CHAPTER SEVEN

COSMOPOLITAN DIFFERENCE: CRITIQUE OF IMPERIALISM AND DEBATING “CHINAHANDS”

What shocked me as a traveler is the existence of caste in a land dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Americans laugh at the hopeless ignorance of Hindus in their attitude toward untouchables. But if the white treatment of Negroes in America is not caste, I do not know what caste is.

Lin Yutang: “East and West Must Meet,” *Survey Graphic*, November, 1942

Liberty for Americans is their life blood, but for Chinese, what does it matter anyhow?…. [T]he consigning of 500 millions to totalitarian rule does not even arouse a ripple in their phlegm…. What I was going to say is that I have no country to return to. I suppose Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley think I am a fool not to jump into the communist heaven at this moment, in my own country.

Lin Yutang: Letter to Richard J. Walsh and Pearl S. Buck, September 2, 1949

To American public at large, Lin Yutang was most well-known as a wise and witty “Chinese philosopher” introducing Chinese cultural wisdom to America. The formation of this image of the “most cultured man” was partly due to the cross-cultural attraction of Lin’s aesthetics of life he constructed in his bilingual writings in Shanghai and perfected in his American bestsellers, and partly due to the collaborative making between Lin and his publisher/friend Richard Walsh, as we have discussed in the last two chapters. However, what is little emphasized concerning Lin’s public role in America, but is evident in his published works and highlighted in the unpublished correspondences between Lin and Walsh, is the fact that Lin was far from being a mere cultured world citizen removed from worldly politics, but rather engaged, even fiercely, in the cosmopolitan politics during the wartime 1940s. After Lin Yutang achieved his American success with his cultural bestsellers such as *My Country and My People* and *The Importance of Living*, he quickly turned his fame and status into use for political activism and became
outspoken on issues not just related to China but international relations in general. Lin frequently delivered public speeches on various occasions, appeared on radio talk shows, had interviews and participated in town hall meetings, and most importantly, contributed to various newspapers and magazines, in particular, *The New York Times*. It is in these miscellaneous essays, in addition to published books such as *Between Tears and Laughter*, *The Vigil of a Nation* and *Peace Is in the Heart*, that we see a passionately political Lin Yutang who takes his words and ideas quite enthusiastically.

Lin’s passion in world politics seems to be quite a contrast to his de-political stance towards national politics in the 1930s China, as discussed in Chapter Three. Now living in diaspora and writing for American and world audience, it seems that not only his cross-cultural aesthetics of life gained much wider appreciation and market, but his political enthusiasm was also aroused and rejuvenated. However, while Lin’s political black humor pleased neither the Left nor the Right in China in the 1930s, his cosmopolitan politics in America in the 1940s was also quite controversial, even to the extent that many of his views had to be (self-)censored.

Lin’s political passion during the wartime 1940s consists of two interrelated dimensions of liberal cosmopolitan practices: critique of Western imperialism and defense of liberalism in regards to American representation of China. Just like in the 1930s when Lin’s de-political attitude brought him criticism from both the Left and the Right, his cosmopolitan politics in the 1940s caught him in between again, except that this time his fight was on a different transnational scale. A critical examination of Lin Yutang’s cosmopolitan politics will show the other side of the liberal cosmopolitan problematic in Chinese modernity situated transnationally. Lin’s critique of Western imperialism on the one hand and his insistence on the equal application of liberal principles on the other demonstrate a unique intellectual disposition that poses new questions to the cultural politics of liberal cosmopolitan practices and constitutes a pioneering cosmopolitan critique of modernity at large.

**Diasporic Critique of Western Imperialism**

One year after Lin had arrived in America, an all-out War of Resistance against Japan broke out in 1937. It is quite understandable that Lin devoted his political passion in the ensuing years to explaining