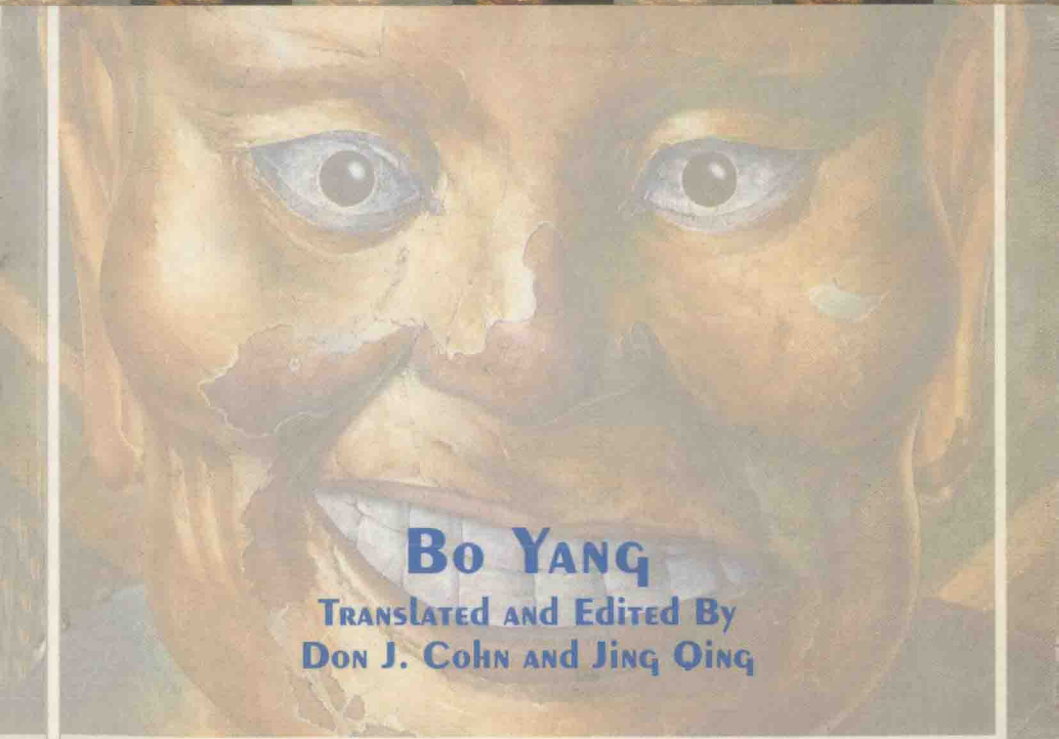


The Ugly Chinaman

AND THE CRISIS OF CHINESE CULTURE



BO YANG

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
DON J. COHN AND JING QING

The Ugly Chinaman

© Translation Don J. Cohn 1991

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Preface to the English translation

The road taken by the Chinese writer is a treacherous one, full of twists and turns. I have been making my living as a writer for over 40 years. I began in the 1950s by writing fiction. In the 1960s, I wrote a number of newspaper columns in which I criticised various inequalities and injustices in Taiwan society. Because of what I wrote, the Kuomintang Government accused me of being a ‘communist spy’, jailed me, and attempted to get a military tribunal to sentence me to death. Eventually my sentence was reduced to twelve years in prison. My long stint behind bars gave me time to think about China’s problems, and to confirm the basic premise of everything I had written before: ‘Every problem in contemporary Chinese society originates in the traditional culture of the soy paste vat’.

When I was released from prison in the late 1970s, I had planned to write a book based on this premise in order to shake the Chinese people out of their muddleheaded complacency and arrogance, but at the time I was working on my *Outline History of the Chinese People*, and editing a series of books on Chinese history that I had begun writing in prison, so I put the idea on the back burner.

In 1984, when I was taking part in an international writers’ conference at Iowa University in the USA, a Chinese student association invited me to address them. Suddenly all the thoughts stored up inside me—those ideas I had wanted to shape into a book, but which I was not allowed to talk about in public (as a condition for my release from prison)—surged into my consciousness like a tidal wave. So I decided to use that occasion to talk about this long-suppressed topic. I entitled my talk ‘The Ugly Chinaman’* because I wanted to shock my compatriots into self-understanding.

