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A Survey of Li Yang Crazy English

by

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Preface

English is the world's current *lingua franca*. Nations without English as a native language push to promote English as a second language (ESL) in their schools and workplaces in order to compete with economic and diplomatic demands. In China, the ESL movement has boomed over the last decade. According to the Web site of China's official news agency, Xinhua, in 2001 the ESL industry in Beijing reaped 700 million yuan (US\$84.68 million) in profits. Some Chinese ESL programs, such as the New Oriental Language School, are well known and well trusted for their traditional approaches to English oral studies. Others, like Beijing's Eastern English Services, the Wall Street English School, and Shanghai's Talk 'da Talk are rising stars, hoping to obtain a slice of the profits from the ESL mania in China. Of the many ESL outlets, one of the most controversial, unorthodox, and popular is a language-learning methodology known as Li Yang Crazy English. I learned of Li Yang and his Crazy English from Dr. Victor H. Mair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania, who suggested that I study this multifaceted and relatively untouched subject.

When I began researching this topic in 2005, only a few articles provided information on the phenomenon. The most reliable were written by Anthony Spaeth of *Time Asia* and Sophie Loras of *City Weekend Beijing*, who introduced Li Yang and his Crazy English to the Western world. Since then, more articles have been published, but all contain the same general information, the same quotations, and the same light-hearted speculations. Through my research in America and China over the past two and a half years, I have critically examined the claims made by reporters and bloggers regarding Li Yang and his Crazy English, in an attempt to go beyond such surface evaluations.¹ I researched literature, conducted interviews, distributed surveys, examined Li Yang Crazy

¹ For my introductory paper on this topic, please see: Amber R. Woodward, "Learning English, Losing Face, and Taking Over: The Method (or Madness) of Li Yang and His Crazy English," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 170 (Feb. 2006)

English products and similar pirated products, attended a Crazy English lecture, and analyzed Crazy English video footage and photographs from various sources.

Li Yang's political ideology and his Crazy English method raise many questions. The concrete gains made through Li Yang's pedagogical and psychological techniques are dubious. But the most significant question—one that this paper hopes to answer—regards Li Yang's professional status. It is the question with which I ended my first paper on this subject: "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 revolution?"

Abstract

There is a new cultural phenomenon sweeping China, and, although little Western attention has been paid to its potential social and political implications, it is quite significant. The name of the game is Crazy English and its purveyor is Chinese superstar Li Yang. Drove of Chinese citizens are buying into Li Yang's program to help China rise to a position of global power by improving their spoken English. Li tells his audiences that English is the international language of commerce and foreign affairs, so let's master it and spread the word of the greatness of Chinese culture!

Li Yang utilizes a highly unconventional method of language learning. Developed by Li to combat his own failures in college English courses, his method involves shouting random English phrases at the top of one's voice at rapid speed while waving one's hands and arms in patterns that supposedly reflect proper pronunciation. Li believes that this method is instrumental in breaking down a common barrier to language learning for Chinese students, namely, the fear of "losing face." The fear of losing face is a widespread obstacle to language learning in China because many students are so worried about making oral mistakes in front of others, especially native English speakers, that they give up speaking altogether. A major reason for this problem is that English classes in China tend to focus on reading and writing, rather than speaking. This results in Chinese students potentially mastering English grammar, but with acquiring limited proficiency in pronunciation and verbal fluidity. Li Yang Crazy English seeks to bridge this educational gap by focusing on speech. By forcing students out of their comfort zone when practicing their spoken English, Li hopes that they will gain the confidence to approach native English speakers and strike up a conversation.

Li Yang promotes the Crazy English method in mass lectures that he presents across the country. Some compare the lectures to rock concerts, wherein thousands of people congregate in large school auditoriums or open public spaces to watch Li 'perform' English on stage.² During the lectures, the audience is actively engaged in Li's

² Please see Appendix for pictures.

program, reciting his English slogans and madly waving their limbs in imitation. They clap their hands and stamp their feet to rap or techno music while shouting phrases such as "Mike likes to write by the bright light at night." These touring lectures, which can bring in 20,000 to 30,000 spectators for a single event, and the Li Yang Crazy English products (tapes, videos, computer programs, and books) are the revenue drivers for Crazy English promotion. The products are hot sellers, as are the pirated materials sold by establishments with names like "Crack English" and "No. 1 English Crazy."

While Li Yang's methodology for learning English merits further examination (is it innovative or deceiving?), there is another feature of Crazy English that disrupts the innocent façade of a fun-and-games language-learning program. As is evident in Chinese independent director Zhang Yuan's documentary of Li Yang, also called *Crazy English*, Li uses his lectures, products, interviews, and even television appearances as opportunities to promote his personal political opinions. His ideology is blatantly racist and chauvinistic; he is anti-American, anti-European, and, especially, anti-Japanese. He hopes that the Chinese will use English to "defeat their enemies" (through the economy, of course) and elevate China to its former position as leading world power. He teaches elementary school children about the Japanese invasions of China because he wants them to remember the atrocities of the past and use that as motivational fuel for nationalist visions. This underlying motivation for improving the country's English skills, namely, that of helping China rise to a position of global dominance, is a scary facet of an otherwise popular and entertaining language-learning program. So far, the Chinese government approves of Li Yang Crazy English, allowing its mass gatherings in sacred places such as the Forbidden City, while withholding permission from other groups. Li's political ideology is a primary cause for this official approval and may have been a preemptive strategy developed by Li's Stone Cliz³ company to attract such acceptance. While there is no definitive evidence that the Li Yang Crazy English movement will ultimately suffer the fate of other movements in China, such as Falun Gong, its progress and increasing following warrant critical attention.

