

## *Original Paper*

# A Study of the Chinese Cultural Image of *Young Fu of the*

## *Upper Yangtze*

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### **Abstracts**

*At the beginning of the 20th century, an American boy arriving in China for the first time views Chinese social phenomena through the lens of American individual heroism, which leads to both conflict and fusion of ideas. After an in-depth understanding of China, there is both praise for the excellent traditional Chinese thought such as Chinese traditional humanistic thought, and a one-sided understanding of the image of Chinese women and Chinese religious culture. The author's task is to explore in detail the American's understanding of Chinese cultural thought in *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*, hoping to help more foreigners reshape the image of China.*

### **Keywords**

*Confucianism, American individual heroism, *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*, Chinese images, humanistic thought, feminism*

### **1. Introduction**

Elizabeth Louisa, an American writer that used to live in China for many years, was sent to China in 1917 by the Board of Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church for Women because of her interest in Chinese culture at an early age. Set in Chongqing, where she lived, Louisa wrote *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*, which won the Newbery Medal for Children's Literature in 1933.

Although the 20th century was quite primitive in China's certain social development, it was also the pinnacle of a genuine examination of Chinese culture and a voyage inside the country from a Western

perspective. Through her own experiences, Louisa employs a western perspective and writing style to vividly depict the character traits of Chinese people in the early 20th century and the traditional humanistic spirit of China. She also showcases the destiny of a young man in the turmoil of the world. *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* creates a vivid and cubic character through descriptions of language, behavior, and psychology. The main character, Fu, an adventurous American boy, undergoes the trials and tribulations of China's changing times within the historical context. Under the careful guidance of his elders, he gradually comes to understand China's excellent traditional thinking, becomes mature and steady, and realizes the fusion of Chinese and American ideas.

This work holds high research value through presenting Chinese traditional thoughts and cultures. On the one hand, it facilitates the West's understanding and comprehension of China's traditional culture and Chinese humanistic thoughts and plays a crucial role in shaping China's international image. On the other, due to the author's American identity and her own life experiences, it seems difficult for her to escape the different perspectives influenced by her own culture during the process of characterization and subjective comments on the characters. The author's view of Chinese culture is both objective and biased to certain extent. While praising Chinese humanistic thoughts, the author also exhibits partial, single perspective towards the portrayal of Chinese women and misunderstandings of some aspects of traditional Chinese culture.

The international study on *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* has been analyzed by Constable Nicole in "Born out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor" from the perspective of children's literature. However, it has not yet received much concentrated attention in terms of portraying China. Therefore, through a comparative perspective, the writer of this paper aims to interpret the image-making of China from the western perspective, aiming to help Western readers observe the image of China more objectively and understand Chinese culture from a neutral stance.

## **2. Western Cultural Prejudice against China**

### *2.1 Bias of Chinese Women*

In the narrative, Chinese women are conventionally perceived as possessing feudal and ignorant traits. Nevertheless, it is an extreme and generalized perspective to assert that all Chinese women possess these characteristics. Furthermore, the diversity of the factors contributing to the formation of such personalities gives rise to contradictions and complexity in the portrayal of Chinese women.

The western perception of Chinese mothers seems rather incomplete. They merely observe the stubbornness, ignorance, and backwardness of Chinese mothers, without being capable of comprehending the image of Chinese mothers at a profound level. Both Mother Fu and Mother Li seemingly exhibit a strong inclination to control their children's lives from birth to death. They are resolute individuals that genuinely love their children but frequently become obsessed with imposing their notions upon them. There exists a rational basis for this: Chinese mothers emphasize dedication

and are perpetually inclined to be concerned about their children's lives. In China, where collectivism is emphasized, mothers do not merely assume a vertical ethical role within the relatively private domain of the family. Rather, they possess more of a horizontal socio—cultural symbolic function that extends from the private to the public sphere. Consequently, mothers consciously expand their maternal virtues and abandon their identities as human beings or women, thereby establishing the moral standard of “motherhood”. In contrast, those in the West, who advocate individualism, are unable to fathom the behavior of Chinese mothers. Judging the actions of Chinese mothers through their individualistic mindset will give rise to a skewed understanding of Chinese women in the Western world.

