The Translator Who Knew No English
—Lin Shu

I *A Contemporary Appraisal of Lin Shu*

by Cheng Chen-to (鄭振鐸)

OVER THE past thirty to forty years Mr. Lin Ch'in-nan had won great fame as a translator and writer of classical prose. Just after the European War,[1] when a newly-enlightened intelligentsia in China was ferociously attacking traditional culture and literature, Lin, then residing in Peking, expressed vehement views to the contrary. He thus came to be considered the foremost defender of an antiquated tradition. Many denounced his position on morality, on the classical literary style and on translation, pointing out his many mistakes and hoping to oust his reactionary influence from these fields. To the young generation it seemed that after this battle Lin had entirely lost his place in Chinese literature. But his views is one thing and his literary achievement is another. It would not be fair if we denied his position in literature and the value of his lifetime's work altogether, just because of the conservative views that he held at one time....

AN APPRAISAL of Lin Ch'in-nan the scholar must begin with Lin Ch'in-nan the man. His name was Shu and he styled himself 冷紅生 (Cold Crimson Scholar).[2] A native of Fukien from the county of Min, he was born in 1852 (the second year in the Hsien-feng period of Emperor Wen-tsung of the Ch'ing dynasty), and lived to the age of 73. In an apt description of himself, he said that "he came from a poor family and had an unattractive face, on top of which he was stiff-mannered, strong-willed and easily-provoked." (From "Life of Cold Crimson Scholar", collected in畏廬文集, *Writings of Wei-lu*.) Most associates knew of this uncompomising, irritable bent in his character, and many were estranged from him because of it, but though his frequent reproaches often annoyed people, when they were in need he would do all he could to help them out of their difficulties. His warm and passionate nature can be seen not only in this respect, but in almost everything else throughout his life.

In his writings, as well as in the prefaces he wrote to his translations, Lin was free in making very passionate statements. In the Preface to 不如歸 (*Better Come Home*)[3] he wrote: "Having finish-

Part I of this article is translated by Diana Yu from a tribute to Lin Shu written by Cheng Chen-to, editor, literary historian and bibliophile. The article, originally published a month after Lin's death on Oct. 9, 1924, is collected in 中國文學研究 (*Studies in Chinese Literature*), vol. III. See Footnote no. 7, in Ch'ien Chung-shu's article on page 00 of this issue. The footnotes to this translation are added by the Editor.

[1]World War I, 1914-1918.

[2]Lin Shu's *hao* was Wei-lu 畏廬. Some of the other names with which he signed his writings and paintings were Ch'un-chueh chai 春覺齋, Li Sou 蠡叟, and Chien-cho Weng 踐卓翁. After his death, his disciples gave him the posthumous title of Chen Wen 貞文.

[3]A Japanese novel of the War of 1894-95, in which China suffered a humiliating defeat in the hands of her island neighbor, written by Kenjiro Tokutomi 德富建次郎 and translated by Lin Shu and Wei Yi from an English version. The original title *Hototogishu*—in Chinese *pu-ju-kuei*—denotes the cuckoo, so named because of the bird's characteristic call.

ed translating this book, I am burdened with a great agitation which I must now vent before my honourable countrymen.... If, after that disastrous defeat, our remnant forces could have been rounded up and trained to serve as instructors for the novices, and if we could have established navy schools far and near to educate the intelligent and brave, then even if we could not manage to raise a fleet, we would have nurtured a rising generation that would be capable of serving as leaders of a navy. Those who have not gone through defeat will never learn what caused it. When we have understood the causes, and reformed and improved ourselves, then shall we be able to hold ourselves strong against the enemy.... I am ageing and will not see the day when I can repay my country. So I persist daily, as the chanticleer that hails the dawn, to remind my compatriots to be alert. And forever in the prefaces of these fictitious tales I open up my heart."

From many such writings we see his fervent patriotism. Nor was such passion diminished even when he attained the advanced age of seventy. He was also an upright and uncorrupted man. After having acquired the *chü-jen* degree in 1882, he abandoned the examination career altogether and devoted his effort to the study of classical prose. He worked first as a teacher in Peking, in such places as the Capital Academy (京師學堂) and the Min Academy (閩學堂). Later, quite by chance, he produced a translation of Dumas *fils' La Dame aux Camélias*, which won him the praise of countless people. This greatly aroused his interest in translating books. From then on he translated numerous works from European authors—mostly French and English—and translation fees became his main source of income. He did not know any foreign language, and depended on a co-translator familiar with the original language to provide him with an orally interpreted version, which he wrote down in Chinese. He was a very fast writer; according to himself, he worked four hours a day at the speed of 1,500 Chinese characters per hour. Oftentimes, he would complete his written translation even before his co-translator finished recounting a passage. Errors were quite common in his translations. He himself said, "Writing done in such haste cannot be free of errors. Lately good friends have written to me and pointed out the faults in my work, and I am extremely grateful. Not being conversant with any Western language, I could only narrate in writing [what was related to me orally]; if I committed errors, it was all out of ignorance."[4] (From Preface to 西利亞郡主別傳, the translation of which was published in 1908.)