³ The definition of "Stone Cliz" is unknown, though it comes from another of Li's company names, Stone-Cliz. A few people refer to Li Yang as "Stone Cliz" as if it were his name. The product and method is best known as Li Yang Crazy English, and not by its official names "Li Yang Stone Cliz Crazy English Promotion Studio" or "Stone Cliz International English Promotion Workshop."

Li Yang: The Man

Li Yang's Background

Li Yang's personal success story is the foundation of Crazy English: it is the program's inspiration, seal of authenticity, and primary marketing tool. His background is inseparable from his mission.⁴ As the legend goes, Li Yang was born in 1969—the end of the Cultural Revolution—in Ürümqi, Xinjiang Province. In secondary school, he was a poor student with nearly failing grades. Even worse, Li was terribly shy: he was afraid to answer the phone or go to the movies alone, and once during a physical therapy session he accidentally received an electric shock but was too afraid to tell anyone (Zhan, 2000). His timidity was such that he nearly dropped out of high school. Yet it seems that Li achieved exam scores that were high enough to attend Lanzhou University, where he studied mechanical engineering and English.

At Lanzhou University, Li's academic achievements remained below average. In his first two years, he failed thirteen exams, mostly in English language courses. In one interview, Li said of his former self, "I was tofu scum, unworthy to eat even jellyfish" (LoBaido, 2001). Frustrated with his record and desiring to remain at the university, Li decided to make a major change to his ineffective study habits and introverted lifestyle. Focusing on his English courses, he devised a new method of learning and practicing spoken English—his worst subject. As the story goes, one day Li traveled to a park near the university and began reading English aloud. The more he practiced and the louder he spoke, the more confident he became. Li found himself practicing everywhere, including rooftops, dormitories, and deserted fields. He would shout English passages and class exercises, focusing his vocal energy on trees, lampposts, or even the unsuspecting pigeon. After only three or four months of using his shout-aloud method of learning English, Li felt confident and capable. He took the mandatory Test for English Majors Level 4 (TEM

⁴ The inseparability of Li Yang's personal life and his program also presents the possibility that certain facts or background information have been skewed to fit the company's needs. Some in the online community question Li's claims regarding his work resume, among others.

4) National English Exam and received the second-highest score in his class. Following this 'rags to riches' success, he was inspired to share his unique study techniques with his friends and classmates. Li, apparently quite nervous, gave his first English lecture in room 201 of a Lanzhou University building (Lee, "Let's Go Crazy!").

After graduating from Lanzhou University, Li Yang kept up his study of English while working as an engineer for the Northwest Electronic Equipment Institute in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. During his lunch breaks, Li would go to the roof of the company building and practice shouting English phrases. After a short time working at the institute, Li realized the potential of his newfound English language proficiency and abandoned his career as an engineer. Not long after, Li became a disc jockey for Guangdong People's Radio in southeastern China. His success in the south opened many more opportunities, including jobs reading English advertisements for Hong Kong television and announcing the news in English for the Guangzhou Canton TV station. Li's quality of spoken English was such that the China's Translators Association invited him to become their youngest member. He also became a special translator for the United States Consulate General.⁵

The Establishment of Li Yang Crazy English

In 1994, Li Yang turned his unorthodox language learning method into a profitable enterprise. He established the Li Yang Stone Cliz Crazy English Promotion Studio, known as "Li Yang Crazy English."⁶ The Crazy English lecture was the foundation for the method. As Li already had a bit of experience giving lectures to his friends and fellow students when he attended Lanzhou University, it was the obvious starting block for his new company.

The progress of the Li Yang Crazy English program was initially slow, but within a few years the company had expanded to include a staff of over one hundred and fifty, with its headquarters in Guangzhou and offices in Shanghai, Beijing, and many other major cities in mainland China, Japan, and South Korea. In October 1996, Li performed

⁵ This has been questioned by the *China Digital Times* ("Is Crazy English Here to Stay?" Oct. 16, 1999), which states that this and other assertions on Li Yang's resume have not been verified.

⁶ Another company already had property rights to the name "Crazy English," so Li added his name to the company title.

for a record 100,000 people in a single day during three lectures at Chengdu, Sichuan. Lectures typically average 20,000–30,000 audience members per event, but severe health problems resulting from intense work forced Li to minimize the number of these massive performances (Zhan, 2000). In 1999, the Stone Cliz company boosted its efforts, producing new products such as the "Blurt Out" books and audiotape series (《脱口而出》), as well as a high school and middle school entrance exam preparation series 《阅读突破》 (translated as "Reading Break-Through"). These increased efforts coincided with the release of Chinese independent director Zhang Yuan's documentary on Li Yang, *Crazy English* (《疯狂英语》), and the first major article on Crazy English, published by *Time Asia*. The craze over Crazy English reached a peak just after 2000, when media attention raised people's curiosity and interest in this new form of educational entertainment. Today, the media's obsession with Li Yang Crazy English is not as great, simply because it is no longer a novelty. But the popularity and growth of the Crazy English program itself has accelerated. Li has now authored more than one hundred books, and the range of Crazy English products has expanded to include audiotapes, demonstrational DVDs, and MP3 files.