In the modern era, Chinese women's characterization has demonstrated a wide range of diversity over time. For instance, Pearl S. Buck, a representative female writer who also depicted Chinese stories, portrayed a more multifaceted image of the mother. “Mrs. Wu, the mother in *Pavilion of Women*, has a double role in their destiny tied to the feudal family, that of the female head of the family with a dual role of subordination and subjectivity” (Zeng, 2006, p. 126). Furthermore, with regard to the typical portrayal of female characters from the northeastern region, Hong Xiao, one of the representative writers in contemporary Chinese literature, merits readers' attention for her incisive and vivid depictions of empathetic women in succession. Due to Chinese feudalism, Chinese mothers tend to be ignorant and backward, but their personalities are unique due to their varied origins and individual characteristics. Chinese ladies are therefore multifaceted. They cannot be categorized according to a certain standard or explained in a single language.

## 2.2 Bias of Chinese Traditional Beliefs

Conventionally, Chinese do not believe in Christianity, but they do have their own unique beliefs. In the novel, the American missionary Arthur Smith came to China, commenting that Chinese people believed in a certain God, but with time gradually fading away, Chinese people would believe in their ancestors and build sacred temples for them; the missionary also said that the Chinese people would worship the power of nature and the traditional religion had always been produced by the Chinese native Confucianism and Taoism etc. Westerners often refer to our religion as “superstition”, however, which is actually due to the different attitudes towards religion in China and the West (Smith, 2010, pp. 155-168). In the West, religion is the core of culture, highlighting the dominant influence in society.

The author believes that two leading factors affect China's view of religion: the relationship between imperial power and religion and the other between the individual and religion. As early as the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Periods, “the nature worship of primitive religions was endowed with a patriarchal hierarchy, forming a god worship directly held by the state, ancestor worship as the core of the patriarchal state religion” (Mou & Zhang, 2015), which explains the former type of relationship. The idea that “Throughout the history of religious development in China, it is an interpretation of the lifestyle and values of the ancient Chinese people” (Li, 2020) explains the latter.

Traditional Chinese religions such as Confucianism and Taoism are both a means of imperial rule and a code of behavior that the people believed in. For example, Chinese people go to Taoist temples to burn incense and kneel to worship the gods and goddesses, praying not only for blessings, but also for a kind of spirit, which comes from their deeds of saving lives and caring for the people, especially Confucianism's sacrifices are out of the purpose of honoring virtue and rewarding merit, and those who are worshiped by the gods should be meritorious. finally, China emphasizes much more humanistic religions, which include "the Divine Principle and human feelings; communication with God through feelings; the interplay of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; and the use of diffuse religions" (Li, 2020), which emphasizes on the cultivation of one's physical body and establishment of morality, mentioned that "a gentleman respects his moral character" (Xun, 2011, p. 270) in Xunzi. It is mentioned that "a gentleman honors those who are in himself and does not admire those who are in heaven", and that people should not rely too much on the gods, but they need to cultivate their virtues through their efforts.

Westerners also hold the ambivalent attitudes toward Chinese Fengshui. In this novel, though Fu lives in a feudal and superstitious environment yet he lacks a judgmental standard. In rural China at that time, science was not part of the Chinese mindset. Almost everyone believes in the existence of the Dragon King, the Fire Dragon King, and the God of Plague, and however, for which Fu is indifferent to totally. When the old lady tells Fu that snow is the breath of the Dragon King and that selling it will offend the Dragon King, he still collects the snow and sells it at the market to pay off his debt. From this, we can see that Fu understands the meaning of "snow is an omen of a good year". Thus, he can accept the positive connotations of superstition but will also break through the limitations of feudal superstition for certain benefits.

