
SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 170

February, 2006

Learning English, Losing Face, and Taking Over: The Method (or Madness) of Li Yang and His Crazy English

by
Amber R. Woodward

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

FOUNDED 1986

Editor-in-Chief
VICTOR H. MAIR

Associate Editors
PAULA ROBERTS MARK SWOFFORD

ISSN
2157-9679 (print) 2157-9687 (online)

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS is an occasional series dedicated to making available to specialists and the interested public the results of research that, because of its unconventional or controversial nature, might otherwise go unpublished. The editor-in-chief actively encourages younger, not yet well established, scholars and independent authors to submit manuscripts for consideration. Contributions in any of the major scholarly languages of the world, including romanized modern standard Mandarin (MSM) and Japanese, are acceptable. In special circumstances, papers written in one of the Sinitic topolects (*fangyan*) may be considered for publication.

Although the chief focus of *Sino-Platonic Papers* is on the intercultural relations of China with other peoples, challenging and creative studies on a wide variety of philological subjects will be entertained. This series is **not** the place for safe, sober, and stodgy presentations. *Sino-Platonic Papers* prefers lively work that, while taking reasonable risks to advance the field, capitalizes on brilliant new insights into the development of civilization.

Submissions are regularly sent out to be refereed, and extensive editorial suggestions for revision may be offered.

Sino-Platonic Papers emphasizes substance over form. We do, however, strongly recommend that prospective authors consult our style guidelines at www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc. Manuscripts should be submitted as electronic files, preferably in Microsoft Word format. You may wish to use our sample document template, available here: www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot.

Beginning with issue no. 171, *Sino-Platonic Papers* has been published electronically on the Web at www.sino-platonic.org. Issues 1–170, however, will continue to be sold as paper copies until our stock runs out, after which they too will be made available on the Web.

Please note: When the editor goes on an expedition or research trip, all operations (including filling orders) may temporarily cease for up to three months at a time. In such circumstances, those who wish to purchase various issues of *SPP* are requested to wait patiently until he returns. If issues are urgently needed while the editor is away, they may be requested through Interlibrary Loan. You should also check our Web site at www.sino-platonic.org, as back issues are regularly rereleased for free as PDF editions.

Sino-Platonic Papers is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Learning English, Losing Face, and Taking Over: The Method (or Madness) of Li Yang and His Crazy English

Amber R. Woodward
University of Pennsylvania

There is a new cultural phenomenon sweeping China, and although little Western attention has been paid to the potential social and political implications of its following, it is quite significant. The name of the game is Crazy English and its purveyor is Chinese superstar Li Yang. Drove of Chinese citizens and others from East Asia are buying into Li Yang's program to help China and Asia rise to a position of global power by learning English in unconventional ways. Li's goal to improve commerce and English language education in China is innocent enough, but the mass of fanatical followers he has built under his empire is not. Past precedent suggests that the Chinese government is not prepared to handle large groups who follow a single charismatic leader. The question of the PRC government's long-term approval of Li Yang and his Crazy English remains unresolved. The methodology of learning English employed by Li also merits further examination; are his teaching schemes innovative or deceiving? The Western world must carefully observe Li and his work to prepare for any global disruptions that may surface in the near future.

Li Yang's personal success story is a primary element of the appeal to his methodology; every description of Crazy English begins with an anecdote of Li's introverted countenance as a youth. Li was born in Urumqi, Xinjiang in 1969 during the end of the Cultural Revolution. As a student, he received poor grades, almost dropped out of school, and was lacking any confidence. Somehow, Li mustered the will to apply for college. He was accepted by Lanzhou University and studied mechanical engineering and English. Li's academic achievements were still lower than average, and he failed 13 exams, including many in English. With a desperate desire to remain at the university, Li decided to make a major change in his study habits. He focused on improving his English language

skills and devised a new method of learning and practicing English. As the story goes, one day Li went out to a park near the university and began reading English aloud.¹ The more he practiced and the louder he spoke, the more confident he became. Li found himself practicing everywhere, from rooftops, to the dormitories, to deserted fields. He would often shout out English passages and class exercises at trees or light posts to focus his energy on one point. After using his 'shout-aloud' method of learning English for only four months, he took the TEM 4 English exam and placed second in his class!² Following this success, he was inspired to share his newfound study technique with his friends and classmates. Li's first lecture in Room 209 may not have been his smoothest (he was a shaking a little due to his nervousness), but it certainly was a stepping-stone for the development of Crazy English.

