

An Open Bookshelf in an Open China:

A Challenge to the Contrived Barrier Between Natural Science and Liberal Arts

- The Translator's Postscript

for the Chinese Edition of *Letters to Lily*

(*Letters to Lily*, by Alan Macfarlane,
Profile Books Ltd., London, 2005.
Mainland China's Chinese Edition of *Letters to Lily*,
Commercial Press, Beijing, June 2006)

Who is the readership of this book? In the West, its target readership may be obvious – it is Lily and the likes of her, or teenagers who have stepped into a phase of life where they are beginning to examine themselves and to constantly ask questions about how humans behave and how society works. But who is the Chinese readership of this book? The answer may not be so simple.

In China today, teenagers, as well as all the last several generations, are growing up accompanied by a widely known reading series of popular science, namely *A Hundred Thousand Why's*. With its efficient help and guidance, we have solved a lot of myths in the natural world. Why does bamboo grow so fast? Why is some man-eating fish so ferocious? Why are submarines able to stay under the sea? These are only few instances among the hundred thousand. Then, do Chinese teenagers who are of the same age as Lily and who are similarly curious think about the questions she raises? Do we ask such questions related to liberal arts, rather than to natural science, as: Who am I? What is love? Why is there inequality? We naturally do, but, because of a different way of training, our range of questions might be somewhat limited. For example, we are unlikely to ask: What makes us individuals? Or: How well does democracy work? Nonetheless, whatever the quantity, questions of the kind are there. The pity is that from nowhere can we find suggested answers, because in China we have not got the kind of book like *Letters to Lily*.

It looks as if there were a real barrier between natural science and liberal arts, so that they have become two separate domains which do not speak to each other. This is almost a universal phenomenon. But evidently the world around us does not split into two separate systems which then work respectively in their own way. This is only an artificial, recent, not always adequate division. So under the subtitle “What are the interconnections?” the author of *Letters to Lily*, Alan Macfarlane, points out: “We study different topics at school, economics, biology, history, literature, physics and so on. That is fine and necessary. After we have separated them, however, we also need to bring these bits back together again. To get very far in understanding our world we need to see things in relation to each other.” If we would like to cite a probably oversimplified case of the interconnection between disciplines to show how they supplement and complement each other, or an example of the integrity of all credible knowledge, then we remember that Leonardo da Vinci was such a situation incarnate during the Renaissance.

We have observed that, in general, disciplines have been forcefully torn apart and very roughly lumped under two categories namely natural science and liberal arts. In much of the world, however, these two domains are almost equally active, encouraging both extensive and intensive researches and experiments, and becoming sites full of spirit of challenge and innovation. Suppose there were a place where natural science was quite an open field while liberal arts kept silent and some of the disciplines even did not utter a single sound, then it could well be regarded as a strange land. And there must have been curious reasons in there.

As opposed to many other areas of the world, liberal arts in China today are still in an initial phase of development, or more exactly, in a phase when they are taking off a second time. For, actually, China's first effort to establish modern academic institution was made as early as the late Qing Dynasty. By the 1930s or 1940s, China had already reached a certain level in terms of liberal arts and been able to have conversations to a certain extent with international academic circles. The later silence has had its deep roots. Here we could just recall one story. In the early 1950s, Chinese universities carried out a "Readjustment of Colleges and Departments", in which move liberal arts suffered a fundamental negation owing to their "bourgeois/capitalist (in China equivalents to "occidental") nature" and some specific disciplines like sociology, politics and law were banned.

It may be unnecessary to endeavour to deny the "bourgeois/capitalist nature" of liberal arts, if we do not question whether the label itself is valid enough. Firstly, it was in Europe where modern academic institution was created and many of the particular disciplines were established. Secondly, compared with "neutral" natural science, liberal arts are embedded with much more "Western" values. One enlightening example could be anthropology with its origin, its development and its original colonialist pattern of speech. In fact, the author has previously written a number of books elaborating the package of British, or rather, English, concepts, and discussing its effects on the modern world. In *Letters to Lily*, he explains again what the package precisely includes. Furthermore, he uses the sand-timer as a metaphor to describe the relation between the concepts and the emergence of the modern world (See Letter 30). In another work Alan Macfarlane directly addressed to the Chinese readers how England or Britain as a whole acted as midwife to the birth of the modern world: "This occurred both through the influence of the great nineteenth century British Empire, and by way of the civilization which took most of its character from England and then magnified its effects, namely the United States." (*The Origin of English Individualism*, The Author's Preface for the Chinese Edition) Given the marked "Western" brand that liberal arts bear, the various measures that New China took in the first decades after it was founded to enhance natural science and debase liberal arts could be explained as a need in the then particular political climate, or as an inevitable product by history. Whatever the arguments, the result is what we see today – liberal arts in China have become underdeveloped again and have to try to resume their seat.