The core content of Feng Shui is a kind of knowledge and paradigm for people to select and handle the living environment. It is also an ancient culture within the traditional Chinese cultural system, serving as a means of communication between humans and the environment and harmonizing the relationship between humans and buildings (Guan, 2017, p. 17). Though Chester Holcombe said that "darkness and ignorance are important components of Chinese superstitions" (Holcombe, 2014, Chapter IX), nowadays in the 21st century, Bill Gates needed to ask a fengshui master to take a look at his surroundings when he comes to China to choose a hotel before he stays there. Chinese people's faith goes with a kind of emotion or wish, through which they express their gratitude and admiration for great heroes; because it is impossible to explain natural phenomena in science, they tend to summarize the experience according to the circumstance they live in, and then pass it down from generation to generation. In conclusion, Chinese beliefs are not baseless superstitions, but some are based on humanistic ideas and geographical factors.

### 2.3 Bias of Chinese Braid

The braid, known as “pigtail” to westerners, symbolizes the ideological and political changes in China. In *this novel*, after the 1911 Revolution, men no longer wore pigtails. However, there was a rag picker who wore a fake pigtail. His fake braid was jokingly torn in two by passers-by in public, which made him feel extremely ashamed. The “pigtail” was something disliked by both parties. In the end, the rag picker put the pigtail back on his head. Judging from the passers-by’s jokes about the braid and the rag picker’s feelings of shame and embarrassment, we can analyze that the author also “despises” the Chinese “braid”. Simultaneously, the author is also puzzled by the rag picker’s behavior. During this period, Chinese people’s attitudes towards the braid were diverse. Some loathed the braid as an old-fashioned thing, and some still guarded it. This requires analyzing the close relationship between politics and beliefs. The first lies in the politics of the body, for “the body is entering into a mechanism of power that probes it, breaks it, and reprograms it”. “Discipline then creates tamed, trained flesh, tame flesh” “The issue of hair braids” condensed the Qing government’s physical control over its subjects (Tan, 2008, p. 12).

In terms of cultural thought, hair is a symbol of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness. Newly married couples have a ceremony to tie their temples together, in which the couple sits side by side and takes a strand of hair from each of them and ties it together, thus becoming a “married couple”; in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in the episode of “Kong Ming waving his tears to chop off Ma Su, Zhou Bream breaking his hair to earn Cao Huo” (Luo, 2019, p. 793); and in *Classic of Filial Piety*, it is said that “the body’s hair and skin are the recipients of one’s parents’ love, and one should not dare to destroy them” (Kong, 2016, Chapter I), all of which reflect the close connection between hair and one’s character. In the thousand-year history of China, “hair” has served as a cultural symbol with many meanings, but its symbolism has always been limited to the social and cultural fields and lacked a political nature. It was not until the Manchus entered the country that “hair braid” was gradually given the symbolism of a political symbol and brought into the political realm during the Manchus’ conquest of the Ming Dynasty (Tan, 2008, p. 12). When deeply influenced by feudal politics, a sudden change was difficult, and those who were revamped by new ideas despised the old guard.

## 3. Chinese Culture Appreciated by the West

Regarding the excellent Chinese ideas, “filial piety”, “propriety” and “harmony” are the most prominent Chinese ideas in *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*.

### 3.1 “Filial Piety”

The filial piety embodied in *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* includes Young Fu’s sensible filial piety to his mother and Young Li’s foolish filial piety to his mother. The author’s attitude in the face of Chinese filial piety is filial piety respect for one’s parents and opposition to foolish filial piety. In the *Book of Rites*, it is said, “There are three kinds of filial piety: the first is to honor one’s parents; the second is to

avoid insulting them; and the second is to be able to raise them” (Hu & Zhang, 2022, Chapter 24). Great filial piety is to allow parents to be honored by society. “The next level of filial piety is not to let one’s parents be humiliated by society”. The next level of filial piety is not to let your parents be humiliated by society (Lou, 2016).