Post-graduation, Li joined the Northwest Electronic Equipment Institute engineering team while continuing to study English on his own. During lunch breaks, Li would stand on the roof of his building and practice shouting various English phrases. Realizing that his English speaking skills had improved beyond the average, Li quit his engineering job and became a radio personality on Guangdong People's Radio in the distant Southeast. His success continued, and he progressed to reading English advertisements for Hong Kong television and announcing the news (in English) on the Guangzhou Canton TV station. The quality of his spoken English was such that he was invited to become the youngest member of China's Translators Association. Li also became Special Translator for the United States Consulate General. He had truly overcome the timidity of his youth and his failings in English.

"My way is the only way."

— *Li Yang (Loras, 2004)*

¹ As with many anecdotes, the real facts are often skewed – different versions name the location of Li Yang's first venture into Crazy English as on top of a classroom building, in a deserted field, or in a park.

² The Test for English Major 4, or TEM 4, is the Level 4 National English Exam, which all English majors in China must pass.

By 1994, Li Yang had become very confident in his English skills and his self-help method of learning the language, and founded the Li Yang English Promotion Studio. The company promotes the use of Li's shouting technique, christened Crazy English, by holding courses and planning seminar tours, in addition to marketing books, audiotapes, and DVD's for learning English. Li currently remains the director and principal speaker of this multi-million dollar business, which employs over 150 people in China, Japan, and Korea.

"Crazy English! Crazy life! Crazy world! I love this crazy game, so let's go!"

— *Li Yang in Zhang Yuan's film "Crazy English"*

The name "Crazy English" was not meant to be a marker for insanity; Li Yang chose the word "crazy" to reflect his belief that everything in life should be done with whole-hearted passion and abandon. Crazy English employs two primary components: physical and mental engagement. Both are intrinsic to the uniqueness of Li's method.³

Crazy English utilizes movement with the voice and body. Just as Li Yang practiced for his college English exam, he teaches his audiences to practice their English by shouting accurate pronunciations of common (and not so common) English phrases aloud. Li calls it "Tongue-Muscle Training." In his opinion, emphasis on studying with the mouth (and not with the hand) is the best method for learning any language. "The tongue is an important organ for speaking. Some muscles in the tongue used to pronounce English sounds have withered in Chinese so we need to shout to restore them" (Yumei, 2001). Unfortunately, most English language programs in Chinese schools only employ writing and translation; teachers place little emphasis on speech and response. Li is out to change the traditional system with his Crazy English. In the hours that he spends with each audience, he tirelessly repeats the same English phrases, demanding that his students shout back at him. He reasons that people do not learn to swim in the classroom, they need to get out in the environment and practice in

³ I doubt, however, that Li Yang's method would be as intriguing if he had called it "Whole-Hearted English." Li's Crazy English is actually called "Li Yang Crazy English" for copyright purposes. When Li chose the name for his method, he was unaware that another company had the rights to "Crazy English."

the only logically place to practice swimming, namely, the water. Why then should people learn a language in a classroom, if the classroom, by tradition, only emphasizes reading and writing?⁴

"It is kinetic. It is learning by doing. It is effective. It works."

— *"Doing the ESL Thing and ... Enjoying It,"* 2004

"What the letter kills, the spirit saves."

— *New American Bible, Cor. 3:6*

Li Yang describes Crazy English as a form of "new entertainment," whereby learning and rock 'n' roll are combined to create an information-sharing form of entertainment. Like a rock star performing before the members of an audience, he moves across the stage, wildly gesticulating and drawing them in to active participation. Li uses specific hand and arm gestures to help his audience grasp the sounds of vernacular English.⁵

He demonstrates the sound for "a" by swiftly jabbing to the left with his right hand held high above his head.⁶ When pronouncing the "o" in "hope," Li quickly draws an imaginary circle in the air. The audience mimics his movements as they repeat the phonemes. A major question is whether the gestures directly improve speech or only serve to increase concentration on inflection. Native English speakers may have a hard time finding the correlation between certain vowels and Li's movements. Nevertheless, the movement is an intrinsic aspect of Li's method.

Although Li advocates fluency in pronunciation, his dismissal of fluency in content is slightly problematic. Native speakers often have a hard time following a conversation with a Crazy English

⁴ The word "language" implies the spoken aspect.

⁵ Although Li has specific gestures to represent specific sounds, most people practice on their own with wild and randomized movements. Even infomercials for Crazy English materials use salespersons who flail their arms about unknowingly.

