to be: "the east learns from the west" or, in other words: "we live in a westernized world". But from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1940s, the world experienced two disastrous world wars, which impelled western people to examine their western culture and try to learn from oriental, Chinese philosophy to remedy western methodology and world view. For instance, there was a "Chinese culture craze" in Europe after World War 1. This offered good conditions for the spread of Chinese culture in western countries. However, the situation in the United States was different from Europe. American people didn't think it was necessary to examine their culture, especially during the 1920s-1930s when their economy was blooming. The study by Lu (2003) identifies that "For Americans, introducing Chinese culture was not learning Chinese philosophy, but the practical purpose of understanding China's reality." (p.505). China was always a remote and mysterious oriental country to American people. The China image formed in American people's mind was unclear, deformed, a mixture of imagination and

reality with many blind spots. Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing catered to American readers' demands, satisfying their curiosity by emphasizing Chinese people's traditional culture and ordinary life style in his descriptions. Lin Yu-tang's works were loved by American readers because he successfully unfolded an age-old, traditional China in front of them.

Language Promotes Cultural Exchange

It has been argued that language is able to play an important role in culture exchange. (Lu, 2004)

According to theory of genetics, on the one hand, language is generated to meet the humanity's demand for communication, and closely connected with social activities. So, language is a product of culture. On the other hand, as language is a tool for all intellectual activities, language structure becomes the foundation and prototype of cultural and social structure of human beings. In this sense, language is a cultural condition, with language and culture interacting as both cause and effect. That is, language reflects culture, as culture forms the understanding to language. (p.195)

The biggest limitation in trans-cultural exchanges is the language barrier; language plays a very significant role in cultural exchanges and can promote cultural exchange. Lin Yu-tang used English to conduct his reverse writing, so American readers could overcome the obstacles caused by a foreign language when they read. As an English linguist of great achievement in English language and an expert in western literature, Lin Yu-tang could write English articles in an easy and fluent style, that is why his works had an extensive influence on American society.

Special Cultural Course

In every ethnic culture, there is an essential core which is a forbidden area that foreign people cannot enter. It appears in visible objects or invisible thoughts. Any culture depends on this essential core to preserve and develop its traditions. Lin Yu-tang's success in the United States is attributable to his special cultural course. He could enter the essential core of Chinese culture and cast off the trammels of China's reality. Different from most scholars at his times, Lin Yu-tang's academic course first leads from east to west, and then returns to Chinese traditional culture. The special cultural course made Lin Yu-tang able to return to Chinese culture as a Chinese citizen, examine traditional culture as a modern intellectual, and choose for high grade culture in a western perspective. In the novel *My Country and My People*, Lin (2006) himself also confidently indicated that he was the most qualified translator to introduce "the Great and renowned China" to the west. He explained that he could speak English fluently, but did not have the stereotype ideas of foreigners toward Chinese people; he knew the English language very well but he was different from those Chinese people who know only English; he was a patriotic Chinese, completely different from most sinologists.

Reverse Writing and Sino-U.S. Cultural Exchanges

In modern times, there are mainly 3 ways of communication for conducting Sino-U.S. Cultural Exchanges. These are: Chinese students sent to study in the United States, American missionaries bringing western knowledge to China, and the translation and writing of literary works (both in Chinese and English). This third way, writing literary works seems to exert a stronger influence on the Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges than translation. Even though translation can remove the language barrier, ordinary American people still know little about Chinese classical works, so it is quite difficult to conduct intercultural exchanges and dialogues because of the cultural difference between the two peoples. But Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing was to introduce Chinese traditional culture to American people through literary works which described the life style and cultural mentality of average Chinese people. Moreover, in his novels, he used a vast amount of cultural narrative to explain Chinese culture through his remarkable characters; he made American people see a sound image of China other than Chinese people's pigtailed and Chinese women's bound feet. He showed them the formation and development of a culture of 5,000 years old. In conclusion, we can say, Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing surmounted the language obstacle, and played a unique role in the Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges, because of its form, which could be easily understood by American readers.