### 3.2 “Rites”

In the novel, the author also attaches great importance to traditional Chinese etiquettes, especially the distinct teacher-student relationship. “Rites” in Confucian culture includes at least six different meanings: ethical Principle, culture, rite and ceremony, courtesy and etiquette, institution, and code, generally refers to a variety of already institutionalized and standardized behavioral norms to show the nature of dignity. From ancient times to the present, the Chinese people will often through rite and ceremony, judge a person’s comprehensive quality. Often a well-educated person cares a lot about them.

First of all, In the process of Young Fu and his mother getting along with Scholar Wang, Young Fu’s mother is extremely grateful to him. Although the family is not financially prosperous, she still presents some gifts to the teacher to express her gratitude for teaching her son. Moreover, Young Fu’s mother will also specifically admonish Young Fu to be careful not to disturb Scholar Wang. As a result, Young Fu has never been to the second floor of Wang’s house without his consent. Finally, when Young Fu is about to leave, he says respectfully to Scholar Wang, “I will never forget your great kindness, sir”. Scholar Wang is not only an elder to Fu but also his teacher. Ultimately, Fu’s words manifest his gratitude and his understanding of Chinese etiquette.

Improve and observe the rules of the system with courtesy. *Confucius* mentions that “but it will not to observe propriety without the regulation of the rites” (Kong & Xu, 2019). According to *Xunzi*, “The first king was evil of the chaos, so he made the rites and righteousness to divide it, to nourish people’s desires and give them what they wanted, so that the desires would not be exhausted by the things and the things would not be bent by the desires, and the two would be held together and grow, and that was the origin of the rites” (Xun, 2011, p. 117). Rites are used to control human desires and to restrain human behavior. The task of rites is to “equalize the noble and the lowly, the long and the young, the rich and the poor, and the light and the heavy” (Sima, 2008). The distinction between honor and inferiority, as well as between the young and the old, provides different people with something to abide by. This is not a class division but a means of seeking harmony among others. This is something that Western society strongly opposes. In Western society, there is a prevailing attitude of “self-centeredness”, which emphasizes that “people must work hard and compete with others to earn more money and gain a respectable position in society” (Heard, 1990). But the American author of *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* expresses her admiration for “Rites” through Fu’s growing experience and his characteristics development.

### 3.3 “Harmony”

“Harmony” represents the overall harmony that does not advocate confrontation division and violence. Instead, it advocates “holistic thinking and dynamic balance” as the Chinese concept that the author admires the most.

There are three principles of “harmony”. Firstly, it emphasizes the harmony amid differences. According to *Confucius*, “A gentleman is harmonious but different; a petty man is the same but not harmonious” (Kong, 2019). Everyone has a different personality and way of doing things. As we live in the same society, what people need to do is to recognize these differences. Fu was initially impetuous. Through getting along with Scholar Wang and working in the copper store for some time, Fu gradually understood the meaning of “harmony”. Every time Fu argued with Deng, it was over some minor matter of prejudice, and he would engage in a full-blown dispute with the other side over the entire issue of right and wrong. Moreover, when faced with the suspicion of the people in the copper store, young Fu was eager to prove himself and was very impatient. However, when he won the argument, he felt that no matter how much frustration he encountered in the future, the victory would be a comfort to him. When he told Scholar Wang about these things, the scholar told him that one should be tolerant. That is “harmony”.