* This archaic and derogatory term, bound to offend some readers, is deliberately used throughout this translation with Bo Yang’s approval.
(Translators)

Not long after this, an anthology of articles about the Ugly Chinaman by myself and others (including the talk I gave at Iowa University), originally published in Chinese in Taiwan, was translated into Japanese and Korean, and in 1986 five different Chinese editions were published in mainland China. This set off what the media in China referred to as 'Bo Yang fever'. Within one year, however, the Beijing *Guangming Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party's leading newspaper for intellectuals, published a long critical attack on the book (see 'Are Chinamen so ugly?' by Sun Guodong, p. 101). This in turn provoked a nationwide anti-Bo Yang campaign in China that was reminiscent of the harrowing 'struggle' sessions common during the Cultural Revolution. Later, I learned from the newspapers that my book *The Ugly Chinaman* had been a pawn in a power struggle taking place in the higher echelons of the Party. Hu Yaobang, then communist party secretary, had recommended the book to his subordinates. This was just the sort of lame excuse the conservative faction was looking for, and they attacked the book as a way of harassing Hu Yaobang. The fierceness of the accusations made me feel grateful for the fact that I do not live in mainland China, but rather in relatively liberal and democratic Taiwan.

In 1988 I went back to China for the first time in 40 years. Much to my surprise I was lionised in nearly every city I visited. People in the street even recognised me from the picture on the cover of *The Ugly Chinaman*. But because of the intellectual isolation and severe censorship imposed on China by the communist party over the years, Chinese people could only react to me in two ways: at one extreme, I was exalted as an all-knowing visionary and prophet, as China's saviour; at the other, I was excoriated as the lowest scum, and called a traitor to the Chinese people. A month ago, in December 1990, I was interviewed in Singapore. *The Straits Times* published a cover story about me, with a huge photo, entitled 'Bo Yang: The Ugly Chinaman'. Some things never change.

While I am pleased to be able to enjoy such a wide readership, my life as a writer has been something less than inspiring. Since 1950, I have published nearly 150 volumes of fiction, essays, poetry, reportage and history. My reportage has been made into a film. My history books are used as references in university courses. And my poetry and stories have been translated into foreign languages. But I never imagined that a book based on a talk I gave in which I criticised a few aspects of Chinese culture would stir up such a fuss among Chinese people all over the world. Interestingly enough, I discovered that regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with me, all those who participated in the debate shared an admirably serious concern for the survival of Chinese culture. And it also became obvious that the enthusiasm they

displayed in either railing against or defending Chinese culture greatly outweighed whatever interest they might have in literature or history. For an author this was a rather uncomfortable discovery.

I do not believe that the Chinese people are inherently inferior to anyone. In fact, if I thought that they were intellectually backward I would be the first to say so. The Tiananmen Square incident provided the Chinese people with an opportunity to show the world their true colours—their enthusiasm, warm-heartedness, discipline, kindness and consideration for others. For a few weeks during the spring of 1989, Beijing was a city of love. And for a while it looked as if everything I had written in *The Ugly Chinaman* was about to be disproven: *The Ugly Chinaman* was looking more and more like a ridiculous, slanderous tract. But then on the night of June 4, Beijing returned to 'normal'.

Are the Chinese people cursed? Are they condemned to an endless cycle of retrogression and recovery, recovery and retrogression? Ages ago, all the ethical tendencies and native wisdom of the Chinese people were crushed by the destructive elements of Confucian culture and despotic government, and gradually the remains were reconstituted in the biggest soy paste vat ever created in the history of human civilisation. If that wasn't enough, the coup de grace came in the 1950s, when the most corrosive elements of socialism—the system of public ownership and the cult of worshipping the leadership—infected the Chinese people with an international cultural virus, and left them gasping for breath. How different are the Chinese from the people of Eastern Europe, who have woken from a long bad dream to a world where democracy offers them a chance for a new life?

The harsh treatment *The Ugly Chinaman* received at the hands of the communists has finally brought this book to the attention of Western readers, and now it is appearing in English. Western readers should understand that this book represents a painful awakening for the Chinese people, as they acquire the courage to face their own shortcomings. If this book fails to make Western readers aware of the problems facing China, and leaves them with the impression that I have only written it in order to make fun of the Chinese, that not only spells disaster for me, but may have disastrous consequences for the Chinese people and the rest of the civilised world as well. To commit that mistake is to write off the ongoing struggle of this huge mass of people to escape from their tragic predicament and seek self-understanding.