⁶ Li uses the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) developed by the International Phonetic Association, which created a global standard for the sounds of all languages. However, Li often demonstrates the vernacular pronunciation (with the aid of native English-speaking assistants). For a laugh, he sometimes speaks in a "gang-sta" style.

student because the students move at high speed from one random topic to the next ("Crazy Place, Crazy English," 2004; Williams, "Foreigner"). The sentences that Li yells back and forth to his students during his seminars include normal phrases like "I am a Chinese man" and "Good Morning," but also include peculiar sentences like "She's as fine as frog's hair" and "Don't worry about the horse being blind, just load the wagon." A clip from one of Li's lectures on the Crazy English computer program shows Li saying, "Lucky, nice, face, no, no smoking, talk, famous, dangerous, enjoy your stay." Li does not spend effort on structuring any cohesion between vocabularies or sentences; he assumes that students get enough of that in the classroom. Instead, he uses "crazy" sentences shouted at high decibels and funny hand movements to engage his audience in participation. However, when Crazy English students meet with foreigners, they excitedly spout off their perfected Crazy English phrases, leaving their conversation partners in a daze (Williams, "Foreigner").

"In school we're not encouraged to participate like this."

— *Li Xuting, Beijing Medical University student (Lee, "Let's go crazy!")*

As innovative as shouting and gesticulating may be for the language learning process, the psychological processes at play in Crazy English, while not innovative, are more effective than the physical processes in terms of fostering success. Li originally developed the shouting-method for learning English because he himself was too shy and introverted to dare speaking English aloud. Li believes that most Chinese are brought up with modesty and a lack of confidence—they are afraid of losing face in front of family, friends, educators, and even strangers. Common English teaching methods in China reflect this fear of failure and accommodate students by allowing them to learn English without practicing speaking, preparing dialogues, or giving individual oral presentations. The goal is to avoid embarrassment, even at the cost of learning to speak accurately and effectively.

"Inherited social dynamics" also play a role in silencing classroom discussion and participation in large groups (May, 2005). In traditional Chinese hierarchies, youths are not encouraged to show a mastery of skills that is greater than the skills of their adult counterparts. As an example, a child should avoid speaking English to his grandfather if his grandfather's English skills are inferior to his own. If the child did so, he would be showing disrespect. This dynamic is also true

for the gender gap; traditionally, Chinese women should not flaunt intelligence or acquired skills before men.⁷ In addition to age and gender, social status also plays a role in determining who speaks and who does not speak in a classroom setting. Many English language courses in China are open to the public, resulting in a great diversity of student demographics. Janitors, police officers, and doctors may all attend the same class. If this is the case, then the janitor may be disinclined to contribute as much to discussion or dialoguing. He may feel that it is not his place, or he simply may lack the confidence, to speak in front of those who are more educated than he is.

"Self confidence is a serious problem for most Chinese people."

— *Li Yang (Lee, "Let's Go Crazy")*

"From what I see, self-confidence is the real product that Li is selling."

— *P. Kerim Friedman ("Crazy English," 2005)*

Li Yang disagrees with the traditional method of teaching English. He believes that embarrassment can be a great motivator to learn. His most familiar "crazy" phrase is "Enjoy losing face," a shorter version of "Put your face in your pocket and cry out in English with me, so that you don't lose it in the future!" More than learning to speak English, Crazy English is a method to overcome common psychological obstacles, like bashfulness and introversion. Li says, "Chinese are typically shy. Shouting can help erase their mental obstacles, excite their mouths and ears, and strengthen their confidence and concentration" (Yumei, 2001). Many Chinese are afraid of losing their composure in public and especially in the presence of a native English speaker. If they could overcome this fear, they would have a more successful language learning experience. Giving students the confidence to succeed in school is not an innovative message, but with Crazy English, Li has been able to popularize and market the message more successfully than ever before.

⁷ In modern times, there is a greater equality between the different social constructs. However, these specific social dynamics have existed for quite some time in Chinese history and definitely contribute to the characteristics of the modern hierarchy.

Although helping students overcome a lack of confidence is Li Yang's main initiative, he also advocates mental and physical strength for students.⁸ When Li meets with an audience that is not willing to "lose face," he has no problem setting them straight. "I don't like you," he says, and after giving them a moment to reflect on this accusation he explains, "Strong people don't get hurt." Li believes that giving an unconvinced audience a tough time makes them stronger. "If you are strong enough, you are your own god," he says (Loras, 2004).⁹ Li has had a lot of experience with crowd control. He travels throughout China, Japan, and Korea, giving about 300 Crazy English seminars a year, touring 15 cities per month. He lectures everywhere from grade school and university auditoriums to corporate boardrooms, the Forbidden City, Marco Polo Bridge, and the Great Wall.

