

# *On Lin Yutang's Ideas Inspired by William Shakespeare*

—Taking *The Importance of Living* as an Example

Lan HE

Foreign Language Department  
Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College  
Zhangzhou, Fujian, China

**Abstract**—Careful research shows that Lin Yutang's concept of four life periods is inspired from works of Shakespeare, and his creation of the fool can be a modified version of that of Shakespeare. It is clear that Shakespeare has an enormous influence on him, and humanism serves as the foundation for Lin Yutang to learn so much from the world giant. To understand Lin Yutang's inspiration source can be of significance in accelerating the process of spreading Chinese culture to the world in this modern time.

**Keywords**—Lin Yutang; William Shakespeare; four life periods; the fool; inspiration

## I. INTRODUCTION

Being Lin Yutang's bestseller in the United States in the twentieth century, *The Importance of Living* captured great attention of the Western audience at that time by its philosophical insights into life. Generally, it is considered a great work to spread to the modern world traditional culture of ancient China. Just in the first chapter, the Chinese philosopher's approach to life is described vividly with Yen Hwei, a disciple of Confucius, not in the office but lying idly on the sand, uttering "life is beautiful". However, careful examinations reveal that there are traces that the author's ideas have been inspired quiet obviously from giants in the world stage like Walt Whitman and William Shakespeare. Quotes of both of them are found scattered in the book to make its contents about ancient China more artistic and full of humanism. Studies regarding the influence of Walt Whitman on Lin Yutang have reaped fruits as we can see the paper by Wang Xiaolin and Zhou Yihui published on the academic journal[1]. More efforts need to be invested in the research of the influence of Shakespeare on the author, because it will contribute to finding some efficient ways to spread Chinese culture to the world in this modern time when Chinese economy is growing rapidly.

There is no doubt that Lin Yutang has learned a lot from William Shakespeare and integrated some of his wisdom with some ancient oriental philosophy. In this paper, firstly, a comparison is made between Lin Yutang's view about life periods and William Shakespeare's view about the course of a lifetime. Secondly, an examination is conducted concerning Lin Yutang's concept of fool and that of William Shakespeare. After William Shakespeare's specific influence on Lin Yutang is illustrated, finally, what serves as the foundation for Lin

Yutang to gain inspirations from William Shakespeare is explored. All of this investigation aims to seek cultural paths to accelerate the process of making Chinese culture a major part of the world culture in response to the fast growth of Chinese economy.

## II. LIN YUTANG'S FOUR LIFE PERIODS AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S SEVEN LIFE STAGES

In his book *The Importance of Living*, Lin Yutang introduces to the reader a poetic life with four periods, which reminds the reader of William Shakespeare's seven stages of a man's life. If we go deeper, we can conclude that Yin Yutang is in line with Shakespeare despite that he views the four periods from a hedonistic perspective of an oriental philosopher.

To lead the reader to a leisurely life pattern of hedonism, Lin Yutang[2], on the basis of the rhythm and beat, or the cycles of growth and decay, divides life into four periods, beginning with innocent childhood, followed by awkward adolescence; after that, life reaches a manhood of intense activities. The third period is middle age for gradual acquiring a more tolerant and a kindlier view of life. The last period is the old age, an age of peace and contentment, which goes into eternal sleep eventually. In a broad sense, Lin Yutang compares the four periods to the cycle of the four seasons. As spring is characterized by growth, so is childhood. Similarly, the old age is like winter, with old organic things declining in quietness. The four periods are virtually the reflection of the Nature, which is designed by God. In this way, life periods are a beautiful arrangement, and any human individual, if in the old age working hard, is destroying the harmony of life arranged by the Nature in advance.

William Shakespeare's course of a lifetime is a more profound concept with deep implications. It is clearly expressed by Jaques, a character in *As You Like It*. The full context of the parts played by one man in his lifetime is given like this [3]

All the world's a stage,  
And all the man and women merely players.  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven stages.

