

## An Analysis of Lin Yutang's Educational Thought in the Perspective of Cultural Geography

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### Abstract

Lin Yutang, as a renowned Chinese and foreign writer, translator and educator, has crossed many cultural fields in his life, and has made important contributions to the cultural exchange between China and the West and to the cause of education with his unique literary talent and humanistic educational philosophy. The turbulence of the times made him have a lot of experiences, from the family private school in southern Fujian to the long road of education in several western countries, the continuous change of geography and space time made him come into contact with different forms of education and also shaped his unique view of education. This paper analyzes his cross-cultural educational background and life experiences from the perspective of cultural geography, describes the advancement and foresight of Lin Yutang's educational thinking in the context of his time, and discusses its revelation and significance for modern educational reform.

### Keywords

Cultural Geography, Lin Yutang, educational thought.

### 1. Introduction

Lin Yutang is a unique cultural scholar who freely navigates between Eastern and Western cultures, successfully introducing China to the world and enabling the world to gain a deeper understanding of China. His cultural pursuit of "being the bridge between Chinese culture and western culture, writing more articles about human life and social history" has played a significant role in the history of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges. With multiple identities, Lin excels at "explaining Chinese culture to foreigners and foreign culture to Chinese".[1] As the first Chinese writer to gain international fame through English writing, Lin's works have been translated into over twenty languages and sold worldwide in dozens of countries. He integrates Eastern and Western cultures, embodying a contradictory individual with "a western mind and a Chinese heart".[2] Lin's prolific works have primarily been studied for his achievements in translation and literature. Ma Mingrong and Luo Xuanmin focused on Lin's early translation theory *An Urgent Proposal for Uniform Translation Terminology*, analyzing his linguistic competence and enriching his translation thoughts.[3] Liu Quanguo and Yan Xin explored defamiliarization in Lin's English translations of Chinese classics, providing references for the overseas translation and dissemination of Chinese culture and wisdom today.[4] In literary research, Wang Zhaosheng explored Lin's spatial-temporal landscape and cultural ideals from different spatial-temporal dimensions, analyzing their value and cultural significance.[5] Xiao Bairong and Xie Shiting examined Lin's multicultural perspectives in his literary works to

explore his pursuit of life philosophy.[6] While Lin is renowned for his literature and translation, his works across various genres also contain profound insights into education, which offer valuable lessons for contemporary educational advancement. Lin's life involved constant geographical and temporal transitions, from rural to urban areas and from domestic to international settings. These changes in social environments subtly influenced his creations. After experiencing the dynamic changes of ecosystems in different geographical and temporal contexts, his literary works reflect viewpoints and content closely tied to his life experiences. This paper adopts a cultural geographical perspective to explore the educational thoughts reflected in Lin Yutang's prolific literary works, thereby expanding research perspectives on literary works and uncovering their valuable social significance.

## **2. Critique of Old Educational System, Emphasis on True Talent Cultivation**

The educational system serves as the cornerstone for the development of education, playing an irreplaceable role in nurturing talents required by the nation, fostering social equity and progress, and transmitting culture while innovating knowledge. The French educator Émile Durkheim noted, "Education consists of a body of knowledge and beliefs considered fundamental to a given civilization and transmitted from one generation to another." [7] Education disseminates civilization, and a sound educational system is pivotal to the healthy development of education. The formation of an educational system is closely tied to the national culture of a particular time and place. Cultural geography is primarily "a discipline that studies culture from a geographical perspective, mainly exploring how culture influences people's daily living spaces and how places in turn influence and act upon residents". [8] From cultural geography perspective, Lin Yutang's upbringing profoundly influenced the sprouting and shaping of his thoughts. Born in Zhangzhou City, Fujian Province, Lin harbored a strong and profound affection for his hometown, where the landscape and culture of southern Fujian deeply impacted his growth. In his autobiography, Lin described the scenery of his hometown: "To the south of Banzai Village, one's gaze stretches far, embracing the continuous distant mountains that, regardless of weather, are veiled by clouds. Here, the Jiayi Mountains stand like jagged teeth, with cliffs hanging precariously, blocking the sky and obscuring the sun. In winter, winds whistle through the extremely narrow Gouya Valley, and standing here, one feels almost connected to Heaven". [9] His descriptions reveal his reverence and devotion for nature. As one of the birthplaces of southern Fujian culture, Zhangzhou city blends elements of Central Plains culture, Minyue culture, and marine culture, embodying inclusiveness, openness, and diversity. This cultural backdrop exposed Lin to abundant cultural resources and diverse ideologies during his upbringing. Especially after being immersed in western education for many years, Lin has developed unique insights and profound feelings regarding the educational systems of both China and foreign countries. In his book, he characterized the prevailing condition of education in China as "silently tedious and semi-moribund" [10], a phrase that succinctly encapsulated the contemporary state of the educational system at that time. During the late 19th century, China found itself amidst social unrest and the tumult of political transformation. Amid the myriad impacts from Western culture and politics, the educational system was also undergoing a arduous period of transition. It was observed that "the mechanism of moral education under the old institutionalism controlled the moral development of individual students through various 'organizations' and 'norms' at different levels within the school system". [11] The old educational system, by directly imposing external indoctrination and rewards and punishments on students, to some extent stifled their sense of independent thinking and autonomous learning capabilities.