Approximately 30 million people have attended at least one Crazy English lecture, though estimates range from 12 million to the doubtful 120 million from various sources (Loras, 2004; Yamane, 2005; Spaeth, 1999). In addition to Li Yang's huge presentations, he also lectures to small private groups, such as gatherings of government officials and employees of private companies. While Li's target audience is everyone in China (and East Asia), his method and his products cater to Chinese middle school, high school, and college students who have already taken English courses. Li also develops specialized lectures for groups such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Communist Party officials, and translators for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Many of Li Yang's lectures also attract unintended crowds, such as people without any English training and those uninterested in studying English at all, who are usually seeking a crash course in beginning English or merely wishing to see what all of the hullabaloo is about. (This is especially the case when the lectures are free and open to the public.) Li's interaction

with non-Chinese audiences is limited,⁷ but there are many business opportunities in East Asian countries. Li says, "Don't take me as China..., take me as Asia" (Loras, 2004). Li's good looks and charisma have made him an icon of yet another unexpected audience: Korean housewives! "Korean housewives love me. I don't know why," he says (Loras, 2004). Still, Li is not surprised that Crazy English is popular in other Asian countries, as he feels that all Asian students deal with the same fear of losing face in English language learning and the same lack of spoken practice in the classroom.

The general reaction to Li Yang and his Crazy English is that both are entertaining and motivating. Some scholars think that Crazy English is too radical and that it opposes the traditional English teaching sector, such as the practices of the acclaimed New Oriental School. Others find Li to be a humorous performer, like a screaming clown at the circus. Still, Li's image is well known and well marketed throughout China, especially by current teachers and students. In a survey of Chinese university students—mostly students of applied language at Beijing Normal University—two thirds had never attended a Crazy English lecture nor bought Crazy English products; but all of them recognized Li Yang and could write at length about the method and the purpose of Crazy English (Woodward, "Survey on Li Yang Crazy English," 2006). The students surveyed said that they mostly learned about Li Yang and his Crazy English through the media, school, and friends.

Li Yang's personal image has changed a great deal since the development of Li Yang Crazy English. Li's appearance in early products is as crazy as his method; he sported bleached-blond, spiked-up hair; wore thick, punk-like glasses; and dressed in crazy shirts or items like a black tie with three large, yellow smiley faces. This image was initially well suited to the program, when Li was first promoting Crazy English as an exciting and radical new English learning program. As Li Yang Crazy English became a household name, however, Li no longer needed to prove the craziness of his program. Instead, it became necessary for him to convince potential consumers that Crazy English is *more* than just fun and games, and is an authentic, high quality English language-

⁷ Until the year 2000, Li had never left the China/Hong Kong/Taiwan region. He used to proudly tout that he was a great Chinese patriot because he had never left the country. But due to the spread of Crazy English across East Asia he has now traveled to many countries, including Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States.

learning program that guarantees real results. As such, Li's image changed to that of an up-and-coming, capable businessman. He now wears expensive-looking suits matched with classy, frameless glasses and keeps his hair, which has returned to its natural color, neatly combed and gelled. Li's public personality changed along with his image. His demeanor is no longer like that of a madman; instead, he is organized and professional, appropriately to proving his legitimacy as an English teacher. This is not to say that Crazy English has become 'Dull English,' as the method itself is as wild and entertaining as ever.

Crazy English: The Method

Precursors to Crazy English

A Brief History of English Language Learning in China

The ESL industry has boomed in China in the last decade; however, English learning has played an important role in the Chinese educational system for over a century. With the increase in industrialization and "modernization" brought to China by Western merchants and missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the study of Western European languages, including English, became more popular among Chinese students. By the 1880s, knowledge of English already had a high market value in China, and those who knew English received lucrative opportunities for employment, including government positions in the Imperial Maritime Customs and other agencies and in the commercial firms of the treaty ports (Kwang-Ching Liu, 1960). When missionaries erected Anglo-Chinese schools in China, they found that students were willing to pay high tuition just for English lessons (Kwang-Ching Liu, 1960). This high demand for ESL programs is reflected in a statement issued by the Methodist founders of Peking University in 1886.

A knowledge of the English language is soon to become a necessity with the many classes of public men in China. It will be our aim to give the

student a critical and practical knowledge of the English language, such as will enable him, by the aid of current literature, to keep abreast of the times and render him fit to be a leader among the millions of his people to whom all this is a sealed book. (Kwang-Ching Liu, 1960)

At the turn of the century, the last imperial dynasty in China, the Qing, was nearing its end, and Chinese revolutionaries made every effort to replace traditional institutions with modern ones. They called for the abolishment of the Confucian- and classics-based civil service examination, and this was done in 1905, thereby opening the door to Western learning, including science, mathematics, the social sciences, and the English language (Lutz, 1971). English continued to be one of the dominant languages taught in Chinese classrooms, though the Russian language was preferred in the 1950s due to China's growing political relationship with Marxist Russia. At the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), however, English gained a position as the primary foreign language of study in China and has maintained this position with the development of globalization (Jianbo Li, 2006).

As of 2002, English learning in public schools in the People's Republic of China (PRC) began in third grade, with classes four days a week, continuing through the second year of college. More recently, however, the PRC Ministry of Education mandated that Chinese students begin learning English in first grade for five days a week. Meeting the new mandate requires an increase in teachers and materials in all public schools, which has been difficult for most to achieve. English courses in secondary schools and institutions of higher education are, like all other subject matter, guided by the Ministry of Education's regulations and standardized syllabi. For universities, the Ministry of Education has developed the Syllabus of College English, which dictates that all college students must pass certain nationally standardized English examinations.

