

A Look Back at Bo Yang's *The Ugly Chinaman*

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Thomas Talhelm

Carrying around a worn copy of Bo Yang's once-banned *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture* is what I imagine it must be like for a woman to have a diaphragm fall out of her purse in public. I was often embarrassed to be caught reading it, and my copy of the book was even seized at the Chinese embassy in Hong Kong. Close friends warned me to "be careful" about whom I let know I was reading it, and I was sneered at by an ethnic Chinese on a bus in Malaysia (who assumed, oddly, that a person reading a book in Chinese would not understand being sneered at in the same language).

Reading a Chinese book in China normally invites praise from locals surprised that I can read their language, but under the weight of countless frowns and admonitions I became accustomed to nervously hiding my copy of *The Ugly Chinaman* from friends, colleagues, and fellow bus passengers.

This book earned me these scowls, more than two decades after it was published, for its biting criticism of Chinese society. With Bo's recent death, it is important to look again at his most controversial work and to take stock of the work's place in Chinese society.

The Ugly Chinaman is a collection of essays and speeches, as well as reviews and critiques written after Bo lectured in the United States. As such, it reads easily in bursts, even though this format leads to repetition. Written in the *baihua wen* literary style and laced with historical allusions, the book is literary, yet dotted with sarcasm, colloquialism, and coarse language. The range of topics covered in the book—from scholastic history to stinky shoes piled outside apartment doors and flimsy air conditioner axles overhanging Taipei's streets—is as wide as the author's language.

A controversial figure, Bo was a Taiwanese historian and author imprisoned for a political cartoon deemed unacceptable to the Chiang Kai-shek regime. He has been proudly claimed at times (perhaps with just a bit of nationalistic motivation), and the Taiwanese media has called him Taiwan's Lu Xun. But judging from the scorn I received for reading *The Ugly Chinaman*, the average Chinese person does not always appreciate Bo's literary and political efforts.

As this year's CNN "goons and thugs" controversy and Olympic torch incident showed, criticisms of China are often taken as wholesale attacks on everything Chinese. Bo anticipated his own book's cool welcoming when he noted that his inspiration, *The Ugly American*, was used as a reference by the U.S. government, whereas the *Ugly Japanese* earned its author a pink slip. "This is more or less the difference between the east and west," he writes.

Not fearing a pink slip, Bo compares Chinese culture to a "sauce jar," in which foodstuffs are preserved in sauce. As one reviewer explains, the sauce can store foodstuffs for a long time, but that is only because it is already rotten to begin with. Furthermore, when things fall into the rotten "sauce jar" full of the maggots that symbolize Chinese culture, those

things become trapped and tainted in the jar.

Bo spares no barbs in attacking this "sauce jar culture." He is vituperative and unreasonable at times. He implies, for example, that Chinese civilization may eventually fade out like the Native American tribes he saw on a trip to the U.S.

The author is also biting and crudely humorous. When discussing how the tendency to romanticize the past prevents progress, he writes that it is often believed that "in the past people had everything. . . . aerial bombing, automobiles, democracy, republican government, cancer, the runs, manmade satellites, roosters laying eggs, taking off your pants to fart." He adds that those who want to break from tradition will hear heaven-shaking screams akin to "shooting the sauce jar maggot in the asshole."

In my experience conducting cross-cultural psychology research, the question that I perpetually face is: "It's an interesting difference, but is it *culture*?" This question touches upon a delicate distinction, yet through its humor and coarse language *The Ugly Chinaman* stomps carelessly all over it.

Arguing that Chinese culture itself causes Chinese people to be chaotic and noisy seems like a strange argument especially in places such as Hong Kong (where people standing on the left side of escalators are frowned at) and Taipei (where I was scolded for drinking water in a subway station). Clearly, there is something other than culture—perhaps political order—at work here.

Other arguments, however, hit the right chord. Just as Bo claims, psychology research has shown eastern cultures to be less trusting of strangers than Americans, presumably because eastern cultures make a greater distinction between in-group and out-group trust.

On the Chinese tendency to conceal thoughts and preferences, Bo writes, "you need to spend every moment pondering what in the world [others] are thinking. All that is a waste of energy." I would wager that most Chinese, especially the younger generation, agree with this sentiment.

Bo's more extreme arguments are easy targets for criticism, though to go through and pick out unreasonable claims is to miss his point. To be sure, he means to criticize certain parts of Chinese culture; however, he also wants to shed light on the fact that the culture is too often praised. Even his own book is laced with truisms foreigners living on the mainland are sick of hearing like "Chinese culture has a five-thousand-year history" (whatever that is supposed to prove).

Ultimately, Bo's aim is not to praise, but to rouse people to reflection and change. As the author writes, "We [Chinese] need to learn how to introspect." To achieve this goal, he uses coarseness and provocative arguments to incite action, the result being that some arguments

are easy to dismantle.

With Bo's passing from pneumonia this year, one can only imagine that he witnessed much progress since *The Ugly Chinaman* was first published in 1985. His work, once banned, can now be found in bookstores on the mainland.

Yet sadly, a large portion of the reviews in the back of the book, in their angry, unreasoned response, only serve to prove Bo's earlier arguments right. I can only think that a culture benefits from developing a healthy vein of social criticism. Once that happens, my worn copy of *The Ugly Chinaman* would no longer be a source of embarrassment, but would be looked upon as a legitimate work worthy of discussion.

Thomas Talhelm is a free-lance writer based in Beijing.