Secondly, the principle of moderation avoids the excesses and biases. By understanding the actual situation of things and the relationship of each part, we can follow Cheng Zi’s words: “There is nothing wrong with everything, but the Divine Principle. The middle is only the middle”. “There is nothing better than the middle”. From a global perspective, it is fair and impartial; from a local perspective, it is fair to every part of the business. Boss Tang in the story has the traditional idea of moderation. In the face of the betrayal of the shopkeeper, Tang did not fly into a rage nor resort to violence to vent his anger. Instead, he still paid the accountant his wages. Although the accountant had betrayed Tang, he had once benefited Tang. Therefore, Tang did not need to take a radical approach to get rid of the accountant. In the process of uncovering the mole, Tang first pretends to be completely unaware. Then, he suspects young Fu, so that the mole will relax his vigilance and make more mistakes. Then, Tang and the other shopkeepers work together to collect evidence and the mole will be arrested. “Put the hook to catch the big fish”. We should consider problems from an overall macro perspective, not be anxious about immediate results, but calmly think about countermeasures. The author admires the Chinese idea of “harmony”. Through her portrayal of Tang, Tang achieves success in his career and respect in interpersonal relationships. “Harmony” is tolerance, calmness, and helps people to make space with each other when dealing with interpersonal communication, without bias or prejudice.

## 4. Fu Achieving the Integration of Chinese and American Cultures

At the end of the story, the lyrics from Chinese poem “One must first scale the mountain to view the plain” (Du) is cited, which indicates not only Fu’s career success but also the maturity of his thinking.

It is a perfect combination of Chinese and American thoughts. Fu possesses not only the American spirit of resistance and adventure but also the traditional Chinese humanism and the doctrine of the mean, thus realizing the seamless fusion of Chinese and American ideas.

#### *4.1 The Embodiment of American Individual Heroism*

First of all, for Fu, the most prominent trait is the spirit of resistance within him. He does not wish to be confined by the world. As early as in ancient Greece, Westerners embarked on the pursuit of power, truth, and freedom. Socrates, for instance, was willing to oppose the world for the truth he sought. Throughout history, such thoughts and aspirations gradually transformed into a sense of resistance.

At that time, most Chinese regarded foreigners with contempt due to their strange clothing, appearances, and disregard for Chinese etiquettes. As mentioned in the book *Chinese Characteristics*: “China was surrounded by very weak neighbors and perpetually enjoyed a most dangerous form of flattery as a matter of course. They have discovered that a combination of cajoling and threatening softness can lead foreigners to submit to their will, which reinforces the Chinese people’s unspeakable sense of national superiority” (Lou, 2014). In contrast, Fu is curious about foreigners and is not prejudiced against them because of what others say. He is even willing to take the initiative to break feudal superstition to help put out the fire at the foreign hospital. While his mother tries to prevent him from going to the fire scene to avoid getting into trouble, Young Fu is resolute in going to watch the fire. This is a form of rebellion against the world. In the matters of right and wrong, one needs to judge for oneself, and nothing can stop the determination to explore the facts.

Second goes to the spirit of adventure that exists in Chinese culture. Young Fu is always curious about the surrounding issues and aims to try them out. It is due to his curiosity and bravery that he finds the drug dealer who framed Lu. However, he is also deceived by a gambler because of his curiosity. Although the results of these events are both good and bad, they are all growth experiences for Young Fu. With his freedom and dreams as the premise and foundation, he is not intimidated by external factors and uses his courage to defend his rights. Young Fu has made many mistakes and has been cheated many times. It is these mistakes that make him mature and stable. Only by having the courage to try and challenge can one grow.

#### *4.2 Analysis of the Formation of the Humanistic Spirit of Fu*

Lou Yulie once said, “Humanistic spirit is the most distinctive feature of traditional Chinese culture, and it has two prominent features: firstly, it focuses on the spiritual life of human beings, so that they are not subject to the domination of gods and objects, and highlights the self-worth of human beings; secondly, it emphasizes on the rites and music of indoctrination, and humanistic education, and opposes the suppression of force and power. The concept of ‘people-oriented’ is the core of humanism, and the idea of ‘unity of heaven and man’ embodies its essence”.