The English Exams

In addition to the Chinese middle school and high school entrance exams that contain English language sections, one of the most important standardized English exams

taken by Chinese students is the CET4/6 (College English Test: Bands 4/6). The CET exams were established in 1986 and are designed for students who are not college English majors. Nearly all bachelor degree candidates in Chinese universities are required to pass the CET4, and most Chinese business employers prefer to hire those who have passed the CET6. Several sources estimate that every year nearly 2 million Chinese students take the exam, which is offered in June and December. The CET provides a measurement of only listening, reading, and writing skills. A newer exam, the SET (Spoken English Test), is now offered as a supplement to the CET, measuring spoken English ability. After passing the CET4, all non-English majors must pass an SBE (Subject-Based English) exam, testing their English skills (most notably, vocabulary) as it relates to their major.

The government also offers the TEM4 and TEM8 exams (英语专业四、八级统测, translated as Test for English Majors: Band 4/8). All students who are English majors at institutions of higher education in China must sit for the TEM exams, taking the TEM4 at the end of their fourth semester and the TEM8 at the end of their eighth semester (approximately at the end of their college sophomore and senior years, respectively). These tests are obviously more difficult and comprehensive than the CET exams; and many foreign employers in China prefer to hire those who have passed the TEM8.

For any student interested in pursuing a post-secondary education in the West, almost all accredited American universities require that applicants submit scores from common entrance examinations, such as the SAT Reasoning Test and SAT IIs or the ACT. For foreign students who are nonnative speakers of English, most colleges require that they submit scores from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL offers a measurement of English language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Much to the chagrin of Chinese students, ETS added the oral component of the exam in 2005 (the first TOEFL was administered in 1964) to alleviate criticism that the exam could not accurately determine language capability without incorporating speech. In China, there are currently 73 TOEFL testing sites in 28 cities (19 sites in Beijing alone); but these numbers are still too low to accommodate all of those who wish to take the exam in China. The increase in the number of Chinese students taking the exam forced the ETS and China's National

Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) to increase the number of TOEFL seats from approximately 1,950 in June to 3,550 by the end of 2007. This is an increase of 80% capacity in a mere six months. ETS made this announcement on their website, "The added capacity is one of several initiatives taken by ETS and the NEEA to meet increased demand for the world-leading English language proficiency exam in China" (6 Nov. 2007).

A major criticism of foreign-language classes in China is that they emphasize preparing for these English examinations, rather than learning the material comprehensively and practically. Since the major English exams in China only recently added oral components, the traditional classroom emphasis has been only on reading, writing, and, sometimes, listening skills. Students devote innumerable hours studying for the exams; yet years of hard work do not usually result in English fluency. The notorious tradition of "teaching the exam" and rote learning, or by learning the patterns and tricks of each exam's individual format, leaves no time or opportunity for speaking practice.

The Rise of Private English Language Institutions in China

The response to the booming ESL industry in China was swift. To supplement in-class English learning and exam preparation, entrepreneurs created hundreds of private institutions devoted to ESL education. Some programs mirror the Ministry of Education's syllabi, offering their students extra practice on the materials that the students receive in their classrooms. Other programs cater to adults and business people who need to learn specialized English vocabulary. There are also English language centers for young children, educational software for those who cannot afford the time or money to take an extra class, and even English language learning television shows for all ages. Many Chinese parents are concerned with improving their children's English skills, so they invest a great deal of money in private tutors and English classes in private institutions.

One example of a private English language learning institution that follows the traditional English learning method is the New Oriental Language School. New Oriental, which was founded in 1993, is one of the largest and most trusted of the private ESL institutions in China. Each year it enrolls more than one million students in its Language

Center courses. The greatest demand of ESL students is test preparation, so New Oriental focuses on teaching to the exam. Chinese secondary school teachers and university professors support New Oriental above most other programs, and encourage parents and students to enroll in its classes in addition to their normal English studies.

As the ESL industry in China has become saturated with traditional programs that mimic New Oriental's, some of the sharper entrepreneurs offer private English programs that have found a special niche in the industry. In Shanghai, a new ESL institution called 'Talk da Talk' has become widely successful by drawing attention to its innovative use of technology in language learning. For example, one of Talk da Talk's online programs, called the Talk Box, is an audiovisual chat room hosted by the company employees (all native English speakers) and used as a forum for real-time English discussion or Chinese-English language exchange. Talk da Talk members can also post videos and pictures in an online company album to share their English experiences with one another. The company is constantly stretching its capabilities and plans to expand its current use of cellular phone messaging (for services like text messages of the "English Word of the Day") to include language learning and chat rooms via mobile devices. Even as a young company, Talk da Talk has found great success by marketing its unique learn-by-technology offerings, to separate it from the clones of other English language learning programs.

Perhaps the most successful, best known, and wildest of all the private ESL institutions is Li Yang Crazy English. By marketing its program as an entirely novel approach to English studies and by promoting its ability to fill the speaking gap resultant of traditional classroom shortcomings, Li Yang Crazy English has become a household name in China.

Crazy English Pedagogical Method

Common Beliefs about the Crazy English Method

In a survey of graduate and undergraduate students at Beijing Normal University and East China Normal University in Shanghai, regarding their experience with and their understanding of Li Yang and Crazy English, consumers and non-consumers of Crazy

English goods could all identify the Crazy English method (Woodward, "Li Yang and Crazy English Survey," Oct. 2006).⁸ When asked to explain Li's techniques, they wrote, "*Speak loudly, practice a lot*" ("大声地说, 大量地练习"), "*Especially emphasize speaking and pronunciation*" ("非常注重口语和发音"), and "*Read aloud English quickly until you can blurt it out*" ("快速朗读英语直到脱口而出"). One undergraduate student who was familiar with the Crazy English program wrote, in English, "[Li] mainly teaches English by making the students imitating [sic] standard pronunciations. The students can have a good command of English by enhancing their spoken English first."