Literary works are far from mere vehicles for presenting the geographical features of the objective world. They play a far more profound role in evoking emotional resonance. Cultural geography focuses on “the way social groups interact with natural landscapes and the way people construct places and Spaces”.[12] In other words, people construct places and spaces through perception and cognition, which is based not only on material geographical features but also influenced by multiple factors such as culture, history, and society. Lin Yutang’s experiences of studying abroad in multiple countries provided him with a profound understanding of the differences between Chinese and foreign educational philosophies. It was precisely under this “being the bridge between Chinese and western cultural” that Lin Yutang received the nourishment of both Eastern and Western cultures, forming a unique educational perspective. When discussing the cultivation goal of education in *On Reading*, Lin said that most people’s purposes for reading were not pure, some people only to get a degree through the examination, some aimed solely to find a means of livelihood, and others pursued the gates of fame and interest. Lin Yutang criticized this, stating, “Modern education can be said to be the most perfect system planned by the state to ruin the health of youth”.[13] Regarding the goals of education, he proposed that the fundamental duty of education should lie in nurturing individuals, enabling them to “open their minds, eliminate superficial views, acquire new knowledge, enhance their learning, broaden their horizons, and cultivate their souls”.[10] He advocated for “humanistic” education, emphasizing the cultivation of students’ autonomy and spiritual character. The phenomenon of educational utilitarianism still exists in today’s society, yet Lin Yutang, with his rich experiences of studying abroad and broad horizons, identified the flaws in the educational system decades ago, demonstrating his sensitivity and foresight towards national education. Some scholars have pointed out, “Promoting economic development, strengthening national strength, and helping students acquire knowledge and abilities for livelihood are functions that education should possess, but the functions of education are not limited to these”.[14] Education transcends mere imparting of textual knowledge to students. It is more crucially about nurturing their intellectual faculty, problem-solving prowess, and the habit of lifelong learning. This equips them to maintain competitiveness in a rapidly evolving society and achieve the harmonization of personal and societal values. Considering the current state of education in China, education should also return to its original intention of nurturing individuals, abandon all old educational concepts detrimental to students’ growth and talent development, and focus more on their comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics, and labor. It is evident that Lin Yutang expresses some dissatisfaction with the educational system of the time. He perceived that teachers often approached their instruction with a distinctly utilitarian mindset, focusing primarily on enhancing students’ scores solely to ensure their passage in examinations and boost enrollment rates. Within such an educational milieu, students were utterly disconnected from societal realities, acquiring only esoteric theories and various philosophical ideologies while remaining largely ignorant of practical social experiences.

### 3. Rejection of Scores-Only Criteria, Promotion of Individualized Learning

Lin Yutang’s educational ideology of opposing the “scores-only” theory and advocating personalized education was formed under the joint influence of his regional cultural background, family environment and personal experience. The “scores-only” evaluation is a written examination that takes scores as a standard of measurement, and this is the only criterion for students, teachers, and even the entire education system to assess the value of the behavior and judge the merits and demerits. Lin Yutang also expressed his stance on this issue in his literary works. From the perspective of cultural geography, as part of culture, literary works “are no longer a mirror that simply reflects or distorts the external world”.[15] Specifically, literary creations within specific spatio-temporal contexts not only reflect or

distort the outside world but also serve as carriers of culture, crystallizing human perceptions, reflections, and imaginations of the world. In his writings, Lin Yutang unequivocally opposes the sole reliance on grades, asserting that they inadequately represent students' true abilities. Nevertheless, he laments, "Examinations are inevitable, but we must break free from the superstitions of grades and not treat them as ultimate standards".[16] In addition, Lin Yutang mentions Confucius' method of educating his disciples "teaching according to the talent" in his book *The Humor of Confucius*. [17] Confucius used different educational methods and means according to the different personalities and specialties of his students in order to achieve the best teaching results. This educational philosophy emphasizes the relevance and individualization of education, which coincides with the modern educational philosophy of "student-centered" and "individualized teaching". Combined with the modern education reform, "'scores-only' evaluation to the college entrance examination as a watershed downward diffusion and penetration in all aspects of basic education, and the formation of basic education 'scores-only' evaluation of the miasma of chronic disease". [18] In every aspect of education, examinations are regarded as the centerpiece, and students' scores have gradually become the center of public attention, forming the trend of scores determining the fate of candidates. Thus, the drawbacks brought by the "scores-only theory" of education have been criticized by the academia. Lin Yutang, who had studied both Chinese and Western cultures, deeply felt the pursuit of the supremacy of scores in education after he returned home from his travels and studies, and expressed his dissatisfaction with this mode of education and created his own style of "personalized education" in his own educational practice.