The Tiananmen Square incident showed the world in a striking way what the Chinese people are capable of achieving when they are freed from their political shackles. But the rusty fetters of traditional Chinese culture cannot be discarded so easily. It will take the re-establishment of a market economy, the institution of a democratic system of

government, and a long period of political and economic stability before the Chinese people can begin to live normal, healthy lives.

Every country has its bad times and its own history of shame. While China is no exception to this rule, China's bad times seem to have lasted for an extraordinarily long time. But when face-saving Chinese people start calling their compatriots 'Ugly Chinaman' in public, this marks the birth of a new era in which the Chinese may be able to gradually free themselves of their own ugliness. It is my fervent hope that Western readers will give the Chinese people their support and their blessings. For this they will be most grateful.

Bo Yang
Taipei, 25 January 1991

Translators' introduction

Few readers of this book are likely to have encountered a Chinese soy paste vat, but they will probably find the Ugly Chinaman remarkably familiar. This hypothetical creature, who bears the cross of 5000 years of Chinese civilisation, is the creation of Guo Yidong, who was born in Kaifeng, China, in 1920. After his expulsion from university in Manchuria for anti-communist activities, Guo worked as a journalist and teacher in Mukden and Peking, and fled to Taiwan in 1949, on the eve of the communist takeover. In his first decade on the island, Guo wrote fiction and poetry and worked as a teacher and journalist. Much of his writing was anti-communist in nature, and he became associated with the Chinese Youth Anti-Communist National Salvation Corps, founded in 1952 by Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, 'to mobilise and train young people for the move back to the mainland'.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the revival in Taiwan of a form of satirical essay (*zawen*) associated with one of the greatest modern Chinese writers, Lu Xun (1881–1936). Writing essays in this genre under the *nom de plume* of Bo Yang (literally 'cypress and poplar', trees regarded by the Chinese as being able to survive harsh climates), Guo Yidong became a spokesperson for the Taiwanese, pointing his critical pen at such targets as human foibles, government corruption and police brutality.

One of the major themes of Bo Yang's essays takes up a debate in China that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, the face-off between conservative advocates of traditional Chinese values on the one hand, and pro-Western reformists and modernisers on the other. As the reformers saw it, it was the 'spiritual civilisation' of Asia that was keeping China stuck firmly in the middle ages; China had to come to

terms with the 'material civilisation' of the West. For China to become a strong, modern nation, it was believed, she had to discard her notions of spiritual superiority and share in the achievements of modern science.

Bo Yang was a moderate in this debate. He advocated democracy and modernisation for China, but was opposed to wholesale Westernisation, which he believed would create as many problems as it would solve. In his satirical essays written in the late 1960s, Bo Yang introduced the colourful notion of the culture of the soy paste vat as a metaphor for all the ills of Chinese society, past and present. Fulfilling the prescribed role of the outspoken Chinese intellectual, Bo Yang came down hard on present-day China. And the Kuomintang (KMT) authorities, playing their role as intolerant despots, retaliated.

The KMT had long been seeking an opportunity to silence this gadfly on the Chinese body politic, whose writing had won him as many enemies as friends on the provincial island. In 1967 Bo Yang obtained the rights to translate and publish the American comic strip series 'Popeye the Sailor' in Chinese. Popeye is a gritty-voiced straight-talker who touts spinach for its ability to inspire courage and defends the rights of the little guy. In the comic strip that brought Bo Yang down, Popeye has just bought an island, and goes there with his son to admire it. Here is a translation of the text, which Bo Yang toned down considerably from the original:

Popeye What a beautiful kingdom. I am king; I am president;
I can be anything I want to be.

Junior What about me?

Popeye Oh, you can be crown prince.

Junior If I am going to be anything at all, I'm going to be president.

Popeye Your tone of voice is rather bold for one who's just a baby.

Junior But there are just two of us in the whole country, don't you know?

Popeye My country is a democratic country; everyone has the right to vote.

Junior Everyone? But there are just the two of us. Wait, let me think. I'll run for election too.

Popeye Let me first make my election speech . . . Fellow-countrymen. . .

Junior Not a bad beginning!

Popeye You must not under any circumstances vote for Junior!