As the students correctly identified, the Crazy English package does not include grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, or listening comprehension. Li believes, "[Chinese students] have no problem writing, they have no problem reading. That's why I trigger their power of speaking" (interview with Kirpal Singh, 2003). The users and non-users of Crazy English also understand why Li primarily focuses on speech in his method. The students surveyed wrote, "*A large number of Chinese people do not have the opportunity, or they are too embarrassed to take the initiative to speak English, especially in a loud voice*" ("多数中国人没有机会, 或者不好意思主动说英语, 特别是大声说") and "*Chinese people's spoken English is generally pretty poor, [so Li Yang's] method is pretty good*" ("中国人的英语普遍是口语比较差, 这个方法比较好").

One of Li Yang's commonly publicized goals for Crazy English is to teach three hundred million Chinese to speak perfect English. In the survey, students agreed with Li Yang that learning English was an important factor in China's development; but they disagreed that it is important for everyone in China to speak English, especially fluently. Still, the students recognized Li's reasons for pinpointing speech as the primary element of the Crazy English methodology.

In Lee's article "Let's Go Crazy!", one Crazy English student who studies at Beijing Medical University, Li Xuting, validates Li Yang's method, "In school we're not encouraged to participate like this." Indeed, Li believes that learning a language requires direct participation, just like learning a sport: "If you want to be a good swimmer, you

⁸ Please see Appendix for survey format.

have to jump in the water, conquer the fear, survive. You cannot just sit beside the swimming pool, taking notes" (interview with Kirpal Singh, 2003).

The Focus on Speech in Crazy English

Li Yang has three rules for participation in Crazy English: Speak Loud, Speak Fast, and Speak Clearly (大声, 快速, 清晰).⁹ To improve pronunciation, Li emphasizes the repetition of phrases, words, and syllables, so that the tongue and the brain become accustomed to making new sounds. Li calls this "Tongue-Muscle Training" or working the "International Muscle," and says, "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" (Liu Yumei, 2001). Frequently, the term "International Muscle" is incorrectly used by Crazy English consumers to denote "the tongue," rather than Li's definition for "international muscle" as using one's tongue to speak English to become strong internationally.

Li Yang Crazy English uses the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as its standard for pronunciation notation. The International Phonetic Association developed the IPA in 1886 as a tool for writing all languages (all sounds) with a single alphabet. In some Crazy English products, such as the MP3 computer program, English words and sentences are presented in three pronunciation guides: English, IPA, and Kenyon and Knott (KK). The KK alphabet is a less detailed version of the IPA and provides a denotation of American English sounds only. It is primarily used in Taiwan, where it is the standard guide for English pronunciation in classrooms. Li probably included the KK pronunciation guide with his English and IPA notations so that Taiwanese consumers would be more likely to consider his products when purchasing ESL materials. Crazy English books and computer programs rely on the English, IPA, and KK standards to demonstrate pronunciation where an audio medium is not available. Someone using these visual-only products would necessarily need to recognize at least one of these alphabets

⁹ One supposed former employee of Li Yang Crazy English argues that the order for the goals of Crazy English are always misrepresented and are, officially, 1) Loud, 2) Clear, and 3) Fast. However, when Li states his method in his lectures, he uses the order provided above, 1) Loud, 2) Fast, 3) Clear. See: "A Few Lines Concerning Li Yang Crazy English," 2005.

in order to achieve the touted goal of speech and pronunciation improvement. Fortunately, most of the visual Crazy English products, such as books, include audiotapes or CDs that provide the pronunciation of all of its words and sentences.

Li Yang Crazy English employs several native English speakers, usually Caucasian Americans, to assist Li with lecture performances and product development. During the Crazy English lectures, native speakers help Li demonstrate both accurate and exaggerated American pronunciation. The native speakers' assistance is also present in the book products; they insert additional commentary on the usage of certain words and phrases along with the normal lessons. Native English speaking employees include Jim and Andrew (both attractive men in their twenties), Philip (a grandfatherly gentleman seen in Zhang Yuan's documentary *Crazy English*), and Kim (an attractive Caucasian woman who is the leading assistant).¹⁰ While Kim can speak Mandarin Chinese, some of the other American employees, like Philip, do not. Philip is a frequent scapegoat for Li's mockery of Westerners who are not capable of speaking Chinese. Philip, of course, laughs at his own inability to speak a single comprehensible sentence of Mandarin, but still pushes Chinese students to speak flawless English. Li Yang and the Western assistants all speak in a General American accent (neutral Midwest). Li often exaggerates the American accent of some words, particularly his favorite phrase "very good" in which he draws out the vowels (including the "y") in both words. It is unclear whether this exaggeration is intentional in order to make the correct pronunciation of commonly mispronounced words more obvious, or whether Li unintentionally overdoes his own pronunciation. Either way, the students do not imitate this over-exaggeration—most have difficulty with the normal pronunciation—so Li's embellished accent does not seem to impede the learning process. Li will occasionally speak in another English accent, such as British English or vocalizations common to those in the American ghetto ("gangsta-speak"), but this is done in jest, merely to entertain the audience.

