ARCHIVE PICK

Lin Yutang: My Country, My People

In 1935, the Chinese author Lin Yutang offered Westerners an insider's guide to China's society. It endures today despite his own cultural contradictions and racial insensitivity.

JEREMIAH JENNE | MARCH 15, 2023

HISTORY

Buy the book

In his 1935 nonfiction book *My Country, My People*, written in English, the Chinese writer, translator and polymath Lin Yutang identified a problem he felt uniquely suited to fix: "It is the fate of the great to be misunderstood, and so it is with China. China has been profoundly, magnificently misunderstood."

Lin's solution to this problem was a bold — if not entirely successful — effort at cultural translation. *My Country, My People* is Lin Yutang's discursive rumination on Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, social structures and cultural essence. In it, he argues that China's civilization embodies inherent wisdom and beauty deserving of long overdue global recognition and appreciation: "God—if there be a God—intended her to be a first-class nation among the peoples of the earth, and she has chosen to take a back seat with Guatemala at the League of Nations." The book was a bestseller in its time and was translated into multiple languages, including Russian and Japanese, while a Chinese edition appeared in 1936.

When Lin was writing this book in the 1930s, China faced the twin existential threats of internecine discord and external invasion. It was a difficult time for the Chinese people, but a rich era for writing about the country, especially by foreigners. Chinese intellectuals and political figures from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong were also offering their takes on China's destiny. What elevates Lin Yutang's book is the rare crossing of worlds: he is a Chinese writer articulating what it means to be Chinese, but doing so in English for a foreign audience.

Lin Yutang (fourth based from left) alongside fellow Peking University scholars including Hu Shi (far right) in Beijing, 1923. *(Wikicommons)*

Lin Yutang (1895–1976) was the son of a Christian pastor from Fujian province. He received most of his early education from Western missionary schools, eventually studying at Harvard University and later earning a doctorate from the University of Leipzig. An admirer of Hu Shi (later the Republic of China's ambassador to the U.S.) and a contemporary of the writer Lu Xun, he was well-known in Shanghai literary circles, which also included fellow returnees from the West like the poet Xu Zhimo and foreign writers such as the China-born American Pearl Buck, Nobel Prize-winning author of the novel *The Good Earth* (1931).

Lin published and edited a bi-monthly humor magazine known in English as *The Analects* (论语半月刊), after the famous Confucian classic, and garnered recognition for his witty essays and cultural commentary. Yet he grew up reading the Bible, Milton and Shakespeare. Lin felt disconnected from Chinese culture, something he frankly admits in *My Country, My People*:

> Before my teens I knew Joshua's trumpets blew down the walls of Jericho, but I did not know until I was about thirty that when Mengchiangnü cried over the bones of her husband who had died building the Great Wall in conscript labor, the torrent of her tears washed away a section of the Great Wall.

Being a latecomer could be seen as a strength. Lin's appreciation is that of an insider proud of his heritage but with the zeal of a recent convert, eager to share the good news. Moreover, his early years shifting intellectually and psychologically between two worlds gave Lin a discursive palette and language for explaining China — its culture, assets and challenges — in a way that may not have been possible for other writers, whether foreign or Chinese.

> Lin is a Chinese writer articulating what it means to be Chinese, but doing so in English for a foreign audience.

While it may be unfair to authors such as Graham Peck, Edgar Snow, or Peter Goullart, who immersed themselves in Chinese culture and learned the language — or to Lin's friend Pearl Buck, who was raised in China — he asserts that only someone from the country can truly understand the essence of the people:

> It the Old China Hand to pick up an understanding of the soul of China from his cook and amah? Or shall it be from his Number One Boy? Or shall it be from his compradore and shroff, or by reading the correspondence of the North China Daily News?

Lin argues that a proper understanding requires a form of surrender — a willingness on the part of the writer to break free of the grand abstractions of "big words with capital letters like Democracy, Prosperity, Capital, and Success and Religion and Dividends."

He argues that with a few exceptions (Lin specifically cites Robert Hart, former head of the Qing imperial customs service, and the philosopher Bertrand Russell) foreigners fail to grasp what is essential, instead publishing hackneyed and unhelpful books wondering "what's wrong with China?" (the actual title of a 1926 book by Rodney Gilbert).

An essay by Lin Yutang in *The New York Times*, Jan 29, 1938, predicting that the Sino-Japanese war would give birth to a new Chinese nationalism. *(The New York Times)*

"For every one Robert Hart," Lin sniffs, "there are ten thousand Rodney Gilberts." Lin's critique is less about what foreigners fail to see and more about not creating mental space for fully appreciating what they have seen. To borrow a phrase from the science fiction film *Avatar*, "It is hard to fill a cup that is already full."

Lin's book is a buffet. Chapter by chapter, he introduces what he feels are the essential elements of Chinese culture. His discussions of philosophy, particularly the complementary nature of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, remain illuminating:

> Taoism, therefore, accounts for a side of the Chinese character which Confucianism cannot satisfy. There is a natural romanticism and a natural classicism in a nation, as in an individual. Taoism is the romantic school of Chinese thought, as Confucianism is the classic school.