The last half century has witnessed generations of Chinese people striving to popularise and develop natural science, and thereafter seen what noticeable achievements we have made. In regard to the basic level, Chinese schools and colleges have been providing fairly solid fundamental education of natural science. In the field of high technology, China has sent up Shenzhou-5 and -6 manned

spaceships, an experiment advanced enough though not the topmost. Particularly in a so-called information epoch, each of the pioneeringly new developments in the technological world is known to and mastered by China. As a striking contrast, basic knowledge and developments in the domain of liberal arts have appeared distant from us, and this remains the case even up to now. As assumed above, owing to our way of training, our teenagers probably cannot put up so many questions as Lily does. Nor do we realise that we should get to know such concepts as “symbol”, “ritual” and “nation-state” the way we have got to know the concept of “limit” in infinitesimal calculus or that of “entropy” in physics, for the former group also contain a scientific way of thinking, or are also thinking tools to help us understand how the world works. The ignorant is the helpless. When we find terrorism becoming rampant throughout much of the world, or when we fall in love at too young an age and are thereby condemned by people around us, we are only left in puzzle and depression. How insufficient our knowledge of ourselves is! But time and tide urge. Thus the new century is seeing China promoting the construction of “a harmonic society”, a theory inheriting enough core values from traditional Chinese culture and at the same time seemingly embracing some Euro-American ideas of humanism. A hopefully more favourable atmosphere added to people’s instinct curiosity for knowledge seems to be heralding a new developing period of liberal arts.

Therefore our horizon and reading range could be expected to expand in the new century. The English boast of loving reading. This does not seem an unjustifiable statement. If you survey the bookshelf of the ordinary English, you may possibly discover a handful of popular books on sociology or anthropology. They read these books just as they read novels or just as we read books on natural science. Behind this possibility there are several facts, among others, worth paying attention to. Firstly, no disciplinary boundary exists beyond which the English suppose they cannot step. Secondly, their training may more easily arouse such an interest from them. Thirdly, in the West these are major disciplines, no less important than mathematics or physics. If this impartiality is taken as an index, an average Chinese will find there is a blank section in his or her bookshelf. So we need to fill in the gap. If the popularisation of liberal arts is taken as a measurement for the degree of national education, an average Chinese will find there is a blank area in his or her fundamental education. So we could argue that it is not unnecessary to make up this educational gap, for both teenagers and adults who have missed the lesson. Now we have already got the answer to the question “who is the Chinese readership of this book”.

Letters to Lily could be listed as one suitable textbook we Chinese readers use to educate ourselves. In the UK itself, the book has been attracting readers of different levels. Among the earliest comments we find a piece by a teenager, saying that to his pleasant surprise, he does not find its tone “in any way patronising, or aimed too low”. While enjoying reading it, he feels its reasoning “clear but intellectual”, justly making “a challenging read”. There are also comments by older readers like the piece which regards the book as one “that parents would borrow from their children”, because the author has “pinpointed just the kind of questions children and adults do think and worry about”. As for the academics, some note that *Letters to Lily* “is a salutary reminder of just how much we take for granted”. The writing style does not escape observation either. Thus the comment about the “biblical rhythms of the prose”. Indeed, as a writer Alan Macfarlane is characterised by a simple, natural and graceful style, compounded with a humour of his brand. Even if he is explaining an abstract

and profound theory, he never tries to make it an impossible mystery – sharply contrasted to the unnatural, awkward academic writing we see too much over here.

Chinese readers' ability of understanding and appreciating books on liberal arts is equally brilliant compared with anyone else's, if we do not want to say we have our own advantages in this aspect. Actually *Letters to Lily* has already served as a sample for the test. In 2003 Alan Macfarlane, during one of his visits to China, talked about this work (at that time just completed but not yet published in the UK) to individual Chinese teenagers and a class of students in a senior secondary school. The young readers not only appreciated on the spot most of the topics and theories, but obviously had before thought about such seldom addressed questions as religious belief. In 2005 the author, invited by the Li Kashing Foundation, gave lectures at several universities in South China. Some of his topics, "witchcraft", "democracy", etc. were much related to what he wrote in *Letters to Lily*. Although the audience consisted mainly of students and teachers of sociology and anthropology who are trained in the disciplines to an extent, they still remarked that the lectures were inspiring by providing new angles from which to observe the world. This is just one small experiment but is encouraging enough. Furthermore, a recent visit to a Chinese bookshop may show that things are really changing. For, standing side by side on the shelves with books on natural science, an increasing number of works are devoted to liberal arts. After all, the 21st-century China is already an academically opener land. Gone are the days when "Fog of the Inland: Sea cut off" (imitating a quotation cited by *Letters to Lily*: "Fog in the Channel: Continent Cut Off") was the situation.