Li Yang's talent for pronunciation includes his ability to recreate the accents of Chinese people speaking American English, as well as the accent of an American speaking Mandarin (he pretends to be an American saying, "Ni **How**," instead of the

¹⁰ Li Yang Crazy English has employed many native English speakers (who are always listed by first name only), but those listed here are a few of the primary contributors.

accurate "Ni Hao"). For example, when teaching the proper pronunciation for the word "China," he states that people from Beijing incorrectly say "Chaena" instead of "China." Li's talent for imitating accents in other languages is helpful in that it exposes inaccurate pronunciations and provides a clear and easy means for audience members to compare sounds.

Gesticulation as an Aid to Pronunciation

Another way that Li Yang demonstrates the proper pronunciation of words is his use of approximately twenty hand/arm movements that are supposedly coordinated to specific vowel and consonant sounds. In Crazy English lectures, Li will introduce a word to his audience and, after repeating the word several times, tell the audience to put their hands in the air and copy his movements. They attempt to coordinate their voices and hands to produce an accurate pronunciation. Following is a table that lists some of the most frequently used pronunciation and hand/arm movement synchronizations¹¹:

¹¹ For pictures of some of the hand/arm movements, please see Appendix.

Sound	Hand/Arm Movement
<i>a</i> as in <i>what</i>	With the right hand held above the head, make a hand puppet and open it when vocalizing the "a" (For the word "what," slowly open the puppet mouth on "wha" and close it on the "t")
<i>i</i> as in <i>like</i>	With the right hand's pointer finger, draw a small complete clockwise circle
<i>ow</i> as in <i>brown</i>	With the right hand pointer and middle fingers, draw a large circle that moves towards the body, then away
<i>e</i> as in <i>better</i>	With the right hand held above the head, the index and middle fingers make a scissor cutting motion, opening on the "eh"
<i>o</i> as in <i>go</i>	With closed fingers and a cupped palm, dip the right hand from the high right down to the center and then up again to the left
<i>ea</i> as in <i>meat</i>	Make the OK sign with the right hand, moving this in a straight line across the body from left to right
<i>th</i> as in <i>three</i>	With the right hand held above the head, bend hand at the wrist with a flat palm, move arm from right to left over one's head
<i>a</i> as in <i>made</i>	With the right hand held above the head, bend hand at the wrist with a flat palm, move arm from front to back over one's head

The movements listed above seem to have no established relationship with the vowel or consonant sounds, other than Li's decision to pair them together. No academic theory promotes such pairings. Furthermore, Li is not always consistent with his gestures, which would puzzle a student who attempted to memorize the voice-to-movement coordination. That Li's changes may be accidental indicates that he does not take the gestures as seriously as he professes. For example, in one lecture, Li used a different gesture for the "a" in "made" (see above for original), which is to put both hands at the sides of one's mouth, bend hand at the wrist with flat palms and fingertips facing inwards, moving the hands from beside the mouth to behind the head while vocalizing the "a." This casual substitution of supposedly coordinated gestures may further confuse the already confused populace as to the proper Crazy English movements. Many non-consumers of Crazy English associate the method with wild hand clapping and arm waving; but they do not know that there is a purpose to this movement, especially that

the English sounds have an assigned action. One native English speaker (a Canadian) claims that when he performed a Korean Television Shopping Network infomercial for Li Yang Crazy English, he was commanded to say that Canadians learn English by waving their hands in the air while speaking (Grant, 2003). The Canadian was further forced to wave his arms whenever he spoke English in response to the questions asked by the Korean actors. As the Canadian actor did not know what he was supposed to do, he merely flailed about as he spoke. Obviously, neither the actors nor the people marketing the products understood the importance or the denotation of the Crazy English movements. This undermines the educational significance that Li attaches to his movements.

Coherency

A major flaw in Li's method is that it does not address coherency or fluidity of speech. Even though improvement in English speaking is the primary goal of Crazy English, it examines only the problem of pronunciation. If Crazy English followers do not have an extensive knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, then they will not learn to speak coherent English narratives from a Crazy English lecture or product. In lectures, Li teaches the pronunciation of single words or words within a sentence, without giving any context. Many of Li's sentences seem perfectly useful, such as "How are you doing?", but they become less practical because he does not teach the follow-up responses, such as:

A: How are you doing?

B: I'm great! And you?

Moreover, many phrases that Li teaches are random and useless, such as "She's as fine as frog's hair," "Hainan is the Hawaii of the Orient," or "Don't worry about the horses being blind, just load the wagon." Li also teaches uncommon colloquialisms, such as "There are no flies on me" (indicating an active mind) and "No big talk with me" (meaning, "Don't brag"). The attention that Li gives to such sentences would lead a

student to believe that the sentences were important or useful, which they are not. In addition, without receiving much direction as to the appropriate context for such phrases, the student is left to imagine where and when to use the sentences that they labored to pronounce perfectly. The combining of words that are unrelated in meaning and pronunciation is another problem of Crazy English. In one computer program, Li asks the user to repeat, "Lucky, nice, face, no, no smoking, talk, famous, dangerous, enjoy your stay." These words obviously make no sense when spoken together—but Crazy English consumers without an extensive knowledge of English may think that they are learning a sentence or important word combinations. Several Westerners have been bewildered by encounters with Crazy English students, who try to move at high speed from one random topic to the next, leaving their conversation partners in a daze ("Crazy Place, Crazy English," 2004; Williams, "Foreigner").