(Act II Scene VII)

For the seven stages, character sketches are provided, all self-contained, each stage apparently deriving nothing from the stage before. Human beings in this world pass through rites of passage. They are infants, school children, lovers, soldiers, businessmen, justices, and then they decline into senility, and die.

This division complies with the law of growth and decay, but the notion that each stage derives nothing from the preceding stage may appear fresh to our time, because Elizabethans do not regard personality as a given, limiting human capacity. Instead, as a player on the world stage, a man is a new person every time he enters in new costumes until leaving the stage.

To prove this point, we can find evidence in William Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Change has taken place in him as if he had turned into his father when he announces to his dying father and the audience that [4]

If I do feign,

O, let me in my present wildness die,

And never live to show th' incredulous world

The noble change that I have purposed! (Act IV Scene V)

With a new and gorgeous garment on, Henry V is not the thing he was. He says [4],

For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,

That I have turn'd away my former self.

(Act V Scene V)

For Shakespeare, a man has a fixed role to play on each stage and all the stages do not need to be continuous and coherent.

William Shakespeare develops his viewpoint from theatre performance. The purpose of playing 'is to hold as the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image.' [4] To carry out this purpose, players of a company need to take all the parts in the repertory, with one player taking even three or four parts. Therefore, the same player's performance, in a different part, has nothing to do with the preceding part he has played.

From the above, it may be concluded that Lin Yutang's view is just a much simplified version of Shakespeare's. Both of them may justify their statements by resorting to the power of God, or the Nature. However, Shakespeare's idea is definitely more poignant and functional for guiding people in the complexity of real life.

In this respect, a good case is *King Lear*, who is descending from the sixth to the seventh age of man. On this stage, Lear "persists in ordering the elements to do what they would do whether he ordered or not. He is still deluding himself that he is the lord of creation, unaware that, like the year itself, he has lived through his cycle of a generation, his spring, his summer, his fall of leaf, and now his bitter winter. His striving 'in his little world of man to out-storm / The to-and-fro-conflicting

wind and rain' is absurd." [4] Lear's life experience is in accordance with the seasons, but his helplessness in his attempt to reverse the great decay is dramatized. In Lear's world, more is lost than can be replaced. As a representative of man, he is the king of God's creation, with marks of sovereignty, knowledge and reason, but he loses all of them when the king loses his political power as a result of his growing old. The message in the play is obvious: how great the hero is, if he has the misfortune to live so long, he must come to a tragic ending. All human beings are in the scheme of things.

In addition, the origin of William Shakespeare's view of life stages can be identified in *King Lear* [4], where a verse is sung which divides the life of a man into four categories, along with the lines of description of the role played by folly in childhood, youth, manhood, and old age in Erasmus's *Encomium Moriae*.

Therefore, although his perspective to look at old age with peace and contentment is original, Lin Yutang is not original in dividing a man's life into four periods. We may safely say that Lin Yutang's view of life periods is created out of inspirations from works of William Shakespeare.

### III. LIN YUTANG'S CONCEPT OF FOOL AND THAT OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

When introducing to the Western reader Laotse, the ancient philosopher of China, Lin Yutang uses "folly", thinking of Laotse to have the wisdom of the foolish. In *The Importance of Living*, Laotse is a man who believes the greatest wisdom is like stupidity, because the author is in the conviction that "Blessed are the idiots, for they are the happiest people on earth." [2]

To understand Lin Yutang's concept of fool, we need to take into consideration the conducts of "fools" who follow Laotse's dictum. In Chinese culture, there have been a number of famous fools in Chinese history, all extremely popular and beloved for their real or affected craziness. One example is Chi Kung, who is the hero of a popular romance steadily being lengthened and added to until it is about three times the size of *Don Quixote*, and still seems endless. Like Chi Kung, other fools, who give people the impression of being crazy, going against conventions in terms of their appearance and conduct, are actually the great romantic geniuses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In contrast to the fool presented by Lin Yutang, the fool of William Shakespeare is not at all a genius who chooses to live a care-free life by spitting forth intelligence.

