



# “An Asian Type of Literature”

Translations of Classical Chinese Culture in Lin Yutang and Han Suyin's English Novels

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## “一类专属亚洲的文学”

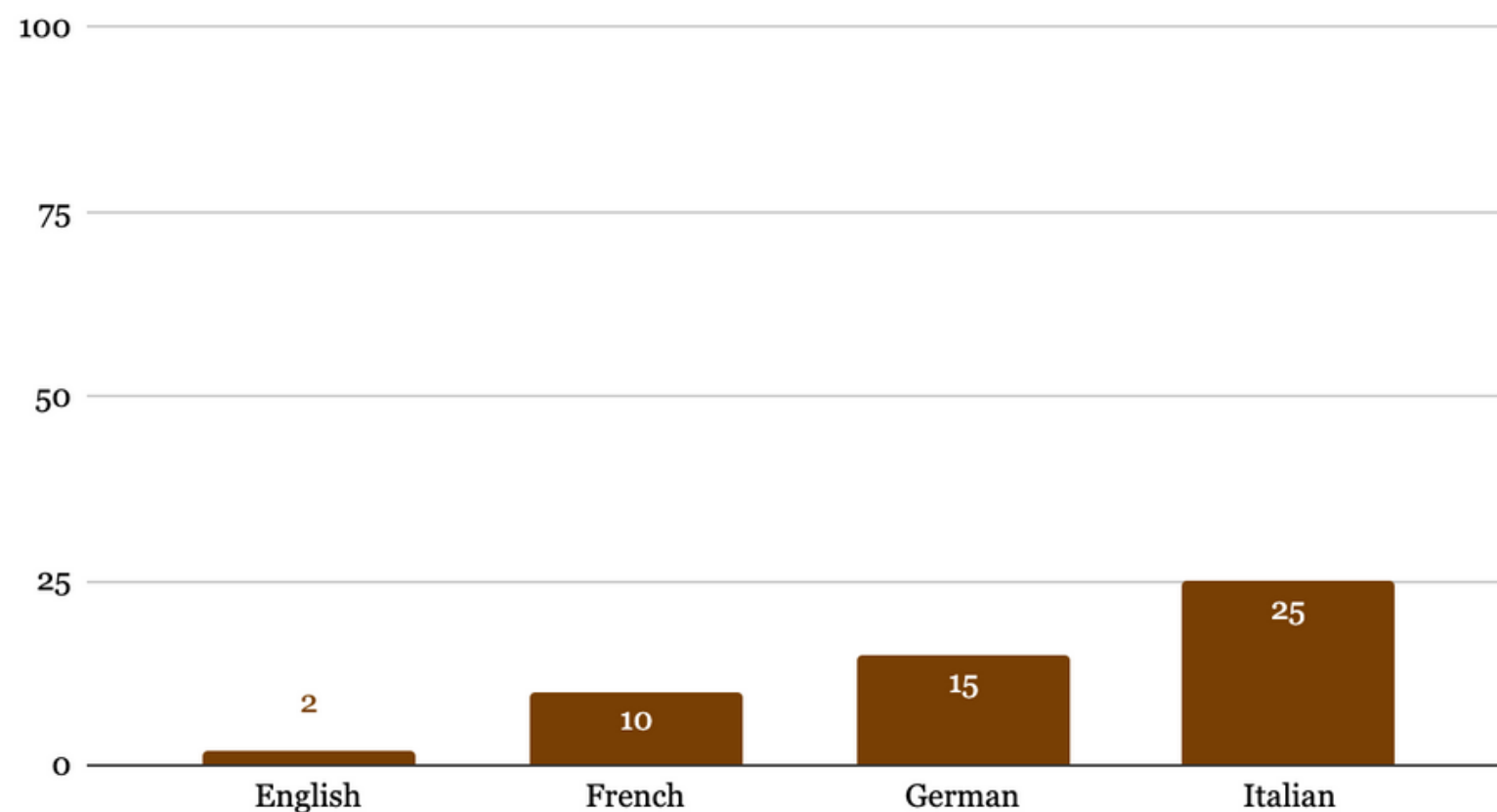
论林语堂与韩素音英语作品中的中国古典文化英译

# Chinese-English translation: an overview

The process of 西学东渐 (translating Western learning to the East) has not been replicated in the opposite direction, causing ‘an enormous translation deficit’ from Chinese to English (Xie 2008:26).