"I have witnessed the tremendous energy of the masses. On this foundation it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever."

— *Mao Zedong*

Although Li Yang sometimes lectures to small, private groups, his crowds typically range from 20,000-30,000 people— the equivalent of a Rolling Stones concert. His greatest attendance was at Chengdu, Sichuan, where he lectured 100,000 people in a single day. Li estimates that over 14 million people have taken his courses or studied his self-help books.¹⁰ His audience is typically comprised of eager students, but he has also given lectures to the People's Liberation Army, communist party officials, and potential translators for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Crazy English lectures are open to everyone, but Li finds that a particular segment of the population resonates with his message and style.

Despite Li Yang's claim that Crazy English is for the common people, he targets a particular demographic.¹¹ His methods are primarily intended for students who have mastered the Chinese

⁸ He hopes to add a gym and a psychological counseling center to his company building for his students.

⁹ Li also says, "I hate people who pretend to be noble, who pretend to be god" (Loras, 2004).

¹⁰ This number ranges from 14-30 million depending on the source.

¹¹ However, he *markets* to all demographics—the larger his audiences, the greater his revenue.

language, are self-proclaimed patriots, are interested in international business, and who may be too timid to learn spoken English properly. High school and college students are his largest target group (he does not bother with older Chinese who dislike his untraditional/radical teaching methods). Most students who attend Li's lectures have already taken considerable coursework in English, but know nothing more than English vocabulary and grammar.¹² However, many middle-aged adults are also attending Li's seminars in preparation for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Li mostly gives lectures to his fellow Chinese, but he encourages other Asians to take up Crazy English as well. "Don't think of me as China ..., think of me as Asia." Koreans are especially attracted to Li's methods; Li even jokes that he is an icon to the Korean housewives!

If students or teachers cannot attend his "crazy" seminars, they are able to purchase self-help English-learning audiotapes, a demonstrational DVD, an MP3 formatted computer program, and over 100 books authored by Li Yang. These secondary materials have built up a huge stream of revenue for the Li Yang English Promotion Studio. Although Li discourages book learning as the primary method for language study, he would be a bad businessman if he did not use book sales to make a profit. However, in keeping with his principle that less print and more action is better, he sells a Crazy English computer program. The program uses MP3 formatted files, so users can watch Li Yang and imitate him, rather than read about his method in a book. The computer program shows clips from a Crazy English lecture, Li rapping his crazy phrases, and a short film of Li and a few students jogging through the snow while chanting. Once users watch these MP3 clips, they can practice responding to questions in English through one of four tutorial sets. In addition to the Crazy English computer program, a DVD of a full Crazy English lecture is available for purchase. The two-disc computer program and the DVD are sold together.

"So popular are the lessons that the tapes and books have been pirated."

— *Anthony Spaeth, "Method or Madness?"*

¹² Li believes that teaching young children or toddlers to speak English hurts their ability to speak their mother tongue and confuses their cultural pride.

The DVD created by Li Yang's company is primarily an introduction to Li's method of learning English. Li gives a 30-minute lecture on pronunciation of various English phrases and sentences such as, "Good Morning" and "I am Chinese, I am from China." The lecture is held on a small stage, with no more than two hundred students standing in attendance. Li wears a suit and tie and has his hair nicely combed. The audience, too, is dressed in their best casual-wear. While giving the lecture, Li uses hand gestures to demonstrate certain sounds, but is far from waving wildly about. His voice only grows louder to get the audience to build up their own voices, though the decibel level is always tolerable. All these details are extremely important in analyzing the portrayal that Li and his company wish to project for Crazy English.

Whereas pictures and personal accounts of Li Yang's Crazy English lectures seem to describe the event as a rock concert with an English teacher playing the role of lead vocalist, Li's DVD and computer program clips convey a sense of professionalism and scholarly interaction. If Li were trying to produce an introductory DVD that would alleviate government and public concern over his "crazy" ways, then it would make perfect sense for him to soften his published lectures.¹³ This explanation would be satisfactory, except for one major objection: the DVD's introductory scene depicts a completely different picture of Li's character than the lecture following the introduction does. Whereas the lecture shows an intelligent man teaching a large group of students, the 4-minute long introduction to the lecture portrays a crazy mob-leader figure. The introduction is set to dramatic, coming-to-war music, black, white, and red pictures, and film clips without any narration. As the intensified musical harmonies and pounding of the drums build, a woman's screams are perceivable. This is not the kind of music that any Western marketing company would use to open a self-help language-learning tutorial! As a visual supplement to the menacing melody, pictures and clips of huge crowds are timed to the music. In the clips, people by the thousands surround Li Yang and repeat his arm and hand movements in what can only be described as Nazi-like gesticulation. It is difficult to discern where one person ends and the other begins in the crowded settings. The volume of bodies, harsh movements, and eerie music would give an American the undeniable impression that the DVD