Presence and Vocal Personality

In addition to teaching proper pronunciation, Li Yang also encourages his students to show charisma when speaking English. He believes that a full and weighty voice is necessary to prove one's skill in the English language. When teaching vocal personality, Li speaks loudly but, unlike what he does in many other situations, does not shout. He frequently demonstrates the use of the abdominal diaphragm to push out words with strength. For example, when teaching the sentence, "Let's get together again soon," Li says that the first four words are spoken with strength, while the last, "soon," is softer. Li shows an inward (toward the spine) pull of the abdomen to create strength and a forceful release of the abdomen for the softer "soon." Unfortunately, it seems that Li never studied the proper use of the diaphragm for speech, because power is conveyed by a release of the abdominal muscle, rather than an inward pull, which creates the opposite effect. In fact, when Li and his audience practice repeating this sentence with the diaphragm movement, they all inadvertently (and by default) emphasize the "soon" over the previous four words. It seems that no one recognizes this contrast or, if they do, they probably blame it on the speed and repetition. Usage of the diaphragm aside, Li is more successful in teaching his students to replicate confident tones for sentences such as, "I

am Chinese. I am from the People's Republic of China."

Reading Comprehension, Writing, and Listening Comprehension in Crazy English

At most Crazy English classes and lectures, especially those for high school and university students, the audience will benefit more from the lesson if they have a working knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. When Li Yang chooses words and phrases to practice, he does not provide vocabulary lists or grammar notes; he assumes that there is no need to waste time on translation or context. In the lectures, Li may translate a word or a phrase into Chinese, but this is often to emphasize the feeling behind the word by reminding the audience of the emphasis in a Chinese translation. That said, the vocabulary and grammar used in Crazy English lectures are both simple. In fact, Crazy English lectures rarely contain full English sentences. For example, Li will string together words like, "Good. City. Busy," and "Great. Make. Dangerous. Famous." Usually the words are chosen to emphasize a similar pronunciation, like the "ā" sound in the second set of words here; yet, at other times, the words seem to have no similarities in pronunciation, as with "good" and "city/busy." The few full English sentences that Li does articulate in his lectures are usually not intended for repetition by the audience, but are merely spoken to impress the students with Li's pronunciation skills. Very rarely is English text displayed in the lectures, beyond the signs for vowel and consonant sounds, and no writing is required.

The emphases in Crazy English products differ slightly from the emphases in the Crazy English lectures. The products can be divided into two categories: those that utilize the Crazy English methodology and those that more closely resemble test-preparation materials. In the former category are products such as the "Blurt Out" book and audiotape series (《脱口而出》). The "Blurt Out" series comprises five small books and accompanying audiotapes, which teach the meaning, proper pronunciation, and vocal personality of English colloquialisms. These include, "That's settled!" "not have a penny to one's name," and "don't lose heart." Each colloquialism is followed by one or two examples of its use. For example, the colloquialism "Don't talk to me like that!" is demonstrated as:

A: You're fat and ugly and I hate you.

B: Don't talk to me like that!

Three of Li's native English speaking staff—Kim, Jim, and Andrew—provide commentary on the usefulness and underlying meaning of certain phrases in the "Blurt Out" books. For example, when learning "The very idea (!)," Andrew attaches his note for the usefulness of the phrase: "A wonderful way to express indignation." These commentaries are translated into Chinese, as well. Although the focus of Crazy English lectures is on speaking, the nature of visual media, such as a book, naturally increases the emphasis on reading comprehension or grammar and vocabulary. Still, the inclusion of the audiotape helps balance the otherwise reading-heavy focus. It would be difficult to learn grammar and vocabulary from these materials without having a prior understanding of English.

In contrast, the Crazy English test-preparation products oppose the Crazy English goals. Products such as middle school and high school entrance exam preparation series 《阅读突破》 (translated as "Reading Break-Through") and "Conquer Junior High School English Listening Comprehension in 5 Minutes" (《5分钟突破英语初中听力》) merely provide practice English exams. They do not include audiotapes for verbal practice, and give only short English passages followed by multiple-choice questions on grammar, vocabulary, and plot. No writing is required; and English is only tested, not taught. These products are no different from the multitude of traditional English language exam preparation materials in the Chinese ESL market. In public, Li dismisses such materials as unimportant for the study of real English; yet it seems that the promise of profitability of such products is all too tempting for Li Yang to remain completely aloof.



Li teaches his method to a large assembly of students in Heilongjiang, 1998. The students enjoy Li's charisma and incorporation of edutainment in his lectures, as well as the opportunity to scream and clap to loud music.

[Click image to play video \(time: 1 min. 54 sec.\)](#)

From *Crazy English*, directed by Zhang Yuan. Xian Film Studio, 1999.

Crazy English Psychological Method

The Fear of Losing Face

The psychological component of the Crazy English method is closely related to its didactic emphasis on speech improvement. Li frequently shouts one of his favorite motivational slogans, "Crazy English! Crazy life! Crazy world! I love this crazy game, so let's go!" The "Crazy" in Crazy English signifies Li Yang's desire for students to have passion in their studies and to fulfill their dreams by giving over 100% of themselves to their personal goals, without the fear of failure. This message seems especially important in East Asian countries, as one of the major hindrances to activities such as learning foreign languages is the fear of losing face. "Face" is not a strong concept in the West, where students are usually told to "shoot for the stars," "try your best," "be an individual," and "have no fear." In the East, "face" is what is expected of someone under certain conditions and according to certain relationships. "Losing face" is not meeting the standards expected in a given situation. The fear of losing face is so great for many

Chinese that it becomes debilitating. One article in the *American Journal of Sociology* explains:

Losing face is a serious matter which will, in varying degrees, affect one's ability to function effectively in society. Face is lost when the individual, either through his action or that of people closely related to him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies. In contrast to the ideology of individualism, the question of face frequently arises beyond the realm of individual responsibility and subjective volition. (Ho, 1976)

