



My Country And My People

Lin Yutang

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In this atmosphere of change, the present intellectual youth of China has grown up. Where the fathers imbibed the doctrine of Confucius and learned the classics and revolted against them, these young people have been battered by many forces of the new times. They have been taught something of science, something of Christianity, something of atheism, something of free love, something of communism, something of Western philosophy, something of modern militarism, something, in fact, of everything. In the midst of the sturdy medievalism of the masses of their countrymen the young intellectuals have been taught the most extreme of every culture. Intellectually they have been forced to the same great omissions that China has made physically. They have skipped, figuratively speaking, from the period of the unimproved country road to the aero plane era. The omission was too great. The mind could not compensate for it. The spirit was lost in the conflict. The first result, therefore, of the hiatus was undoubtedly to produce a class of young Chinese, both men and women, but chiefly men, who frankly did not know how to live in their own country or in the age in which their country still was. They were for the most part educated abroad, where they forgot the realities of their own race. It was easy enough for various revolutionary leaders to persuade these alienated minds that China's so-called backwardness was due primarily to political and material interference by foreign powers. The world was made the scapegoat for Chinas medievalism. Instead of realizing that China was in her own way making her own steps, slowly, it is true, and somewhat ponderously, toward modernity, it was easy hue and cry to say that if it had not been for foreigners she would have been already on an equality, in material terms, with other nations. The result of this was a fresh revolution of a sort. China practically rid herself of her two great grievances outside of Japan, extraterritoriality and the tariff. No great visible change appeared as a consequence. It became apparent that what had been weaknesses were still weaknesses, and that these were inherent in the ideology of the people. It was found, for instance, that when a revolutionary leader became secure and entrenched he became conservative and as corrupt, too often, as an old style official. The same has been true in other histories. There were too many honest and intelligent young minds in China not to observe and accept the truth, that the outside world had very little to do with Chinas condition, and what she had to do with it could have been prevented if China had been earlier less sluggish and her leaders less blind and selfish. Then followed a period of despair and frenzy and increased idealistic worship of the West. The evident prosperity of foreign countries was felt to be a direct fruit of Western scientific development.

My Country And My People Details

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Nick says

This was an interesting read in the fact that I could still see quite a bit of overlap in Chinese culture that he described of the early 20th century and current Chinese culture. I didn't really appreciate his commentary of Christianity and thought it surprising that he could have a pastor as a father and yet be so misinformed about Christianity. I also didn't really care for his ethnocentric overtone that Chinese culture is superior, but I guess that in itself is a rather common element of Chinese culture.

Rob Shurmer says

Anyone contemplating spending time in China should read this book. I wish I had BEFORE working in Shanghai.

David Guy says

Some years ago I read and really enjoyed *The Importance of Living*, so I thought I might like this book, which I found at a used bookstore. Lin Yutang writes beautifully, and has an interesting take on things, but ultimately I found long stretches of this book rather tedious.

Tom says

Lin Yutang was a Chinese Nobel-Prize nominee writing in the first half of the 20th century, mainly with the purpose of explaining Chinese culture to the West. His piercing insight into the attitude and character of most Chinese people resonates with me every day that I live here. He writes completely in English, with the skill of a gifted native speaker (he was Harvard-educated). If anyone wants to understand into what the average Chinese person was like in the early 20th century, a period of chaos and warlordism, one would do no better than to read Lin Yutang's books.

However, one major drawback to Lin Yutang is that his books were written so long ago about perhaps the most quickly changing nation on the planet. Sometimes, his insight is prophetic, as in one section where he states that if Communism were to take hold in China, it would be changed beyond recognition (as is true with the socialist-authoritarian-market-free-for-all-capitalism that exists in China today). At other times, too much has changed for his characterization to be true, such as when he discusses the Chinese virtue of patience as a direct result of the large families (whoa, one-child policy happened!). Finally, there's the historical bias of relying too much on early 20th century eugenical history in explaining the Chinese characteristics as a result of evolution.

All in all, though, I recommend this book to those interested in China. But good luck finding a copy!