¹³ Censorship is a major issue in China. Li would not want to risk publishing content, such as his rock and roll lectures, because the government could ban his company from distributing or exhibiting any materials.

is about social unrest and political upheaval. What a surprise the American receives when the scene that follows this musical introduction is that of a well-dressed man teaching well-dressed students to speak English with a proper pronunciation! The introduction may have been created solely for dramatic effect, but it actually invites suspicion by scholars of Li Yang's intentions for his Crazy English performances.¹⁴

"What is the most concrete way to love your country? To make yourself qualified for the twenty-first century, to make yourself strong mentally and physically, to make more money internationally – that's the way to love your country."

— Li Yang (Walsh, 1999)

Li Yang's goals for the Crazy English movement are easy to recognize by listening to his well-known quotes. He does not hesitate to announce publicly that his dream is for China to become the most powerful nation in the world. The only way to do this, he believes, is to learn English fluently and promote Chinese language, culture, and ideals abroad. Zhu Pu, Shanghai's director for primary and secondary schools, agrees with Li in that English is a crucial "survival skill" for China. Zhu says, "English is not just a class It is an international symbol of status" (Cheng and McGregor, 2003). While the idea of learning English and studying in America may seem counter-intuitive for the goal of promoting Chinese nationalism, Li's logic can be understood bit by bit. Most Chinese who go to America or any other Western countries speak "stupid" or "terrible" English outside of the classroom; they cannot communicate the excellence of China while speaking with poor grammar and unintelligible accents. Li says, "I want [the Chinese] to use English and spread Chinese as a world language [M]astering English and therefore enriching our country is an act of patriotism" (Yamane, 2005). Li reckons that if Chinese people speak perfect conversational English and learn Western business techniques, they will learn how the Western world profits. Li says, "If China is to be an economic power, its citizens must speak the language of global commerce well enough to be understood" (Meijdam, 1999). By becoming foreign language teachers like so many native English

¹⁴ It also invites comparisons (however unfair) between Li Yang and Hitler or Mao Zedong.

speakers abroad have done, they can promote Chinese language learning, culture, and study abroad or tourism opportunities. In summary, learning English will allow the Chinese people to more successfully promote China to Western peoples, which will allow China to advance to a role of global leadership.

"If he wasn't spouting nationalism, I doubt he'd be allowed to go around telling school children what he thinks."

— *Michael Churchman commenting on Pinyin.info*

In proportion to the time and energy Li Yang spends promoting English language learning, he spends an equal amount of effort on encouraging Chinese pride and nationalism. His one caveat to Crazy English followers: "Never let your country down."¹⁵ The only roadblock to Li's goal is if Chinese learn English and study in America, but like the freedom and pay so well that they forget China altogether. "I promote the love-thy-country angle because I don't want our people to forget China after they acquire English," he explains (Friedman, "Crazy English"). Some believe that if Li were not so enthusiastically encouraging Chinese pride and patriotism, then the PRC government would not be as willing to allow him to teach English and Western business ideals to mass public audiences. Critics do a lot of name-calling for Crazy English because of Li's efforts to promote Chinese nationalism in his teaching seminars. They ask if his encouragement of Chinese culture and language is a form of "patriotism," "racism," "scary nationalism," or "cultural chauvinism?"

The amount of Western publicity of Crazy English is far behind the publicity Li Yang has received in East Asia. In America, very few newspapers have printed articles on the subject; most of the reports are nothing more than a regurgitation of the information in two or three published articles.¹⁶ When performing searches on American-based web search engines, the results yield about

¹⁵ This quote was displayed on a red banner put up in a grade school for one of Li's lectures. Whereas Li may be hesitant to teach grade school children English before they have a full mastery of Chinese, it is never too early to instill cultural pride for China.