1

Translations as percentage of total publishing output



(Venuti 1996:328)

**The unique resistance of Anglophone literary culture to translated literature.**

2

There is a ‘**relative dearth**’ of English-native translators; meanwhile, ‘Chinese translators find themselves **unable to cope with Western demands** when performing cross-cultural translations’. (Cui 2021:220)

3

China **has not produced the same ‘rich crop of Anglophone writers’** as other regions of former British influence. (Forman 2013:12).

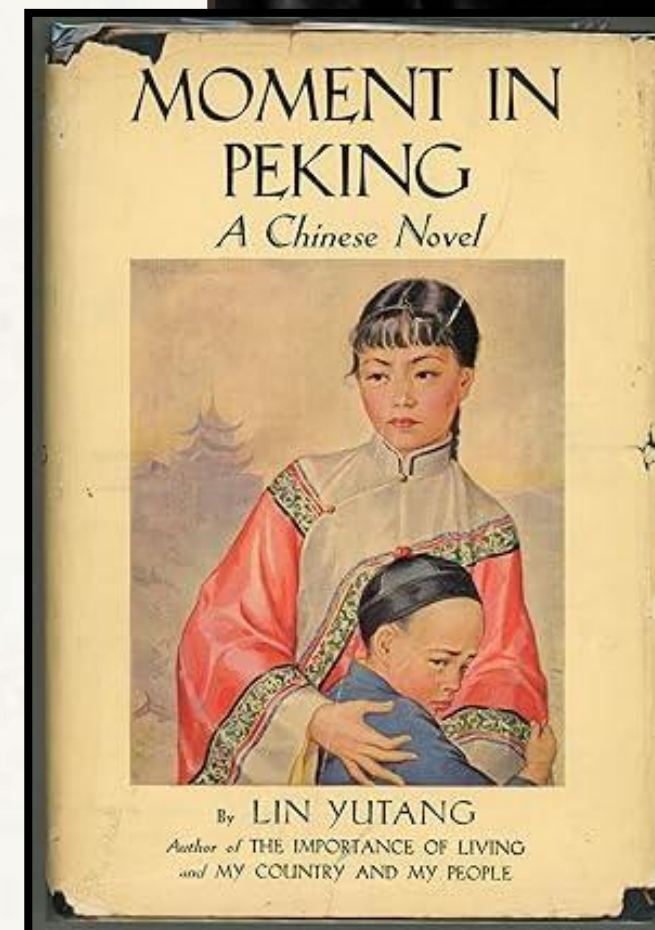
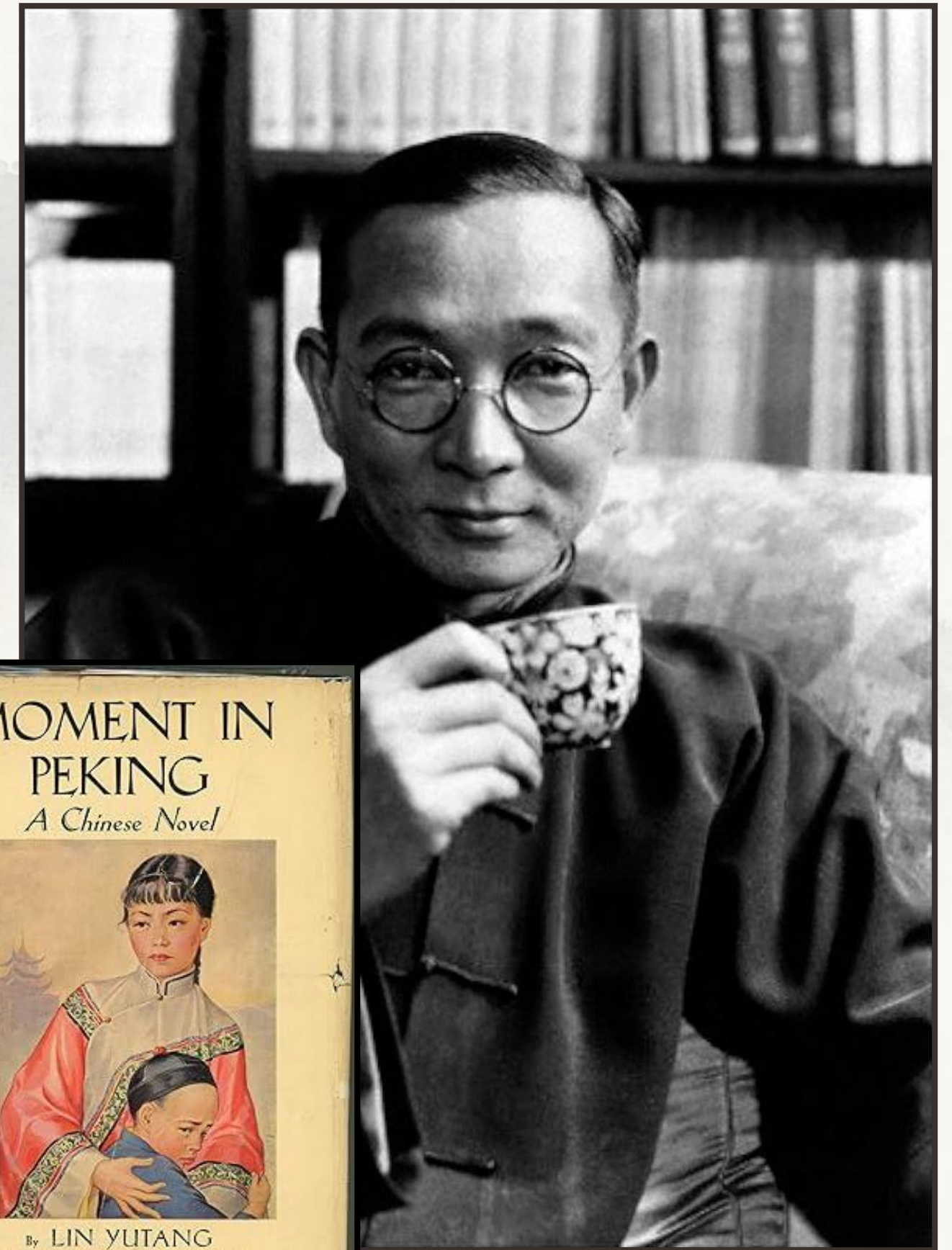
‘Anglophone writers of Chinese origin [...] have often had **limited experiences of life in China**’. (Zhuang 2021:201)



# Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895-1976)

An 'exemplary' Westernised intellectual (Qian 2011)

- Born to a Chinese Christian family in Fujian Province
- Educated in both Chinese and Western traditions
- Active in both the Chinese and Anglophone cultural spheres
- Achieved major success in the Anglosphere from the mid-1930s to mid-1940s
- ***Moment in Peking*** 《京华烟云》 (1939)





# Han Suyin 韩素音 (1917-2012)

An 'effective bicultural' (Zhuang, 2021)

- Born in China to a Chinese father and Belgian mother
- Most fluent in English, but also wrote in French
- Educated in England and Belgium
- One of the only 'Westerners' allowed into China throughout the Cultural Revolution
- Success in the Anglosphere beginning in 1952
- *A Many-Splendoured Thing* 《瑰宝》 (1952)



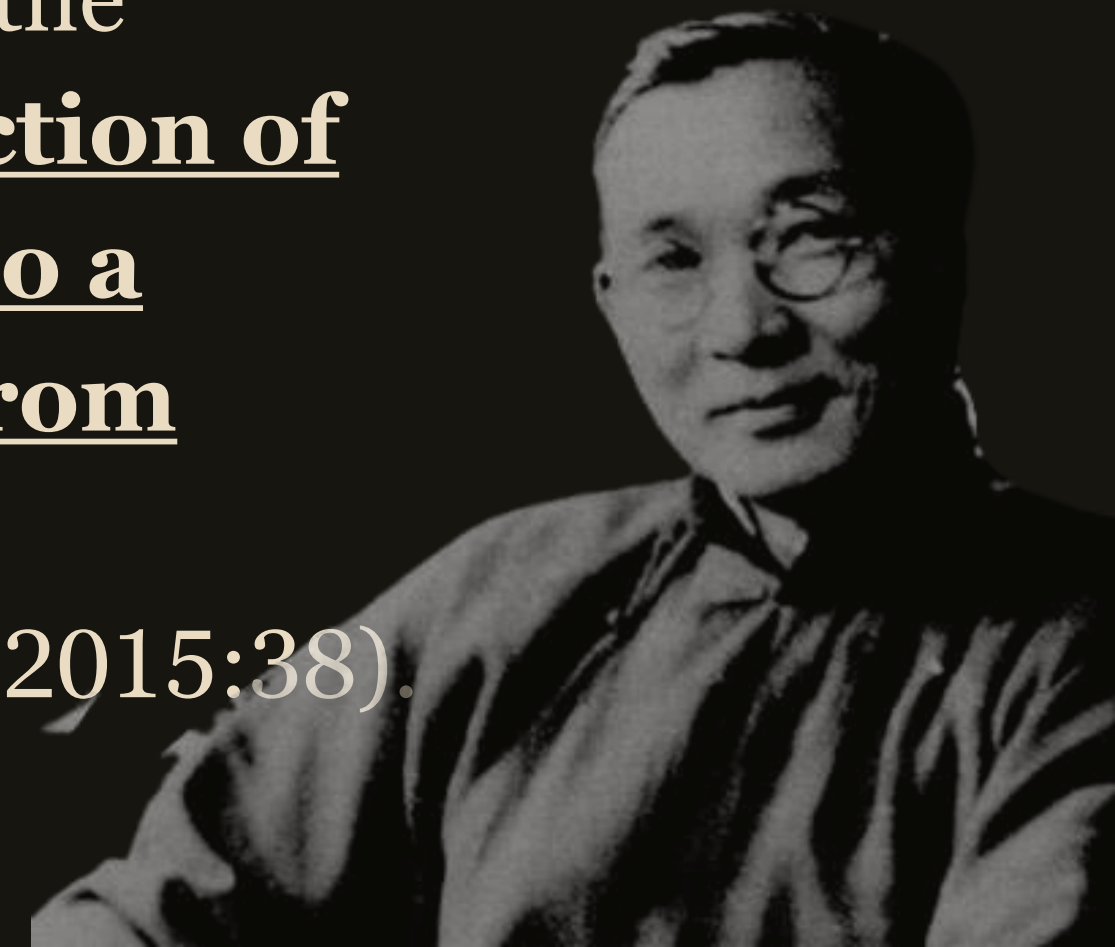
**‘In whose terms, for which linguistic constituency, and in the name of what kinds of knowledge’ are cross-cultural translations performed? (Liu 1995:2)**

**“One cannot write for a Western audience as one does for a Chinese one,”** I told her’.

(Han 1980:200)

‘Lin’s self-construction as a native informant to the Anglophone world [...] involved his **reconstruction of Chinese culture and tradition according to a certain vision that can be distinguished from other modern Chinese visions.**’

(Laughlin 2015:38).







# Domestication/Foreignisation: A Combined Strategy

Foreignisation ‘perform[s] a work of cultural restoration, **admitting the ethnodeviant and potentially revising literary canons** in the translating language’. (Venuti 2008:125)

## The advantages of foreignisation:

The Chinese language possesses a ‘concreteness of imagery and economy of syntactical relationships’: **‘There is no reason why a sentence like “He come, you no come; you come, he no come” should not be considered as clear as “You needn’t come, if he comes, and he needn’t come, if you come”.**

(Lin, *My Country and My People*, 1936:77)

## The advantages of domestication:

**‘The translations became ludicrous.**

For instance, the Chinese metaphor for integrity is “A well-formed bamboo in the chest”. This was translated exactly as it stood in Chinese! [...] **I took liberties in free interpretation’.**

(Han, *My House Has Two Doors* 1980:527)

