CHAPTER FIVE

A CROSS-CULTURAL AESTHETICS OF LIFE:
TRANSLATING “XINGLING” INTO “SELF-EXPRESSION,”
“XIANSHI” INTO “LEISURE,” AND “HUMOR”
INTO “YOUMO”

‘Tea Chat’ literally means chatting while drinking tea, but actually I have hardly ever chatted this way; besides, I am not a connoisseur of tea—I merely drink cold tea like a fish sucks water.
Zhou Zuoren, Preface to “Cha Hua” (Tea Chat) in My Own Garden (Ziji de yuandi) (1927)

Humor is a state of mind. More than that, it is a point of view, a way of looking at life.
Lin Yutang, My Country and My People (1935)

Discussions on cosmopolitanism have usually focused on the cultural politics of particularism vs. universalism while few have paid attention to the aesthetic dimension.1 But aesthetic issues should be legitimate and important concerns of cosmopolitanism. In the context of Chinese modernity, the transition and transformation from traditional Chinese aesthetics to a modern sensibility accommodating Western influences constitute an important aspect of the making of the modernity project. That is especially true in the case of Lin Yutang’s cosmopolitan practices. While his cosmopolitan politics brought him controversy and criticism whether in China or in America, it was his unique type of aesthetics out of a particular cross-cultural fusion that won him popularity and fame both in China and in America. In this chapter, I will interpret Lin Yutang’s literary and cultural discourses and

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1 An interesting exception can be found in Michel Foucault who, in his later years, was keen on searching for an “aesthetics of existence” in reference to a “Greek formula” and a “Chinese formula.” See Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.
practices surrounding his translating “xingling” into “self-expression,” “xianshi” into “leisure” and humor into “youmo,” which constitute, as I will show, a distinct aesthetics of life through his cross-cultural mediation and appropriation of traditional Chinese and modern Western aesthetics.

“Xingling” As Self-Expression

In 1934, Zhou Zuoren published his series of lectures given at Furen University in 1932, entitled Zhongguo xin wenxue de yuanliu (Sources of New Chinese Literature) in which he traced the origins of modern propositions of “New Literature” to the late Ming and Qing “xingling” school as represented by three Yuan brothers, Yuan Zongdao, Yuan Hongdao (popularly known as Yuan Zhonglang, the most distinguished among the three) and Yuan Zhongdao of the “Gong’an school.” At the same time, Shen Qiwu compiled a companion book Jindai sanwen chao (A Selection of Essays of Recent Times) in which major writings of this “xingling” school, starting from the Yuan brothers to Jin Shengtan and Li Liweng, were represented. These literary moves by the so-called “Jingpai” (“Beijing school”) writers at the time were immediately echoed and promoted by Lin Yutang, then already a prominent writer in the Shanghai circle, so-called “Haipai” (Shanghai school). In the journals he launched in Shanghai, Lin wrote a number of essays, including “Lun wen” (On Literature), “Shuo ziwo” (On Self), “Ji xingling” (On “xingling”), “Xinjiu wenxue” (New and Old Literature), advocating “xingling” literature. And with his promotion, The Complete Works of Yuan Zhonglang was published in 1934, making “xingling” and Yuan Zhonglang suddenly the talk of the town, to the dislike of many, especially the Leftists.

The very translation of “xingling” into English, which James J. Y. Liu rendered as “native sensibility,” is an interpretive act itself, of which Lin Yutang’s effort will be the focus of our discussion here. But first, let us take a look at the theory of “xingling” according to Yuan Zhonglang in his historical context. Yuan’s literary theory, to schematize succinctly, comprises of mainly three elements: Historicity (shi),

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