LIN SHU *at the age of fifty-eight: brush and ink portrait taken from* Writings of Wei-lu (畏廬文集), *Commercial Press, Shanghai, 1913.*

Lin's ignorance of foreign languages was his greatest weakness, and probably most of the errors in his translations are attributable to the collaborators who interpreted for him. In his old age he lived on translating books as well as on selling his own paintings. Some have given a higher rating to his paintings than his classical prose. At seventy he still painted away for six or seven hours a day at his painter's desk. The fact is, he was a most industrious and honest man, who never took anything for which he did not work or reaped any undue reward, even though he counted many high and mighty personages among his friends and

[4] See Ch'ien's article, p. 18 of this issue, Footnote no. 15.

juniors. In this respect, he was a scholar whose incorruptibility commands our highest respect. Such men are extremely rare nowadays. . . .[5]

LEAVING ASIDE the merits and demerits in Mr. Lin's translations, we must recognize that the work he had done exercised a profound influence in his time and made a great contribution. This can be discussed in the following aspects:

The first had to do with the very limited and shallow knowledge which the Chinese used to have of the world. There was the ancient belief that China was the entire world "Under Heaven"; even after trade had been established with Europe and America, their national characters and the structure of Western societies remained a mystery. The Chinese regarded Westerners in a strange light, either despising them as "barbarians" or worshipping them as a more advanced race. The same attitude was held towards conditions in Western societies—the prevalent belief was that "they" must be different from "us" in all respects, and that China and the West must be separated by a deep gulf. Only after Mr. Lin had laboriously introduced over 150 novels one after another to us from Europe and America did a portion of the educated class come to understand that "we" and "they" were after all "human beings" alike. They were then able to have a clearer understanding of what it was like in Western families and Western societies, and what actually constituted their national character. Only then did they understand that the terms "China" and "the West" did not represent entirely different things. This great influence and contribution we owe to Mr. Lin.

The second had to do with the Chinese admiration for Western weaponry and material progress, after China was repeatedly defeated in war. The entire nation deemed it urgent to construct arsenals, shipbuilding factories and railways, and to study the sciences of "sound and light" and physics and chemistry. The belief was that China was supreme in morality, literature and government, but that in these material aspects of civilization the nation must defer to "Westerners". The cry of the day was, of course, "Chinese learning for substance, Western learning for function." Later, when basic defects in the old political structure of China became obvious, there developed a longing for the European and American forms of constitutional or republican government. Now admitting that China's government structure was corrupt and inferior to those of Europe and America, people voiced their eagerness for "Constitutional Monarchy" or a "Republican Revolution". Even then the majority of the educated class believed that China was worse off than others only in its corrupt government structure, while in the realm of letters Chinese literature must still be the best and the most beautiful in the world, and no Western work could be compared to our own Grand Historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Li Po and Tu Fu. Only after Mr. Lin had introduced a considerable bulk of Western literature, and opined that Sir Walter Scott's writing was no less great than that of Ssu-ma Ch'ien, did people realize Europe and America also had their literary heritage, in which were authors who could rank with Ssu-ma Ch'ien. This must be counted as another of Mr. Lin's great influence and contribution.

The third had to do with the Chinese literati's traditional regard for fiction as only a lesser form of literature. This explains why heretofore so little importance was attached to writers of fiction, why many famous authors never tried their hand at fiction, and why fiction writers adopted pseudonyms and were reluctant to reveal their real names to readers. Mr. Lin completely shattered this traditional inhibition. As a fine stylist in classical prose, he took it upon himself to translate European novels, and even went so far as to say that their novelists were comparable to our own Grand Historian—a brave, daring gesture indeed! It was only after Mr. Lin that among the Chinese literati men began to dub themselves novelists, and it was after Mr. Lin that the fashion for translating world literature into Chinese began. Mr. Lin's enlighten-

[5]Here follow two sections in Cheng Chen-to's article which are omitted in this translation: One deals with Lin Shu's own writings—including fiction, essays, poetry, etc.—characterized by certain innovative ideas in story-telling and reformist thinking in his earlier topical poems. Cheng's conclusion, however, was that Lin owes his place in Chinese literary history more to his translation than to his creative writing. The other section summaries Lin's translation career (Cf. p. 22-24 of this issue), pointing out his deficiencies, mainly due to the weakness of some of his collaborators, and concluding that in some forty of his better works Lin had succeeded to a remarkable degree in conveying the mood and the flavor of the Western classics he translated.

ment and influence were behind the profusion of translators and writers of fiction in China in the past two decades. In the Preface to 點滴 (*Drop by Drop*), a collection of his own translation works, Mr. Chou Tso-jen 周作人 said, "When I started translating fiction, I was much under the influence of Mr. Lin Ch'in-nan." The fact is, not only Mr. Chou and other translators of fiction, but creative writers of fiction too were very much under Mr. Lin's influence. It was Mr. Lin who broke away from the old form in Chinese fiction, and it was Mr. Lin who brought to the reader's knowledge such names as Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Washington Irving and Dumas *père* and *fils*. This must be regarded as Mr. Lin's greatest contribution to modern Chinese literature.