**【胸有成竹】**



# Foreignisation in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*

Original	Domesticated translation	Han Suyin's translation
离恨恰如春草 更行更远还生  唐·李煜	The sorrow of separation is like the new grass of springtime; However distantly you wander, you find it growing still.  <i>Daniel Bryant, qtd. Zhuang 2021</i>	Oh, <b>smile</b> at <b>lovely sorrow</b> , <b>Fresh</b> as the <b>grass</b> of <b>spring</b> . Where <b>ever</b> my <b>feet wander</b> , <b>Still</b> the young <b>fields</b> are <b>green</b> .  <i>A Many-Splendoured Thing</i>

Chinese possesses a ‘**concreteness of imagery and economy of syntactical relationships**’ that Western literature would do well to emulate.

(Lin, *My Country and My People* 1936:77)



# Foreignisation in *Moment in Peking*

“I can prove that Confucius [ate crabs],” said  
Mulan [...]

“The *Thousand-Character Text* begins with the  
sentence ‘**Heaven Earth Black Yellow**’.

‘Black Yellow’ means the colour of the crab roe  
and membrane.”

“Where is your authority for ‘Black Yellow’ as  
referring to crab?”

Mulan replied at once, “Doesn’t the poem about  
the crab in the *Red Chamber Dream* say [...]

‘**The spring and autumn in its shell are  
black and yellow in vain?**’”



《千字文》 (*Thousand-Character Text*):  
“**天地玄黄**，宇宙洪荒”.

《红楼梦·螃蟹咏》 (“Ode to a Crab”):  
眼前道路无经纬，**皮里春秋空黑黄**”.

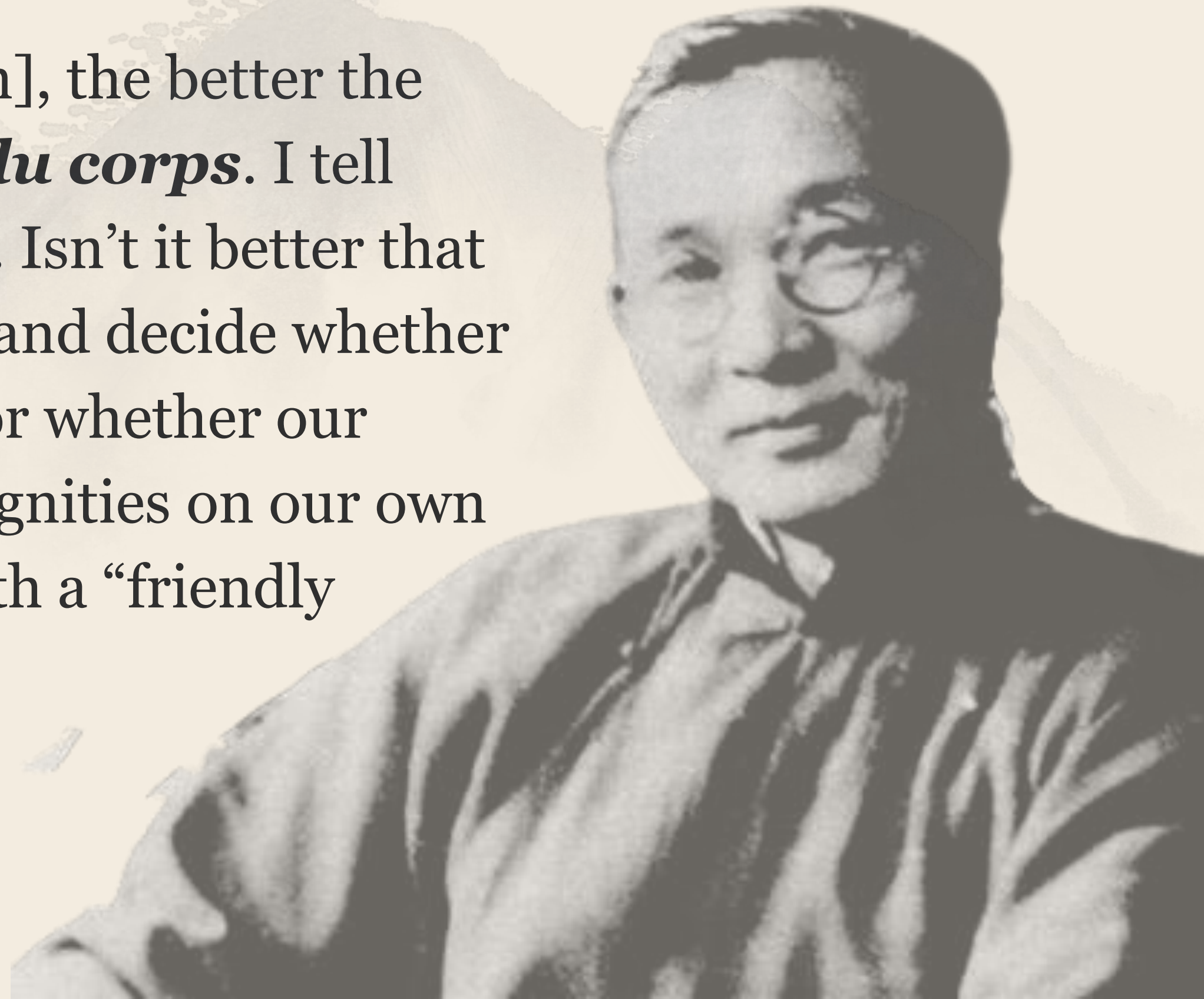
(Lin, *Moment in Peking* 1969:250-  
251)