Junior Hey! What's the big idea?*

* NOTE: This translation and much of the information here is drawn from Edel Lancashire, 'Popeye and the Case of Guo Yidong, Alias Bo Yang', *The China Quarterly* (London) No. 92, December 1982

This veiled attack on Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo led to Bo Yang's arrest in March 1968. Over the next several weeks, the police interrogated Bo Yang about his communist connections in all-night sessions that wore him down to the point where he confessed to complicity with the communists—something he had been duped into believing would lead to his release. But Bo Yang had fallen into the KMT's trap, and under the cover of a media blackout, a military court charged him with being a communist agent and sentenced him to eighteen years in prison. Needless to say, the charge against him was an even more subtle fabrication than his confession.

Bo Yang's pen did not remain idle for long. He spent his nine-year sojourn in prison, his second decade on Taiwan, reading Chinese history and writing several long works on the subject. When he obtained an early release in 1977 at the age of 57, Taiwan and mainland China were entering a period of unprecedented political (in Taiwan's case) and economic liberalisation. The new climate of openness was one factor in Bo Yang's comeback as a controversial essayist, and paved the way for the birth of the Ugly Chinaman, Bo Yang's notorious sidekick during his third decade in Taiwan.

The text of this book, with the exception of one newspaper article, is drawn from Bo Yang's anthology, *The Ugly Chinaman*, published in Taipei in 1985.* The book consists of two parts. The first contains the 'keynote' speech entitled 'The Ugly Chinaman' that Bo Yang delivered at the University of Iowa in September 1984, a number of other speeches and interviews, and selections on topics related to the Ugly Chinaman theme drawn from Bo Yang's previously published essays. The second part consists of counter-attacks, repartees and 'condolences' by other Chinese writers in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and the United States.

The present volume is divided into three sections. The first contains transcriptions of three major speeches about the Ugly Chinaman and an interview with Bo Yang. The second, 'Signs and symptoms of Chinese cultural senility', consists of selections from Bo Yang's other writings on the subject. The third, 'Waves breaking on the shore: an Ugly Chinaman forum', is our selection of articles written in response to Bo Yang's speech, 'The Ugly Chinaman'.

Bo Yang's extemporaneous and anecdotal speeches are a mixture of popular psychology, political analysis, story telling and humour. Bo Yang is constantly urging his Chinese compatriots to 'know themselves' in the Socratic, as well as the Buddhist way. Having rubbed the belly fur of the Confucian fuddy-duddies inhabiting the corridors of power

* *Choulou de Zhongguoren* Taipei: Lin bai Publishing Company

the wrong way, Bo Yang underwent a catharsis of his own in prison, where he paid the price for *not* being an Ugly Chinaman.

Bo Yang's various books on the subject of the Ugly Chinaman have sold remarkably well in the Asian market: over 200 000 copies in Taiwan, 40 000 in Hong Kong, 150 000 in Japan, and more than 400 000 in mainland China. There is also a Korean translation.

We have pruned some but not all of the repetition from the texts and eliminated a few of the more obscure references, but have left intact the rest in order to give readers a taste of the soy paste vat: something ancient, musty, cloying and vaguely familiar.

The chatty, contentious language of these speeches and essays appears easy to translate at first glance, but like the act of translation itself, can sometimes be fiendishly deceptive. Translations are bedevilled by split loyalties: on the one hand, fidelity to the text, in this case one written in a difficult, truly foreign language; and on the other, an obligation to the reader, who should be spared the eyesores and sour notes that accumulate in the translators' workshop. The present translation consciously errs on the side of the latter; were we only less visible.

We are grateful to Stephanie Holmes of Hong Kong for pointing out numerous Ugly Translator infelicities, but remain responsible for all the dissonance. Many thanks, too, to John Minford, who helped to bring the Ugly Chinaman alive in English during a few fondly remembered years in Hong Kong before the Ugly Chinaman took over.

A final word of warning. Ugly Chinamen tend to thrive in Chinese society, but are not exclusive to it. In fact, you don't have to be Chinese to be one.

Don J. Cohn
Jing Qing

Chek Nai Ping
Hong Kong
November 1991

In consultation with a doctor in The Land of the Soy Paste Vat

Once upon a time, there was country called The Land of the Soy Paste Fermentation Vat, known in short as Soyvat. The national pastime of this country was to debate on a daily basis about whether the country was indeed a soy paste vat, with the most hotly contested arguments taking place between doctors and their patients. Of course the doctors always lost. Below we recount a typical argument.