Isaac Shi says

If you need read one book to understand China, this is the one

James says

Lin Yutang writes here in a systematic approach to a western audience about China and Chinese culture. Still prescient even today, after nearly seventy years, Lin truly understands what it is to be Chinese and conveys that to his audience, and is frank and sincere about China's shortcomings and positives. Highly recommended at the time of its publishing, it ought to remain so today.

T says

I don't agree with everything he writes here, especially as it is dated by now, but it's an accomplishment that he even got this far, and the way he is able to weave in cultural references from the East and the West is a feat in itself.

aupiff says

Most of all, "My Country..." is worthwhile because of Lin's brilliant explanation of the opposing roles of Daoism and Confucianism in Chinese society. Lin has a fast-paced and very quotable style--this proved useful for getting through some dull parts of the book.

The chapter on Chinese literary life is essential and provides very good background for recent events like the New Culture movement. Lin's opinions on race and gender roles might be offensive to modern readers but I think they're interesting insofar as they more clearly illuminate the worldview of a undeniably brilliant Chinese scholar.

BlackOxford says

Speaking to the Dead

I acquired this book mistaking it for a recent analysis of Chinese society. So I was more than a little confused by the introductory Baroque paean to China. The flowery, wandering prose says nothing important except about the writer's self consciousness. It is an extended throat clearing.

The book, of course, is not about the China of Xi Jinping but of the somewhat lesser known Lin Sen. It describes a China of eighty years ago, a China which was oppressed, conquered, and in a state of political and economic disintegration. And it begins with a denunciation of what the world, the Western world at least, believed China to be: a permanently crippled place of chaos. To be reminded of that misconception is the obvious point of the book's republication.

It is impossible for an outsider, at least this one, to identify the vestigial cultural tropes that might remain from 1935 in today's China. Not many, I suspect, after the profound dislocations of the Japanese occupation, World War II, civil war, Maoism, famine, Communist persecution of tradition and religion, and an almost miraculous industrialisation. Certainly assessments like "*the Chinese soul revolts against efficiency*" are simply quaint. While the claim that "*China is the greatest mystifying and stupefying fact in the modern world*" is true but in ways the author never could have imagined.

There's another problem as well. The book is aimed to influence a reader who is absent in the twenty-first century - primarily the English Old China Hand, whose experience is that of the commercial colonial overlord. This type was educated in a particular style at Eton and Harrow. He was immersed in certain Western cultural references from Marcus Aurelius to Bertrand Russell. It is these references, with the occasional allusion to American practicality (and the lack of culture represented by the boxer, Jack Dempsey), that Lin uses to make his points about 'common humanity' and the uniqueness of Chinese culture. By making these references he is establishing his bona fides. But neither the social class nor the colonial type exist any longer. Lin is speaking to as well as of the dead.

Lin's descriptions of the regional differences of China are often racist to modern sensibilities. How else can this typical sort of evaluation be considered? "*Down the south-east coast, south of the Yangtse, one meets a different type, inured to ease and culture and sophistication, mentally developed but physically retrograde, loving their poetry and their comforts, sleek undergrown men and slim neurasthenic women, fed on birds'-nest soup and lotus seeds, shrewd in business, gifted in belles-lettres, and cowardly in war, ready to roll on the ground and cry for mamma before the lifted fist descends, offsprings of the cultured Chinese families who crossed the Yangtse with their books and paintings during the end of the Ch'in Dynasty, when China was overrun by barbaric invaders.*" Is this anything but regional profiling to serve some unstated purpose?

Lin's more general historical, political and aesthetic prejudices are obvious and persistent. He presents caricatures rather than characters of contemporary Chinese leaders like Chiang Kaishek. Mao, as far as I can tell isn't even mentioned, despite the fact that he had already established a break-away republic at the time of original publication. The purported virtues of the Chinese people like 'mellowness' and 'conservatism' are farcical given subsequent history.

I suppose *My Country and My People* could serve as a case study for what colonial oppression does to the intellectual layer of a society. Lin had been in a certain sense conned into his role as expiator of Chinese culture to the West. On the one hand he has his Chinese heritage; on the other he has his Western education. So he has some street cred on both sides. But what he writes is apologetic tripe which is largely fictional and doesn't offend the dominant powers. Ultimately it's insulting to everyone.