## Domestication in Han and Lin

‘The worse it is for [Chinese women], the better the spirit of the men [...] their *esprit du corps*. I tell you, this state of things cannot last. Isn’t it better that China and Japan should fight now and decide whether or not we are to be a free country, or whether our women have to submit to such indignities on our own territory while China is at peace with a “friendly power”?’

(Lin, *Moment in Peking* 1969:714)





# Subliminal translation (Han)



I am forever conscious that my [Chinese] friends traverse the centuries [...] **They quote a philosopher of the Han dynasty; refer aptly to neat treachery performed twenty centuries ago; and all this in a way which does not occur in any other culture I know.** Allusion to the classics gives them an amplitude of examples’.

(Han, *My House Has Two Doors* 1980:119)

**‘Honeyed of mouth, and a knife in the bosom, I murmur enchanted approval’.**

(Han, *A Many-Splendoured Thing* 1952:334)

口蜜腹剑

‘Mouth honey, belly sword’

Used in the *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* (资治通鉴), a Northern Song text, to describe a ruthless Tang Dynasty official Li Linfu (李林甫)





# Subliminal translation (Lin)

‘She was **walking in the snow**, which was still falling in big flakes [...]

[S]he was **cold and afraid**, and thought she **would build a fire**. She found some straw on the ground, but could not find a match.

As she was wondering what to do, she heard a voice calling from outside. **She saw a girl in black, carrying a basket of charcoal and saying with a smile, “Mannia, look here, see what I have brought you.”**”

(Lin, *Moment in Peking* 1969:110)



## 雪中送炭

‘Bringing charcoal in the snow’  
From a Song dynasty poem by  
Fan Cheng (范成)

# ‘An Asian Type of Literature’: born-translated writing

‘It is rather frightening, to have so many **dissimilar and equally compelling** emotions, affections, ideas, élans, apprehensions [...] Other people are faced with a choice between two courses of action. I am usually **torn between at least two worlds**, involving different ways of existence’.

(Han, *A Many-Splendoured Thing* 1952:130)

‘Born-translated’ works ‘present translation as a spur to literary innovation, including their own’. They show that ‘**[t]ranslation is the engine rather than the caboose of literary history**’.