First and foremost, humanism is an inward, or “qualitative” development. As early as the Spring and Autumn Period, Confucius and his student Zi Xia explored the Poetry Classic, which says, “Ah! Dark



on white her speaking eyes, Her cheeks with smiles and dimples glow. Colored designs are made on plain silk” (Kong & Xu, 2019) meaning that a beautiful girl is not only pretty. It means that a beautiful girl not only possesses a taking smile and eyes but also has a kind nature. Even if she wears plain clothes, she can still be beautiful and touching. Humanism emphasizes refining self-worth from within. When Fu came to Chongqing from the countryside, everyone said that he looked rustic and was simply dressed, appearing unattractive. This is also a temperament formed from within. As he spends more time in contact with the nature of the land and less time in contact with culture and society, he develops a simple yet somewhat rough character. When Scholar Wang asks why Fu wants to learn to write, Fu replies that it is to get rich and not be bullied by others. However, Scholar Wang tells him that if people only think about getting rich, they will become stupid. After that, in his relationship with Scholar Wang, Fu does not mention many humanistic principles such as “At the beginning of man, nature is good”, “Be benevolent and righteous” and “Everyone has their own merits”. In the future, Fu gradually notices these truths and slowly becomes more tolerant towards others. These internal changes make Fu appear mature and stable. “People-oriented” (Human interest, development as a goal, focusing on human life and values). It is said in the *Book of Document*: “But heaven and earth are the mother of all things, and man is the spirit of all things” (Philosophers before the duration of Qin Dynasty, 2024). Man is the most spiritual in this world. In *The Character of Chinese People*, Lou Yulie summarized Xunzi’s words, “Man has a layer of ethical relationship such as etiquette, integrity, shame. And this concern establishes that people have their different statuses and divisions of labor, and so they can form an effective group that can exert collective power” (Lou, 2014).

There are diverse elements in nature that give rise to various natural disasters. Floods and fires are mentioned from time to time. Before Fu appeared, both of them brought harm to the world. However, when Fu goes to extinguish the fire and save the old couple living by the river, he is successful in both endeavors. When confronted with the raging waves, he can calmly recall that there is a high ground by the Jialing River next to the foreigner’s hospital where he had been, and he can take refuge there. When facing a fire, he can skillfully and quickly climb up to the roof and precisely smash the fire with tiles because his mother used to let him climb walls when he was a child due to household chores. Fu realizes his familiarity with geography and mastery of climbing techniques through his own experiences, which are influenced by others. “The unity of heaven and man”. Heaven refers to the heaven of nature, in contrast to the earth. It includes the things that exist between heaven and earth, the change and development of all things in heaven and earth, the universe that transcends all things in heaven and earth, and the existence that transcends the imagination (Xu, 2023, p. 92).

Man exists between heaven and earth and among all things. Regarding the relationship between man and nature, Marx once divided the view of nature into self-existing nature and humanized nature. The former, self-existing nature, refers to the nature that existed before the emergence of human power. Humanized nature, on the other hand, refers to the nature that has been marked by human beings in the

temporal activities of utilizing and transforming nature for the sake of their survival and development (Zhao & Zhang, 2023, p. 68). There are all kinds of environments in which human beings live, and human beings make use of these elements to better serve themselves.

In ancient China, when humans sought objects from nature, they would inform the heaven in the way to obtain heavenly approval, which gave rise to sacrifices. In many traditional Chinese superstitions, the fire dragon king and floods that appear in novels are hints from the heavens to humanity. However, as people live in this world for an increasingly long time, they gradually discover the mode of coexisting with nature. They build their own homes relying on mountainous terrains, utilize fire remnants to smelt ironware, and even make pottery. Only by living in harmony with nature can we achieve balance and realize the unity of heaven and man.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper conducts an in-depth analysis of *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* and employs comparative analysis to assist western readers in reshaping China as international image. Firstly, it examines the author's incomplete understanding of Chinese culture, the homogenization of women's images, the polarization of Chinese beliefs, and the prejudice against certain aspects of Chinese traditional culture, such as the braid. Secondly, it analyzes the excellent traditional Chinese culture praised in the work, which enables Western readers to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese Confucianism. Finally, the growth of the main character also symbolizes the effective combination of Chinese and American spirituality. This combination is of great significance in promoting cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries.

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