Contributing to this printed variety are also British authors who write their originals in English. It is generally acknowledged that England or Britain as a whole, owing to its particular history, has played an important role in the emergence of the modern world, and that the nation, thanks to its unique character, has simultaneously played the role of rule makers. So it is not rare that we read such articles as the one published by a Chinese newspaper. The writer of the article concludes in a joking tone that "Greenwich Mean Time in time, latitude and longitude in space...rules in the arenas of human rights, law, politics, military science, language, morality, banking, postal service, railway transportation, finance, insurance, aviation, the card game bridge, vehicle racing...all originate from England" (Tang Shizeng, 26, 07, 2005). Alan Macfarlane argues likewise, when speaking of "games" in *Letters to Lily*, that the English are big inventors of various games. As for the academic tradition and the academic position it holds, admittedly England or Britain as a whole also comes among the very first in the international list.

This status may lend the British an angle of speech, which tends to cause others to feel there is a "British standard" and there is a little too much British assumption about other nations' situations. Alan Macfarlane is aware and cautious of this possible tendency so he explains beforehand that he is writing "from a particular viewpoint, that of an elderly, white, British, male academic." He admits that the focus of discussion inevitably often falls on the particular British experience, and that there might even be "times when I extol the virtues of British civilisation too highly". In spite of the precaution, *Letters to Lily*, as the author has hoped and the Chinese readership will find, does not bind itself within a British context, but has "escaped

enough from these limitations” and said “something that applies more widely”. Similar to many other books of the same origin, *Letters to Lily* can really cut across national boundaries and act as a helper with one’s mental work. On the other hand, we may suggest that a certain British context is not unwelcome, since the British culture has provided much reference to the rest of the world.

The British and Chinese civilisations are considered to be very different from each other. Nonetheless, the two seem to have at least one thing in common. That is the wealthy cultural accumulation over a long history. In this respect China could even outdo. For, as some may prefer to define, China can be seen as a survival of the first generation of civilisations, and therefore the cultural heritage we have accumulated could be more abundant in a sense. Today we are beginning to further our study of liberal arts. This bids us to learn and incorporate, like the sea generously incorporating hundreds of rivers, methods that modern disciplines of humanities use in exploring some major disciplines in the domain, and to refer to their research findings, so that we can deeply, systematically and honestly research our own history, society, culture and people. It is hoped that by doing this we can soon make our farewells to the current clumsy imitation of the “Western” research on some hot topics, and can tread our own path and thus make due contribution to the treasure house of human thoughts.

To end the essay, let us come to the story how *Letters to Lily* came into being. Alan Macfarlane, as an anthropologist, a historian, and professor of Cambridge University, in his sixties finds it necessary to tell younger generations what he understands of the way the world works. His granddaughter, Lily, is nine years old (though in the book her assumed age is seventeen), but is already asking him all kinds of questions. It is not difficult for him to foretell that in ten years’ time she will be puzzled by many more questions, all much more complicated. It is not difficult either for him to infer that millions of teenagers are currently disturbed by questions of the same quality. Since he “will not always be here”, he decides to write the book right now, in order to help Lily and the likes of her understand this “confused and confusing world”. The bundle of thirty letters contained in this book is more or less a summary of Alan Macfarlane’s life-work. Those who have studied his other books may glimpse their shadows in here, though the shadows have become brisk and pretty. However, when the professor sat down and started writing the letters, he could not have felt so light and easy on his shoulders. Just like St. Christopher, he was shouldering a child. If you ask: “Who are you, child?” He will answer: “I’m the days to come.” In reality, just like every older generation throughout history, we all owe the next generation our supporting shoulders, a height for them to stand upon so as to look farther and wider. This metaphor taken, the existing generation of China may feel they have to assume the responsibility to lay a foundation with all existing credible knowledge for the generations to come.

(The writer’s note: This is a revised, shortened version of The Translator’s Postscript, the original, written in Chinese in a Chinese context, complying much more to the Chinese audience’s reading habit.)

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