Enlightenment from "Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby" Phenomenon

The "Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby" Phenomenon of Lin Yu-tang in the cross-cultural exchanges indicated clearly that his reverse writing had positively advanced the Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges. This author thinks that we can gain enlightenment from this past phenomenon even at current times.

1. Cultural Exchange never be a Simple, One-way Flow

During the multinational cultural exchange and spread, the mainstream direction was a culture "flow" from the strong area to the weak area. At Lin Yu-tang's times, many Chinese people of insight explored the possibilities of applying western theory to Chinese practice in order to raise China from its inferior position. So the mainstream trend of cultural exchanges at that time was the east learned from the west. However, the significance of the two-way cultural exchange could not be neglected. Reverse spread of culture always exists, and can reach a climax under certain conditions. Actually, it was such factors as Lin Yu-tang's personal knowledge of Chinese and English, the two World Wars smashing the western people's trust in European culture, and American people's yearning to understand the authentic China, which jointly caused the "Flower in but Fragrance out" Phenomenon.

2. Accurately Feeling the Pulse of Objects

"Feel the pulse" is originally a term of Chinese traditional medicine. That means the doctor has to feel the pulse of patients, before making diagnoses of the disease. In 1935, Yu-tang entered the United States as a Chinese writer. It was quite normal for someone like him to cater for American readers in order to make his books sell well. He was acutely

aware of what American readers expected from reading, he knew their cultural background very well too. We can say he accurately felt the pulse of the readers. In this way he could use effective methods to spread Chinese traditional culture. His writing in English is very convenient for American readers to read and comprehend; his works described the mentality and life style of ordinary Chinese people and satisfied the American people's curiosity. Being familiar with the fact that American people were strange to Chinese culture, Lin Yu-tang just explained Chinese culture in a simple and relaxed way. From Lin Yu-tang's success in the United States we can understand the significance of "feeling the pulse of objects" and "having an object in view" in the cultural exchanges.

Conclusion

In spite of Lin Yu-tang's great success in the United States, domestic scholars' comments on Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing differ. Tang Tao criticized Lin Yu-tang's works by saying that they were written through the eyes of a western missionary, and that he was misinterpreting Chinese culture. Why did Lin Yu-tang fail to make himself "fragrant in China"? Besides the limitations posed by translation, the fundamental reason of different judgment toward the same text is that local readers had a totally different cultural background and different intrinsic demands than the foreign readers. It has to be admitted that Lin Yu-tang's reverse writing promoted the cultural exchanges between China and the United States. At the same time, the current situation of Sino-U.S. Cultural exchanges consists of the United States promoting its thoughts and social values in China. This monolateral movement depends on national strength. English is both the universal language in the world, and the native language of the American people, the language which they use to propagate their culture and enlarge their influence. But Lin Yu-tang, a Chinese writer, set a fine example by conducting reverse writing and causing the "Scent of Roses Reaches but Passerby" Phenomenon. Nowadays, intercultural exchange is booming all over the world, so Lin Yu-tang's achievements are still an inspiration to us.

References

- Gao, H. (2005). *Transcultural narrative on China*. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Liao, X.Y.(1996). Lin Yu-tang and Sino-Western exchanges. *Academic Journal of Beifang University of Nationality*.No.3.
- Lin, T.Y. (1994). *Biography of Lin Yu-tang*. Taiyuan: Beiyue Literature & Art Publishing House.
- Lin, Y.T. (2006). *My country and my people*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University General Publishing House.
- Lu, S.Q. (2003). The reverse cultural spread in modern times. *Academic Journal of Wuhan University*.Vol.7.

- Shi, J.W. (1990). *The representative works of Lin Yu-tang*, Zhengzhou: Hannan People's Publishing House.
- Tang, T. (1995). *Study on Lin Yu-tang*. Collected Works of Tang Tao, Vol.9. Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press.