Consider the two major fools in the play of *King Lear*. One is the Fool and the other is Lear. Lear becomes insane when he loses his power and is disgraced by his two daughters. In the dialogue between the Fool and Lear [5], the definition of what a fool is provided.

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

(Act I, Scene IV)

Here “fool” is a child, light-hearted, stoical, unassuming, and remaining in a state of nature. According to William Shakespeare, the born idiot avoids all the temptation and sin associated with the development of intellectual faculties, so he is thought of as perpetually innocent. In knowing his own foolishness, the fool is modest and clear-headed than any other man. In short, the fool is marked by God’s touch.

Apart from that, the word “silly” is descended from an old English word meaning “blessed”. The survival of this connotation into present-day English makes Shakespeare’s fool wise by Christian grace.

Therefore, the Fool in *King Lear*, though acting as a fool, is wise enough to use his folly like a stalking horse and in the disguise of that he shoots his wit. It is not unusual that, in time, the Fool gives bitterly sarcastic comments to warn the king when Lear is muddle-headed. The crazy speeches he makes are confusing but always telling a truth. For example, when the Fool knows Lear decides to give his kingdom to his two ungrateful daughters, he says “I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. (Act I, Scene IV)”[5] It seems ridiculous for him to question the relationship between the king and his daughters, but the Fool’s real intention is to point out the greedy qualities in the two daughters of the king and what a severe mistake the king is about to make. In this sense, the Fool is insightful than the so-called sober man. He is licensed to be a fool to avoid conventional restraints of society and offer unconventional or even subversive opinions to enlighten Lear as well as the audience.

Lear is not mad at the beginning of the play, but he appears to be ridiculous because he believes that love can be proved by sweet words. As his two daughters hurt and disappoint him to the extreme, he is driven mad. Then in madness he sees society and human nature free from social conventions, speaking with wisdom. For example, he says, “What! Art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. (ActIV, Scene VI)”[5] It is the life hits he receives that enable him to acquire his discerning ability. Also, in his madness, he comes to discover his own weakness, the nature of people around him and the essence of kingship.

Comparing Lin Yutang’s concept of fool and that of William Shakespeare, we may realize that Lin Yutang’s fools are extraordinarily wise people, choosing to live a life in a natural state, while Shakespeare’s fools are those reduced by unbearable sufferings to their natural state to gain wisdom. Based on this huge similarity, we may conclude that Lin Yutang, drawing inspirations from William Shakespeare, extracts the natural state from Shakespeare’s concept of fools to present his wise ancient people’s way of life.

#### IV. THE FOUNDATION FOR LIN YUTANG TO GAIN INSPIRATIONS FROM WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Here and there in *The Importance of Living*, sparkles of Western civilization and sparkles of the wisdom of William Shakespeare can be perceived. We cannot help thinking what the foundation is for Lin Yutang to gain inspirations from William Shakespeare in particular.

By examining *The Importance of Living*, by studying Lin Yutang’s cultural and religious backgrounds, and by reviewing

William Shakespeare’s contributions to the world, we may see that humanism, the universal bond, is chiefly what leads the Chinese writer close to the Western literary giant.

As we know, humanism arises from Greek civilization, especially Greek mythology, which personifies gods and creates them with man’s emotions and images, confirming man’s value in real life. Humanism inherits and transcends Greek mythology. It becomes the characteristic of the Renaissance, emphasizing the dignity of human beings and the importance of the present life. What humanists want to achieve is a world where human beings rule instead of God, so man has the right to pursue happiness, knowledge and wealth[6]. In short, humanism gives priority to the nature of human beings, liberating humans from the fetters of feudal system and the medieval theology.

William Shakespeare lives in the time of the Renaissance, and he expresses his view of humanism throughout his works. His heroes are secular, brave to seek happiness, paying attention to their inner souls. As is illustrated in *King Lear*, Cordelia, Lear’s dear daughter, behaves with reason and emotions, achieving happiness and purity by loving her father faithfully and fighting for justice; while Lear comes to realize what true happiness in life is through Cordelia’s love. The death of Cordelia and Lear indicates that the play breaks away from the theological fetter that the evil will be punished by God. It is true that humanism constitutes a major part in Shakespeare’s plays.