The profound attachment to Chinese culture constitutes a fundamental hue in Lin Yutang's educational ideology, which is deeply influenced by his regional and cultural background, scattered throughout his numerous literary works. Despite being exposed to Western thought for an extended period, he did not forget or develop aversion towards traditional Chinese culture. Having grown up in a fishing village in Fujian, later relocating to Gulang Island in Xiamen, and ultimately venturing into the international arena to imbibe both Eastern and Western cultures, this cross-regional experience enabled him to keenly appreciate the differences and integration among diverse regional cultures. In his work, he points out that "all examinations are mechanical, focusing on memorization but not on thinking. How many emperors were there in the Ming Dynasty, and what were the names of the emperors". [19], such exams can test students' comprehension and memorization ability through the scores, but they cannot improve their historical appreciation ability. "With the number of pages and units and measure learning, such as modern history, a cubic inch of Mr. Ding's lecture notes two hundred and seventy-five pages, so the accumulation of pages and get a few cubic inches, the accumulation of cubic inches and get a diploma", [10] which is "far away from 'knowledge is the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge is the way to raise interest'". [13] From this, we can see that Lin Yutang particularly resents the way students are judged by marks. In the classroom, he typically eschewed textbooks and refrained from arbitrarily calling on students to pose questions, instead fostering interaction and dialogue among them. As the semester drew to a close, Lin would assess each student based on his daily observations, rather than simply assigning a grade, as he was opposed to mechanical education, to the spoon-feeding pedagogy that discouraged thinking, and to the pernicious effects of specialization on the human spirit. [20] According to him, "the goal of education or culture lies solely in the development of intellectual discernment and good behavior. An ideal educated person need not be erudite but must possess the wisdom to discern good from evil". [21] These ideas stemmed from his habit of "consciously observing and studying local education wherever he traveled, comparing it with the education prevalent in China at that time, and critically providing nourishment for Chinese education". [22] Undoubtedly, they were also the product of the

collision between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture against the backdrop of constant geographical and environmental changes.

#### 4. Abandonment of Passive Indoctrination, Advocacy of Joyful Learning

Lin Yutang's educational philosophy profoundly embodies the pursuit of "free" and "joyful" educational ideals, as well as the "human-centered" educational objective. The formation of this pursuit and objective can be traced back to his education and upbringing since childhood, namely, the "western education style" influenced by Christian culture and the "relaxed" family atmosphere. He once pointed out in a book, "what each person needs for growth, besides a healthy body and sensitive senses, is only a joyful childhood".[23] Lin Yutang's daughter Lin Taiyi wrote in *The Biography of Lin Yutang* that "My father was a child of the mountains and villages," having had a "joyful childhood" where "he often ran to the rice paddies or the riverbank to admire the sunset wonders and survey the towering mountains".[24] From this, it can be seen that the unique landscapes of southern Fujian nurtured Lin Yutang's "world outlook rooted in nature and humanity" and he spent a happy childhood in his hometown. Through the creation and expression of literary works, Lin Yutang uniquely integrated geographical environment, social changes, and cultural significance, demonstrating profound observations and reflections in cultural geography. He advocated for joyful and free learning, in which individuals not only acquire knowledge and enhance behavioral qualities but also recognize the beautiful elements inherent in learning and experience the pleasure it brings, representing the deeper implications of learning. Karl Jaspers pointed out, "Education is an extremely serious and great endeavor, through which the new generation is introduced into the world of human excellent cultural spirit, allowing them to live, work, and interact in a complete spirit".[25] making people become spiritually enriched civilized beings through a joyful learning process. The renowned philosopher and educator John Dewey also indicated in his writings that learning is proactive, and teachers should adopt a student-centered approach in the teaching process, enabling students to learn and grow joyfully through practice.[26] However, in real-life learning situations, due to various influencing factors, the learning process is often passive and infusing, and learning has lost its inherent fun for some students. Lin Yutang proposed "a philosophy of joy" based on absorbing cultural nutrients from both China and the West, which is reflected in his educational philosophy, where he criticized the modern educational model for violating the original intent of education in both its methods and purposes.[27] In Lin's view, the first principle of education should be the health and happiness of children. Education not only cultivates people's perception of happiness but also creates a beneficial atmosphere for them to pursue lifelong happiness. Therefore, the educational process should respect students' feelings as the subjects of learning, focus on their learning experiences and enjoyment during the process of knowledge transmission, return education to its essence, and enable students to acquire knowledge freely, actively, and joyfully.