(Walkowitz, 2015:5)



**‘In whose terms, for which linguistic constituency, and in the name of what kinds of knowledge’ are cross-cultural translations performed?**

**(Liu 1995:2)**

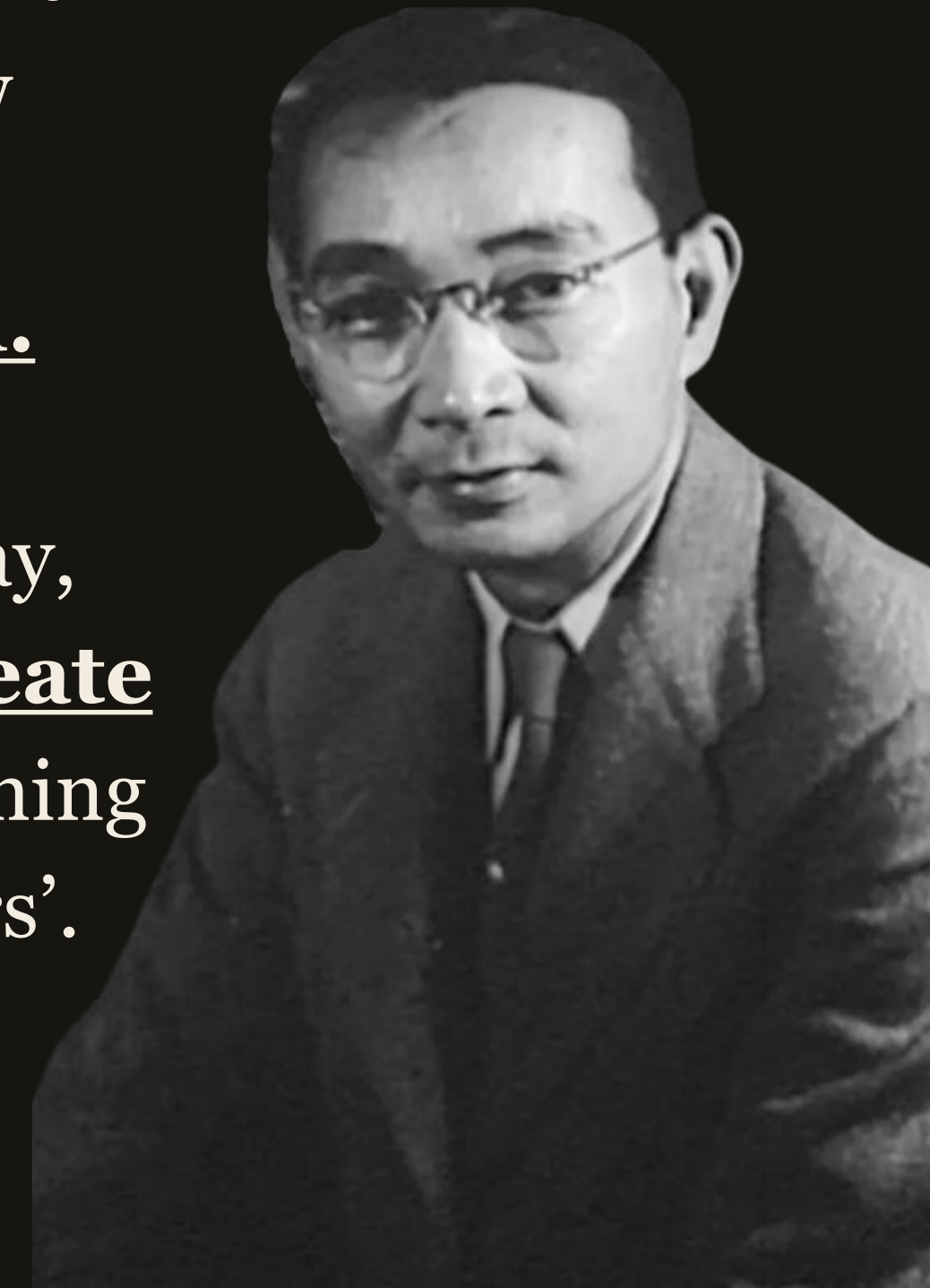
‘[Lin Yutang] asked me to be Professor of English Literature. I shook my head. I did not know anything about English literature.

**“But you write English,” he exclaimed.**

**“Not English literature.”**

I did not want to teach Dickens and Thackeray, worthy though they might be [...] **we must create an Asian type of literature**; we need something other than nineteenth-century English writers’.

*(Han, My House Has Two Doors 1980:90)*







# Citations



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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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