Postscript: it is interesting to compare this book with a more recent assessment of Chinese culture. See <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Qiaomu2003 says

If one wants to understand Chinese people in 20th century, there is no better than this.

Yao says

The book is almost a century old and I guarantee you that most Chinese look very different at a glance. But if scraping off the communist ideology on the surface Chinese are still very much the same people, especially the intellectuals.

This is also a very quotable book, full of little gems (think Oscar Wilde).

Highly recommended.

Aras says

<http://electric-pages.livejournal.com...>

Zhe Sha says

"So they fell more seriously to business of living than to the business of making progress. They took infinite pains and spent sleepless nights over the planning of their private gardens or the cooking of sharks' fins, and fell to eating with the seriousness and gusto of an Omar Khayyam, who trailed the dust of philosophy in vain and took again the vine for his spouse..." How true it is -- here's someone who can't sleep because of thinking too hard about making some chicken soup... A note at the beginning of part II

Michelle says

Old Chinese Scholar reflects on Chinese culture, mentality, style, lifestyle, etc. And because it's an old Chinese dude, it's super "Chinese things are awesome!"

By the way, it made me realize how Chinese I am. Shoot.

Elie F says

I very rarely thought about the special quality of China and its people until I came to US for college, and it is in a foreign country (a special country that seems to be dominating the world and replacing all local cultures with its own) that I gradually started to rediscover the essence of my country and my people.

Lin Yutang had a similar study-abroad experience in the early twentieth century, and I feel affinity with his feelings towards his motherland expressed in this book one hundred years later. Like Lin, I am proud of my country but this pride is not unmixed with elements like羞耻感 (ashamedness). But at the bottom of my mind and my heart (like in the case of Mr. Lin), there is family loyalty, there is bittersweet childhood memory that is quintessentially Chinese, and there is pride in myself who is and will always be Chinese.

China. What a strange old soul! What a great old soul! What a mystic and chaotic soul that I admire but I as its child cannot penetrate into let alone foreigners. Who would have the confidence to declare he/she truly understands this great nation and where it is headed? Lin's book is a contemplation on China and I think it did a great job. There are a lot of good points he made (though repetitive). I don't want to summarize all of them, but I will evaluate some ideas that stuck with me when I read this book.

Fundamental to Western mind is logic and scientific method, but Chinese dislike the drudgery of all that; instead, Chinese have an overdose of common sense and prefer the intricacy of insights. Common sense and insights are highly flexible, and that's why Chinese people are not people with strong principle: we present different values in different circumstances: *"All Chinese are Confucianists when successful, and Taoists when they are failures."* Confucianism (a positive philosophy) and Taoism (a defeatist philosophy) are fundamental to Chinese mentality: Confucianism is our culture, our rule of decorum, our declared value, but Taoism (the very opposite of Confucianism) is our nature, our poetic/romantic soul, our relief from the hypocrisy of Confucianism.

Central to Taoism is the idea that life is so full of sorrow that the only way to be happy is to be indifferent, and once we are indifferent, happiness comes naturally. While Westerners stress the right to vote or the right for liberty, Chinese stress the right to be happy. We ridicule all the efforts to change the status quo at the expense of the enjoyment of the present life. The idea that woman cannot be happy without equal pay or homosexuals cannot be happy without the right to get married is considered ridiculous. Chinese believe that everyone can be happy as long as he/she has a full stomach before going to bed, and even with an empty stomach, we can always look at the beauty of the moon. In the absence of religion, earthly happiness is all we cherish, and we are indeed good at finding sources of happiness on earth. *"We are not humanitarians, we are humanists."*

But China is changing. The influences of both Confucianism and Taoism are decreasing, and I am not positive that the elements that make China a uniquely great soul can survive Americanization and the force of capitalization and pop culture. I think Mr. Lin a hundred years ago also expressed a certain fear for that. He believed that *"Chinese race, instead of reaching full maturity with Confucius, was really enjoying a prolonged childhood."* Yes we have an old soul, but oldness doesn't necessarily mean maturity. Scientific methods developed a lot, but common sense is stagnant in comparison. Can this old yet immature soul stand the intrusion of a force as strong as globalization? As a true lover of diversity, and moreover a proud Chinese, I wish it can.