¹⁶ Sophie Loras' 2004 interview, Zhan Ni's 2002 online report, and Anthony Spaeth's 1999 article in *Time Asia*.

five hundred blog entries on Li, and over a hundred web pages describing *Crazy English*, a documentary film about Li Yang.¹⁷ The blog entries provide a sense of how the public feels about Li, but are unreliable sources for scholarly work. The web articles describing the documentary contain some background of Li Yang and Crazy English, but are mostly critiques of film director Zhang Yuan. In contrast to American publicity, Asian and Chinese articles and websites dedicated to Li Yang are countless. Li has received fame across East Asia through radio and television programming. Even Japan's public television station, NHK, distributed a live broadcast of one of Li's Crazy English performances.¹⁸

The biggest publicity thus far for Li Yang and his Crazy English is contemporary director Zhang Yuan's 1999 documentary *Fengkuang Yingyu* ("Crazy English"). Zhang's documentary is important for understanding the Crazy English movement. On one level, Zhang's film does not portray Li in the way that Li necessarily wants to be shown, but as others see him.¹⁹ Although film critics argue that films are always made through the lens of the director and the framing of film editing, Zhang claims that his films are pure truth. He says, "I try to abandon any subjective views as an artist This film would be worthless if I showed even a tiny trace of subjective judgment" (Wheeler, 1999). Li himself believes that the documentary is fictitious and harsh. He retorts, "The movie was stupid. It was not a real documentary because its intention was to please a Western audience" (Loras, 2004). Li's unhappy reaction to Zhang's portrayal of him as a crazy, pseudo-religious leader underscores the point that Li does not intend for the public to view Crazy English as a social cult comparable to Falun Gong. Li is aware that his continued success depends on the tolerance of the PRC.

Another telling aspect of the documentary is the government's reaction to Zhang Yuan's film. Zhang had made seven notable films prior to *Fengkuang Yingyu*. His movies all contain controversial

¹⁷ This experiment can be repeated by performing an English language Google search with subjects: "Li Yang" "Crazy English," and one with these terms but without "Zhang Yuan."

¹⁸ The NHK is a public station and therefore is not subject to government censorship. It may have been easier for Li to get airtime on this station because it was publicly and not privately owned.

¹⁹ Remember that Li gave a watered-down version of his usual rock-style lectures for his DVD in order to portray a more scholarly, serious caricature.

content, such as the struggle of a single mother with a mentally retarded son in *Mama*, the underground dealings of rock stars in *Beijing Bastards*, and alcoholism, insanity, and parental abuse in *Sons*. None of these or Zhang's other pre-1999 films had been approved by the Chinese government for viewing in China, although they dealt with social topics equally as sensitive as the 'fear of the masses' in *Fengkuang Yingyu*.²⁰ Although Zhang thought that *Li Yang and Crazy English* were controversial enough to keep up his notorious persona, he was pleased when the Chinese government decided that *Fengkuang Yingyu* was acceptable for the Chinese public.²¹ It was Zhang's first film shown in China. The government's approval of the movie was an important stamp of approval of the content; if the government allows the distribution and exhibition of Zhang's film, then they are also allowing the publicity of Li Yang and his *Crazy English*. The PRC must not fear the political or social implications of *Crazy English* if they are allowing its continuation in the mainstream media. Li Yang also pacifies government suspicions using his accumulated wealth. He gives large sums of money back to education in China, especially to rural school districts. While Li believes it is one of his patriotic duties to give back to his country, he is also securing a small government dependence on his contributions.

"I love humiliation! I embrace hardship! I welcome failure! I pursue success!"

— *Li Yang* ("*Crazy Place, Crazy English*," 2004)

Although the government seems to approve of (or at least not disapprove of) Li Yang, he does not yet have complete control over his proceedings. In 1996, two years after Li's creation of the Li Yang English Promotion Studio, Li's learning by shouting method became popular in Guangdong province against the will of English teachers. In response, the local government prohibited Li from giving seminars in the area for six months. Chengdu, Sichuan also banned Li from teaching for an extended span of time. Despite these minor setbacks, Li's position with the government is not a rocky one. His

²⁰ Zhang resorted to distributing his films internationally since the Chinese government did not approve of his work. He received international acclaim from independent film festivals in Venice and Toronto.

²¹ Although the film was approved, censors from the Chinese government did require a certain amount of editing. Zhang believes that the film is still a true depiction of Li Yang, despite these minor cuts.

work as a special English translator, his donations to the education system, and the acceptance of Zhang Yuan's *Fengkuang Yingyu* all demonstrate that Li is "in."

"I'm in favor of China's development, but I don't like these terms."

— Anonymous (*"Crazy Place, Crazy English,"* 2004)

Crazy English may be a teaching program on its façade, but the following built up by Li Yang has been described as a cult following by some. "Racism," "cultural chauvinism," and "scary nationalism" are among the names used to describe the ideas held by Li and his goal for Crazy English to help the Chinese attain global power for China. He wants China to become economically powerful in technology and marketing philosophies, in order to defeat foreign competition (LoBaido, 2001). Although Li claims that he does not advocate hate or revenge, he once told a student, "If you really want revenge against [a country], then master their language" (LoBaido, 2001). Statements like this contribute to the anxiety that Crazy English could erupt into another Falun Gong or Cultural Revolution. Those who have spent time with Li Yang, such as reporters and director Zhang Yuan, think that suggestions of Li as a mob leader or as the next Mao Zedong are misguided. In one interview, Zhang said, "That's going too far Even if Li Yang does have that tendency, it's a funny and cool one" (Eckholm, 1999).