II *Arthur Waley on Lin Shu*

THE TRANSLATOR must use the tools that he knows best how to handle. And this reflection reminds me at once of what Lin Shu, the great early 19th-century translator of European fiction into Chinese, said when he was asked why he translated Dickens into ancient Chinese instead of into modern colloquial. His reply was: "Because ancient Chinese is what I am good at."

There are indeed so many lessons about translation to be learned from the story of this extraordinary man that I want to devote quite a bit of space to him. Let me introduce him to you by quoting from the preface to his translation of *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

> I once went into retreat, shutting myself up in one room for weeks on end. All day the people of the house passed to and fro outside, and although I could not see them I was soon able to distinguish their footsteps and know infallibly who was passing my door.
>
> I have a number of friends who from time to time bring me Western books. I cannot read any Western language, but these friends translate them aloud to me and I have come to be able to distinguish between the different styles of writing as surely as I recognized the footsteps of the people in my house.

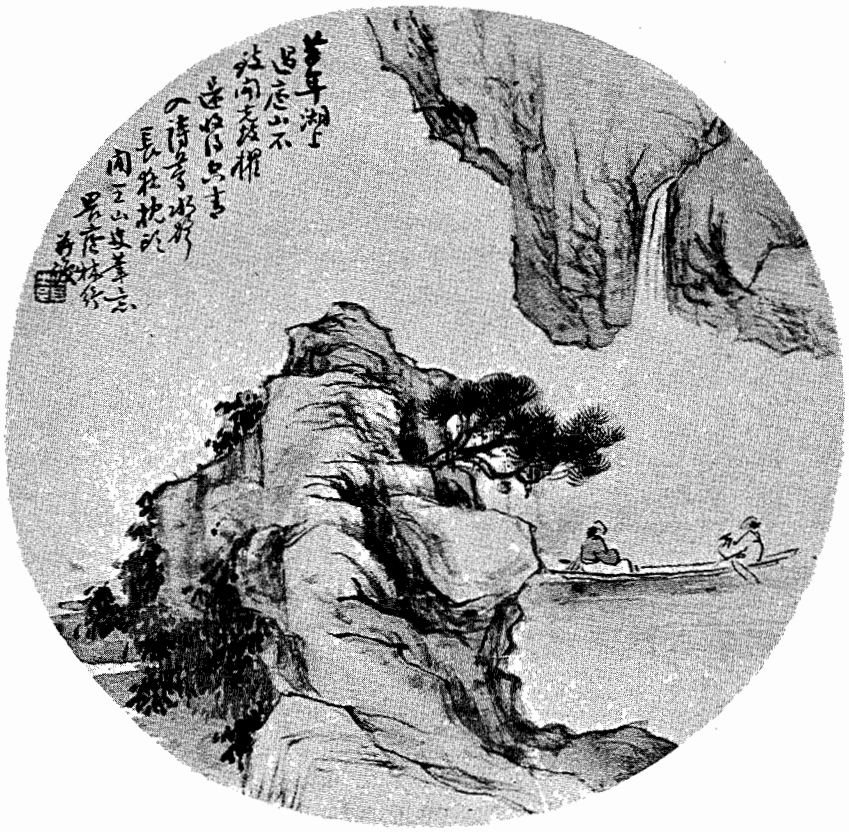
Part II of this appreciation of Lin Ch'in-nan was written by the man who came closest to being his counterpart in the West, the English scholar Arthur Waley who was responsible for opening the eyes of the English-reading public to many classics of prose and poetry from the Chinese and the Japanese. Mr. Waley's article first appeared in the 100th anniversary issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1958, as part of an article entitled "Notes on Translation". This excerpt is reproduced here by courtesy of the Atlantic Monthly Company, Boston, Massachusetts, and with the kind permission of Mrs. Alison Waley.