The process of joyful learning is not only a journey of healthy personal growth but also a pivotal path for accumulating a sense of lifelong happiness. "Joy" can be said to be the essence of the life philosophy summarized by Lin Yutang. He stated, "Only a philosophy of joy can be truly profound; I do not think that those serious philosophical theories of the West have yet begun to understand the true meaning of life".[21] He believed that the process of imparting knowledge should also prioritize "joyful" learning, and teachers should not merely recite textbooks while neglecting students' learning experiences. The learning process ought to be imbued with aesthetic pleasure and joy. School education is an inevitable path for individuals to develop their capacity for happiness and rational thinking, with its fundamental purpose being the development of students' multiple intelligence and assistance in discovering vocations and hobbies suited to their intellectual characteristics, which are key pathways for

fostering a sense of purpose and fulfillment.[29] Passive infusing learning can deprive students of the joy of attending school, diminish their experience of joyful learning, and thereby lead to a rejection of mechanical school education. Learning is a lasting change in behavior that persists over time or is manifested in a certain way, stemming from practice or other experiences.[29] Thus, in the process of internalizing these experiences into one's own knowledge through learning practice, learners acquire external information and knowledge in a way that brings them pleasure and can internalize it, thereby correctly managing relationships between oneself and society, nature, and the self. The core of "joyful learning" is that the ultimate purpose of education is to cultivate individuals who understand "human sentiments and the principles of life," rather than those who merely rote memorize bookish knowledge. Lin Yutang believed that "if a student, in addition to studying, still remembers the principles of being a good person, then there is absolutely no need for us to take responsibility on his behalf." [10] From the perspective of Lin Yutang's educational philosophy, with his "philosophy of joy" as its core theory, he sharply criticized the problems existing in the modern educational system and advocated a free and relaxed "edifying" educational method, which holds far-reaching enlightening significance for the current educational system in China.

## 5. Conclusion

The regional characteristics of literature exhibit a close correlation with its stylistic manifestations across temporal and spatial dimensions, the geographical essence of literature, and the spatial distribution of writers. Literary works, as artistic expressions of emotions, profoundly convey creators' perceptions of real geographical environments and their temporal-spatial contexts, while also mirroring their local mental states and customs of the epoch. Lin Yutang embarked on his journey from majestic mountains, traversing the bustling cities of Xiamen and Shanghai, and even setting foot in the highest academic halls of Europe. As an overseas student, he possessed a unique perspective, observing flaws within the educational system from a student's vantage point. Upon returning to China to teach, he then stood on a teacher's platform, exploring pathways to reform China's outdated educational deficiencies. His educational thoughts originated from the Sino-Western integrated educational approach upheld by his father during his childhood, which were further deepened and sublimated through his overseas study experiences. Whether it was his profound analysis of education during the Republic of China era, his practice of inspiring and persuasive educational methods, or his dissemination of idealistic university educational philosophies, he emerged as a prominent innovator in the educational field of the Republic of China era. Dedicated to literary creation throughout his life, Lin Yutang's life trajectory transcended the boundaries between Chinese and western cultures. This literary perspective imbued with geographical implications opens up a novel interpretive pathway for us, transforming literary space from mere aggregations of words into a multidimensional universe interwoven with emotions, imagination, and cognition, thereby greatly enriching and deepening our perception and interpretation of literary works. Therefore, when appreciating and evaluating Lin Yutang's literary works, it is necessary to adopt a cultural geography perspective, deeply understanding and grasping the regional characteristics within his literary works, and excavating his educational thoughts scattered throughout. By doing so, we can better appreciate the unique charm of his literary works and form a certain cultural perception, experiencing the regional culture underlying his educational thoughts from various aspects, thereby deepening our understanding of the educational philosophies he advocated. Of course, influenced by the historical context, ideological deviations in Lin Yutang's educational viewpoints were inevitable. For instance, he overly emphasized free reading while neglecting classroom instruction by teachers; many mistakenly believed that textbooks were not genuine books, views filled with intense idealism. However, his educational concepts, interpretations of educational goals,

educational assessment methods, and reading skills, among other aspects, are thought-provoking and forward-thinking insights that still possess great reference value and enlightening significance for our current round of educational reform.

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