Despite Zhang's reassurance that Li is not a revolutionary in disguise, many similarities can be drawn between Li and Mao Zedong. Both were born during major eras of transformation for China, Mao in 1893 near the end of the Qing dynasty, and Li at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Both also came from less-than-ideal childhoods, where physical abuse was common. Li has built his empire on teaching, much like Mao's beginnings as a teacher and grammar school principal in Changsha. In terms of lessons to live by, the men advocate strength for the mind and the body and fearlessness.²² Mao once said, "As long as you are not afraid, you won't sink," while Li mimics, "There's nothing to fear." In addition to these general similarities, Mao and Li both built up large followings, called "cults" by some, and retained most of the power within these groups. Li's lecture at Tiananmen Square

²² Mao Zedong was an avid swimmer and Li Yang hopes to open a bodybuilding facility.

yielded a frighteningly high number of listeners, close to Mao Zedong's 90,000 followers on the Chángzheng, or Long March, in retreat from the Kuomintang soldiers.²³

"Be resolute, fear no sacrifice, and surmount every difficulty to win victory."

— *Mao Zedong*

While Mao Zedong and Li Yang's goals for China may be congruous, their plans of action are not. Their goal was for China to reach a level of superiority and greatness in the political, economical, social, and industrial global spheres. Mao used his power to mobilize his followers into oft-violent action in the name of communism and revolution. Li has not demonstrated Mao's violent thread. Li does not advocate social upheaval or political purging; his lectures involve linguistic and cultural pride. Although his opinions may be propaganda, he has not shown any signs of direct political action.

"You have to have passion, you have to do something."

— *Li Yang (Lee, "Let's Go Crazy!")*

What does the future hold for Li Yang and his crazy ways? Although Li works year round, has made enough money for an early, comfortable retirement, and suffers from many physical ailments caused by the intensity of his work, he does not plan to quit any time soon. In fact, he is developing plans for a bigger, better, more "crazy" company. For the past two years, Li has been experimenting with English "concentration camps" in Beijing.²⁴ For twelve days, up to thirty participants can attend ten hours of English language classes (1660 Yuan per person). Li also hopes to bring his Crazy English to the prisons. He believes that prisoners would be the best students for his lectures because they have essentially given up on their past and are ready to build new and productive lives for themselves. The inmates also have a lot of time on their hands, which is a very important factor in learning a second

²³ The Long March was the major event that led to Mao's reception of leadership for the Communist Party of China.

²⁴ Li claims that his English is superb, but he must be unaware that the English name for a Nazi prison camp is "concentration camp."

language. Another of Li's plans is the incorporation of bodybuilding clinics and psychiatric counseling into the company's repertoire. This expansion demonstrates Li's belief that a strong mind needs a strong body.

Bilingualism in Chinese and English is a trend that has received increasing attention in international news. Many predict that bureaucrats and businesspersons who can speak both languages will be in high demand in the 21st century. Li Yang's Crazy English is a suitable development in recognition of this truth; his company helps the Chinese learn proper English so that they will be prepared for the future. However, Li also recognizes the need for a Chinese language-learning program in America and Europe. To reconcile this problem, Li is developing "Crazy Chinese" for native English speakers wishing to learn the Chinese language. The important question is whether Li's Crazy Chinese will use the same shout-aloud method of learning that Crazy English employs. Most foreigners do not stereotype Americans as a culture with inherited shyness and introversion like the Chinese; Li's motivational aspect of shouting to reduce embarrassment would be less effective for American students. Crazy English's emphasis on the natural or colloquial pronunciation would also be unhelpful to Americans learning Chinese. As most Chinese have been forced to learn English since they were in grade school, they have a strong background in the language. The majority of Americans, on the other hand, do not begin learning Chinese unless they choose to take college language courses. If Li's Crazy Chinese were to operate on the same principles as Crazy English, it would surely fail. In one interview, Li said that his goal for Americans in his Crazy Chinese seminars would be to "forget the tones and enjoy speaking bad Chinese" (Loras, 2004). It seems odd that Li built the Crazy English empire to help the Chinese reach absolute perfection in English, but advocates that the Americans speak flawed Chinese. Regardless, Li is planning to lecture 'round the world on the Chinese language and culture.