Lin Shu (1852-1924) was already famous as a writer of essays and criticism in a terse, clear, and vigorous style of literary Chinese when, more or less accidentally, his career as a translator began. In 1893[1] a young friend called Wang Tzu-jen, who had just returned from studying in France, brought him a copy of Dumas's novel *La Dame aux Camélias* and translated it to him viva voce, in ordinary Chinese colloquial. Lin Shu began turning this translation into literary Chinese. It was rather an odd thing to do because, although short stories were sometimes written in literary Chinese, no Chinese novel had ever been in anything but colloquial. The translation was published, and was an immense success.

During the next twenty-five years he published about 160 translations. Wang Tzu-jen, to whom he was deeply devoted, was never again available as a collaborator, and seems to have died rather young. But two of Wang's nephews knew French and collaborated in various works. One of them, twenty years later, helped Lin Shu to translate Bernardin de Saint-Piérre's *Paul et Virginie*. During the twenty-five years or so when he was translating he used at least sixteen different collaborators. Most of them were gifted and highly educated young men who had been sent abroad to study practical subjects, such as naval engineering. They soon became engrossed in their careers, diplomatic or governmental, and it was natural that they were not available as collaborators in translation for very long.

There were, of course, great disadvantages in Lin Shu's method of work. Knowing no foreign

[1] Waley's date is questionable. See Ch'ien's article, p. 19, Footnote no. 20.



A painting by Lin Shu. Courtesy of Mr. T. C. Lai.

language he was, as he more or less confesses in his analogy about footsteps, rather in the position of a blind man at a picture gallery, whose friends are able to tell him everything about the pictures except what they actually look like. Naturally the method led to numerous small mistakes, and he continually received lists of errata from readers all over China. What made him so remarkable as a translator was the immense force and vivacity of his style and the intensity with which he felt the stories that were communicated to him. "People in a book," he writes in the preface to Charlotte Yonge's *The Eagle and the Dove*, "at once become my nearest and dearest relations. When they are in difficulties I fall into despair; when they are successful, I am triumphant. I am no longer a human being, but a puppet whom the author dangles on his strings."

He worked with immense rapidity. In 1907 alone he published translations of Scott's *The Talisman* and *The Betrothed*, Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, Arthur Morrison's *The Hole in the Wall*, and a number of stories by Conan Doyle and other popular writers.

It is perhaps by his translation of Dickens that he is best known. He translated all the principal Dickens novels, and I have compared a number of passages with the original. To put Dickens into classical Chinese would on the face of it seem to be a grotesque undertaking. But the results are not at all grotesque. Dickens, inevitably, becomes a rather different and to my mind a better writer. All the overelaboration, the overstatement and uncurbed garrulity disappear. The humour is there, but is transmuted by a precise, economical style; every point that Dickens spoils by uncontrolled exuberance, Lin Shu makes quietly and efficiently.

You may question at this point whether it is right to call him a translator at all. But at any rate in the case of the Dickens novels it would be misleading, I think, to use such terms as "paraphrase" or "adaptation". In any case he was the transmitter, on the grandest possible scale, of European fiction to China, and through him Chinese fiction (which had been tied down to ancient storyteller's conventions that no longer fitted what the contemporary novelist wanted to say) was revitalized when it was at its last gasp. I have spoken of the lessons that can be drawn from Lin Shu's achievement. First, then, what matters most is that the translator, whether working at first or at second-hand, should be someone who delights in handling words. As another example of what a difference this makes I would cite the *Four Cautionary Tales* by Harold Acton and Lee Yi-hsieh, who worked together in much the same way as Lin Shu worked with his collaborators.

Whether the translator's style is contemporary or archaic does not matter. Some writers have been brought up on the Bible and handle a Biblical style with vigour and ease. I would cite as an instance Gordon Luce's *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. There is all the difference in the world between the deliberate, consistent archaism of this translation and the pointless occasional Biblicisms (such as "these twain" for "these two") of unskillful translators.

The second point concerns the selection of books to translate. About 1910 the novelist and translator Tseng P'u [曾樸] called on Lin Shu at Peking and explained to him that all he was doing was to add to the already vast number of T'ang stories a whole series of new T'ang stories that differed from their predecessors only in the fact that their material was taken from foreign sources. Such a procedure, said Tseng P'u, could have no influence on the future course of Chinese literature. He advised him, among other things, to draw up a list of masterpieces, arranged according to period, country, and literary school, and then work through it in an orderly and systematic way. Lin Shu explained that as he knew no foreign language he was not in a position to draw up such a list, and that he saw no alternative to his present method. The books that his friends brought him were all well-known works, and there would be no point in translating them in a prearranged order.

If Tseng P'u had known anything about Lin Shu's temperament (and it does not appear that he had ever met him before) he would have known how inconceivable it was that Lin should ever work to schedule. Moreover, though Lin Shu translated chiefly because he liked translating and did not, so far as I know, ever aim consciously at "influencing the future course of Chinese literature", the effect of his prodigious life-work was in fact to revolutionize Chinese fiction.