Patient I'm getting married next month. There'll be a big wedding party. Of course you're invited, I want you to be my guest of honour. What about the results of my last tests?

Doctor I am afraid I've got some bad news for you. The results are right here; you've got tertiary tuberculosis. The first stage was your coughing . . .

Patient That's pretty weird. You tell me that I have a cough, but you just coughed too. Does that mean you have TB as well?

Doctor My coughing is different from yours.

Patient How can that be? You're rich, you're smart, you graduated from university, you've drunk Amazon River water, you belong to a superior race, isn't that so?

Doctor I wouldn't say that. You also get feverish at night . . .

Patient If I don't say things like that, how else can I make you happy? As for my fever at night, my electric fan heats up whenever I turn it on, and by midnight it's hot enough to raise welts all over my hands when I touch it. Perhaps it's my fan that has TB, not me.

Doctor (*explains patiently*) Spitting up blood is another symptom . . .

Patient There's a dentist next door to where I live. Every

patient he works on ends up spitting blood. Are you telling me every one of those people has tertiary TB too?

Doctor Of course not, I'm just talking in general . . .

Patient All right then, let's go back to the beginning. If I have TB, even seventh- or eighth-stage TB, what difference does it make? Is it really worth making such a big fuss about it? Don't people in foreign countries get TB all the time? Why do you have to pick on me? I'm getting married next month it's a secret so far. Why can't you give me a word or two of encouragement, instead of attacking me? Do you have any good reason to despise me, or to seek revenge? Or maybe it's that you want to break up my upcoming marriage?

Doctor I'm afraid you misunderstand me completely, all I wanted to say was that . . .

Patient No, no, I understand everything you're saying very clearly. In fact, I can see right through your lungs. Your mother died when you were young, so you didn't get enough love when you were growing up. Later, you spent many years in jail for robbery and rape. You have no respect for the law, you can't tolerate other people being happy, or a foreign country enjoying honour or glory.

Doctor Aren't you taking this a bit too far?

Patient No, this is very much to the point. Tell me the truth now. How did you actually murder that old lady, even though she was so kind to you?

Doctor (*somewhat nervously*) Your diagnosis is based on a blood and sputum test, how could I possibly fake the results?

Patient I know you're not faking the results, just like you never be able to fake the way you plunged the knife into the old lady's chest. All the progressive and patriotic people in this country have had enough of your insults. I know the way you despise all of your fellow countrymen from the bottom of your heart. You've diagnosed every single one of them as suffering from tertiary TB. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

Doctor My dear friend, I am only concerned with your well-being, and hope that you will recover soon. I really have no bad feelings for you. Otherwise why would I tell you the truth about your condition?

Patient (*sneering and coughing*) You're a bloody executioner, that's what you are. All the honest, patriotic people in this country will get together and do something to stop you from murdering the Motherland, although you claim to be acting out of 'love'.

Doctor My diagnosis is based on scientific evidence, such as the results of your sputum test. In fact the test was carried out at Hindustan University.

Patient You're nothing but a foreign bootlicker, a bloody xenophiliac. You're a scoundrel, a thug. You've already

destroyed our national self esteem. I'm warning you, you'll pay a stiff price for your blatant xenophilia!

Doctor (*with courage*) Cut out the nonsense, will you? Look, there's no escaping now, you can't use sticks and stones and dirty names to take the place of reason. What does my past behaviour and our conversation today have to do with each other? What matters here is whether or not you have TB.

Patient Here you go again, playing the 'Ugly Chinaman'. You're full of rubbish. We all know your background, it's obvious you're rotten to the core. Of course there's a relationship between your past and the present. It's people like you who are to blame for China's problems. You make foreigners look down on Chinese people because you give them the idea that we're all suffering from TB. Traitors like you suck the blood of the Chinese people and kiss the arses of the barbarian devils. God will strike you dead! Imperial court guards! (*coughs*) Take him away!

Of course this scenario doesn't really require imperial court guards (although Bo Yang was taken away once in precisely that manner). Sometimes you get beaten up with clubs, other times they attack you with pen and ink.

23 July 1985

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PART I

Bo Yang speaks