"To just be proud of your own culture is selfish — you've got to make your culture widespread, let people all over the world share the good points about your culture."

— Li Yang (Lee, "Let's Go Crazy!")

Li Yang and the Crazy English movement warrant further, intensive study. At best, Li's commercialization of learning English is a positive push towards a further modernization and globalization of China. At worst, Li could use his fame to encourage political action in support of his ideals of Chinese superiority. History has proven that the old adage "only time will tell" is not a safe way to consider pressing issues; there are many questions left unanswered about Li Yang and his goals for Crazy English. Is Li Yang an enthusiastic teacher or a motivational speaker? Is he a performer, a salesman, or a crook? Most importantly, is he a simple patriot or the future leader of a world-shaking cultural revolution?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(* represents web log or blog-like entry; there is no wish on the part of the author to make unpublished material seem as credible as published material)

Cheng, Ien and Richard McGregor. "China's school children learn to love English." *New York Times*. 15 April 2003. Accessed Dec. 2005

Corliss, Richard. "Asian Festival." *Time Asia Magazine*. 4 Oct. 1999. Accessed Oct. 2005

Eckholm, Erik. "Feted Abroad, and No Longer Banned in Beijing." *New York Times Online*. 26 Dec. 1999. Accessed Nov. 2005

Friedman, P. Kerim. "Crazy English." Keywords. 3 July 2005. Accessed Dec. 2005 *

Lee, Ed. "Let's Go Crazy." *Beijing This Month*. Issue 59, 26-27. Accessed Dec. 2005
<http://members.aol.com/lumabner/china/crazyenglish.txt> (original website inactive: <http://www.cbw.com/btm/issue59/P26-27.html>)

Li Yang Ying Yu. Perf. Li Yang. DVD. Digid A.

LoBaido, Anthony C. "Return to Babel." *World Net Magazine*. 2001. Accessed Nov. 2005

Loras, Sophie. "Crazy Talk." *City Weekend Beijing*. 7 Dec. 2004. Accessed Oct. 2005

May, Ken. "The Madness to the Methods." The Ajarn Forum. Aug. 2005. Accessed Nov. 2005 *

McDonald, Hamish. "Forget keeping fit, learning English is the latest craze." *Sydney Morning Herald*. 11 Jan. 2003. Accessed Dec. 2005

Meijdam, Anne. "Pumping Up the Volume." *Asia Week*. 30 July 1999. Vol. 25, No. 30. Accessed Dec. 2005

Ni, Zhan. "Li Yang Crazy For English." *China Today*. May 2002. Accessed Oct. 2005

Spaeth, Anthony. "Method or Madness?" *Time Asia Magazine*. 18 Jan. 1999. Vol. 153 No. 2. Accessed Nov. 2005

Spence, Jonathan D. "The Time 100 Leaders and Revolutionaries: Mao Zedong." *Time Magazine*. 13 April 1998. Accessed Dec. 2005

Walsh, David. "Films from Taiwan and China." World Socialist Web Site. 2 Oct. 1999. Accessed Dec. 2005

Wheeler, Yanhong. "Fratricide and Crazy English." *Beijing Scene*. Sept. 1999, Vol. 5, 25. Accessed Oct. 2005

Williams, Alex. "Foreigner." Accessed Dec. 2005 *

Yamane, Yusaku. "Chinese Patriots burn with English fever." *The Asahi Shimbun*. 2 July 2005. Accessed Oct. 2005

Yumei, Liu. "Li trains crowd to loosen their English tongues." *21st Century*. 9 August 2001. Accessed Dec. 2005

———. "'Crazy English' and Chinese Nationalism." Pinyin News. 2 July 2005. Accessed Oct. 2005

———. "Crazy Place, Crazy English." China Teachers. 7 Jan. 2004. Accessed Oct. 2005 *

———. "Doing the ESL Thing and ... Enjoying It." Ken and Judy's China Adventure. 15 March 2004. Accessed Oct. 2005 *

———. "Li Yang." Wikipedia. 10 Nov. 2005. Accessed Dec. 2005 *

———, Grant. "The Infomercial." The Big Electra Kurva (in Korea). 11 Sept. 2003. Accessed Dec. 2005*

Since June 2006, all new issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* have been published electronically on the Web and are accessible to readers at no charge. Back issues are also being released periodically in e-editions, also free.

For a complete catalog of *Sino-Platonic Papers*, with links to free issues, visit the *SPP* Web site.

www.sino-platonic.org