He is particularly adept at discussing Chinese aesthetics and what he calls "the art of living," an idea that inspired the title of his successful follow-up book *The Importance of Living*, published in 1937. Lin's observations on Chinese gardens, cuisine and approaches to leisure reveal a deep appreciation for the sensual aspects of Chinese culture:

> No Chinese mansion allows an outsider to look through the iron gates at a long drive, for that would be against the principle of concealment. Facing the gate, we see perhaps a small courtyard or a mound giving no idea whatsoever of the expansiveness of space inside, and leading one step by step into newer and bigger views, in a continual series of surprises and astonishments.

Yet for all Lin's insight and presumed cultural authority, he is only partially successful in his quest to explain China to the world. Events would soon overtake Lin's observations, and some of his insights seem creaky and dated in retrospect.

For example, Lin believed that communism was a poor fit for China. Communist ideology, he felt, had little chance of overcoming what Lin describes as the Chinese people's innate conservatism and practicality. Moreover, as devout a humanist in adulthood as he was a Christian in his youth, Lin deplored what he saw as the inhumanity of communism. Such a system could never take root in a people — His people — who, like the author, certainly cherished humaneness above all else:

> Close observers of the communist state when it was set up in Kiangse [Jiangxi] offer as the greatest reason why Communism must fail in China, in spite of its great superiority over the feudalism of other parts, the fact that life was too systematized and too inhuman there.

Lin wrote the book while living in Shanghai, and moved to New York soon after its publication. It is possible that the cosseted bubble of Shanghai, and Lin's missionary education, blinded him to some of the grittier actualities of Chinese life in the 1930s. It is ironic that, for all of Lin's criticism, foreign writers such as Snow, who traveled widely in remote areas, wrote books that presented a more realistic picture of the circumstances on the ground that led to the Communist victory in 1949.

> It is possible that the cosseted bubble of Shanghai, and Lin's missionary education, blinded him to some of the grittier actualities of Chinese life in the 1930s.

Any evaluation of Lin's work must also recognize some troubling aspects. He is overly fond of broad and essentialist characterizations, writing of the "sleek undergrown men and slim nearathletic women" south of the Yangzi who are "gifted in belles lettres, and cowardly in war." More problematic are Lin's views on race. Even a sophisticated thinker like Lin could be influenced by the ideology of racial determinism prevalent in scientific and academic circles during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Like Chinese literary celebrities Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, and influential social scientists such as Pan Guangdan, Lin believed that race was a biological determinant of culture and behavior rather than a social construct, and that the fate of a culture or country was tied to its "racial vigor," a concept that recurs repeatedly in Lin's writing:

> South in Kwangtung, one meets again a different people, where racial vigor is again in evidence, where people eat like men and work like men, enterprising, carefree, openhearted, pugnacious, adventurous, progressive and quick-tempered, where beneath the Chinese culture a snake-eating aborigines tradition persists.

Unfortunately, this means that Lin sometimes comes across like the guy who, after a few drinks in a Beijing bar, holds forth with gracious certitude on China's unique "national character," mixing questionable generalizations and selective historical interpretations with cultural stereotypes:

> The constitutional differences between European and Chinese children at school age are unmistakable. On the athletic field, it is invariably found that boys who have a European father or mother distinguish themselves by their greater swiftness, agility and general endurance of energy, while they seldom excel in tests of endurance and never in scholastic attainments.

Despite these flaws, Lin offers a perspective of this era that is distinct from the outsider viewpoint of foreign correspondents and the polemics of Chinese nationalists. Lin's work exemplifies a more nuanced negotiation of identity and interpretation — one that acknowledges China's challenges while preserving its cultural integrity. "I can lay bare her troubles because I have not lost hope," he writes. "China is bigger than her little politicians, and does not require their whitewashing. She will, as she always did, right herself again."

Lin Yutang in Hong Kong, 1966. *(The Lin Yutang Houses)*

Read in the context of its time, *My Country and My People* is best understood not as a definitive guide to Chinese culture but as a fascinating historical artifact. It reveals as much about the intellectual currents of 1930s China as it does about China itself. Lin's liminal position as both an insider and an interpreter created a lens that, while distorted in ways we can now recognize, still offers insight. He is also a remarkable writer, even when his rhetorical or theoretical deviations veer past the guardrails of polite company.

It is this balance of shortcomings and virtues that enhances the book's merits as a document of cross-cultural understanding — an early attempt to convey one civilization to another at a time when such an explanation felt both urgent and possible. As China and the West drift further apart, the need for the kind of outreach that Lin Yutang sought to achieve seems just as necessary today. Like China, *My Country, My People* encompasses multitudes — wisdom and folly, beauty and prejudice, enlightenment and blind spots. Within this complexity lies its enduring value, offering not simple answers but a rich, contradictory dialogue spanning time about what it means to understand a culture from both within and without. ■

Jeremiah Jenne is a writer and historian who taught late imperial and modern Chinese history in Beijing for over two decades. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis, and is the co-host of the podcast Barbarians at the Gate.