Humanism is also what Lin Yutang pursues and advocates in his lifetime. Living in an era when China is trying to shatter the fetter of feudalism, he greets liberal ideas introduced to China warmly and searches ancient Chinese culture for humanistic thoughts. As a result, he finds that the core values of Confucianism and Daoism are human centered. Mencius, the representative of Confucianism, emphasizes friendly human relationships, proposing the heart or the mind filled with compassion, shame, honor, justice as the basic criterion for handling interpersonal relationships. Laoze, the founder of Daoism, promotes the inclination to compromise for the sake of harmony between people. Understanding the essence of ancient Chinese culture, Lin Yutang says with humor that “if Laoze had been invited to take the chair at the Versailles Conference, there would not be a Hitler today” [2]. It is certain that Lin Yutang’ Chinese humanism is a combination of traditional culture with Western humanism [7].

Furthermore, both William Shakespeare and Lin Yutang are Christians. Humanism in Shakespeare’s works has some religious elements, which shed some particular light to Lin Yutang. So Lin Yutang follows suit, quoting *The Bible* where necessary, and not rigidly confined in non-human fetters of theology.

For example, in *King Lear*, Cordelia, the symbol of goodness and virtue, dies in the end. By creating this tragic ending, William Shakespeare is making an effort to explore into humanism, liberating Cordelia from ferocious egoism. This heroine loses her life instead of winning a victory. That is the artistic design of William Shakespeare. He adheres to the principle of selfless love in Christianity, while getting rid of the

religious revelation that bad people will perish. So we view *King Lear* as true to life and more human-oriented.

Similarly, in *The Importance of Living*, Lin Yutang concerns more about real human life than religious postulates. He proclaims that he is a pagan because “it does not encourage men to do simple act of charity by dragging in a series of hypothetical postulates-sin, redemption, the cross, laying up treasure in heaven...”[2] For him, a man with a true good nature will do good things for the pure motivation that he will be satisfied by doing something good, which is the real reward. In other words, any selfish individual desire for a reward, even the reward for something in heaven, should be excluded from pure pursuit of goodness in life.

Humanism in the works of William Shakespeare shines onto Lin Yutang and becomes the foundation for Lin Yutang to gain inspirations to form concepts of his own for his compositions.

## V. CONCLUSION

*The Importance of Living* is a very popular book with Western readers, providing them with insightful Chinese thoughts. In this book, Lin Yutang quotes William Shakespeare, and several elements of the ancient oriental ideas that he presents remind us of William Shakespeare. Careful research reveals that Lin Yutang’s concept of four life periods is not original in a strict sense, which is inspired from works of William Shakespeare; and his creation of the fool can be a modified version of that of Shakespeare. The reason why Lin Yutang can benefit so much from the world giant is humanism which serves as the foundation or the universal bond. Deeply immersed in ancient Chinese culture, Lin Yutang finds some Chinese thoughts brilliant with humanism, and that is also the core value in the works of William Shakespeare. So when Lin Yutang proposes his views of ancient Chinese philosophy of living a life, he integrates his presentation with classic Western

concepts, especially concepts of William Shakespeare in *The Importance of Living*, on the basis of humanism. In this way, his division of four life periods and his description of the fool seem very exotic yet very easy to appreciate, given the literary knowledge of Western readers.

Lin Yutang has the intelligence to know well the Chinese culture and the Western literature. His ideas inspired from William Shakespeare are illuminating, interesting, and with his Chinese flavor, which partly explains why he is so successful in the world as a Chinese writer.

In this modern time, when our economy is growing fast, intense cultural exchange with the world in response to the growth has become a challenging task. To study and understand Lin Yutang’s works and his inspiration source can be of great significance in accelerating the process of spreading our Chinese culture to the world.

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