In Chinese classrooms, students are expected to speak English at a certain level of fluency. If they feel that their spoken English skills are not up to par with the standards set by the teacher, then they may be so afraid of failure that they decide to forgo speaking in class. Common English teaching methods in China respond to this fear of failure by deemphasizing speech in the classroom. The same fear is reflected in encounters with foreigners; if a Chinese person feels that his or her English is too poor, he or she may not converse with a native English speaker for fear of poorly representing Chinese people as a whole. The goal is to avoid embarrassment, even at the cost of learning to speak accurately and effectively. By denying speaking practice, the fear of losing face becomes a vicious cycle, wherein language skills deteriorate with fear, and fear increases with deteriorating capability. The negative consequence of this common cycle is the reason that Li Yang focuses on speaking practice and on self-strengthening. He believes that if the Chinese people can overcome their fears, they would have a more successful language learning experience.

Dr. Weiguo Qu, a professor of Sociology and English at Shanghai's Fudan University, discussed the contribution of the Crazy English method to dispelling the fear of losing face: "Li Yang's way of doing things is you shout and speak collectively, so basically it's anonymity. So when you shout this way, [making mistakes] doesn't matter at all. [...] People acknowledge Crazy English lectures as a place where they should shout English, even if their English is poor." Qu is skeptical that successful strides made

by students during the Crazy English lectures will remain once the lecture has ended. He says that once the anonymity is lost, the bravery disappears (personal interview, 6 Nov. 2006).

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. For 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 was also true for the male-female relationship; traditionally, Chinese women should not flaunt intelligence or acquired skills before less accomplished men. Fortunately, a more balanced society has limited this harsh gender gap. 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 diverse student demographic. Taxi drivers, police officers, and doctors may all attend the same class. If this is the case, then the taxi driver may be disinclined to contribute as much to the 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.

Mind, Body, and Soul

Many consider Li Yang a motivational speaker due to his emphasis on personal empowerment in Crazy English lectures.¹² Li chants, "I love humiliation! I embrace hardship! I welcome failure! I pursue success!" Li disagrees with the traditional accommodation of the fear of embarrassment in the classroom, because he believes that embarrassment can be a great motivator to learn and improve. Li Yang's own "Cinderella story" as a failing English student who became a government translator and the head of a million-dollar English learning corporation is an inspiration to students. The *Shanghai Star* said (2000), "Li tells of his own experience to encourage his audience. To many

¹² China does not have a large motivational speaking profession. While bookstores may contain self-help books, motivational lectures are nearly nonexistent.

young audiences, he has served as something of an idol, a successful model of self-fulfillment." Zhang Kun (2000) writes of Li's conquering of fear:

Once [Li Yang] decided to make a career of language promotion, he made up his mind to eliminate this weakness. He forced himself to go out onto the streets wearing a pair of earrings that looked extremely feminine, which was quite a sight in a conservative city in 1980s China. He said he met with the "queer looks of passers-by" at first, and was very embarrassed. Then he challengingly returned their looks, until he finally got used to them and put them out of his mind.

Li says, "You have to have passion, you have to do something." But his most familiar motivational 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!" Li uses these sentences with his students to combat common psychological obstacles, like bashfulness and introversion, because as Li says, "Self confidence is a serious problem for most Chinese people" (Lee, "Let's Go Crazy"). Other statements by Li along the same lines include, "Chinese are typically shy. Shouting can help erase their mental obstacles, excite their mouths and ears, and strengthen their confidence and concentration" (Liu Yumei, 2001) and "The more times you lose your face, the more progress you make" (*Channel NewsAsia* interview, 2003). Although giving students the confidence to succeed in school is not an innovative message, with Crazy English Li has been able to popularize and market the message more successfully than ever before. Scholar Kerim Friedman (2005) writes, "From what I see, self-confidence is the real product that Li is selling."

In addition to self-confidence (which he sometimes takes to the point of arrogance), Li emphasizes three other themes: determination, courage, and passion (or obsession). A poem on the first page of the fifth volume of Li's Crazy English book series "Blurt Out" demonstrates the intertwining of Li's motivational and educational goals:

For one single Beautiful Sentence,
I have the determination to yell one hundred times.
I have the passion to listen to tapes one hundred times.
I have the perseverance to write one hundred times.
I have the obsession to talk to myself one hundred times.
Maybe just for one useful, beautiful, powerful sentence!
But at least I will totally master this sentence!
Sentence by sentence,
I will build my splendid empire of English!

Although helping students overcome a lack of confidence is Li Yang's main objective, he also advocates physical strength-building for students. He hopes to add a gym and a psychological counseling center to his company building. Movement is a major part of Crazy English psychology, because Li believes that a strong body builds a strong mind. When working with smaller groups, especially in his training camps, Li may be seen running laps with students, shouting with them slogans like "Never let your country down!" to the rhythm of their jogging. There are Crazy English video segments and pictures of Li working out at a gym or running outside, regardless of the weather.

During lectures, Li uses two activity structures that, unlike the hand/arm movements, assist students with breaking out of their shell. One of the activities is clapping, sometimes to loud techno music, while screaming Crazy English phrases as quickly and as loudly as possible. The noise of the clapping (and the loud music, when used) drowns out the individual voices, allowing for anonymity in speaking practice. The students are more comfortable, because they do not fear others overhearing their potential mistakes or shortcomings. Clapping can also encourage students to speed up the spoken repetition of phrases. The second activity commonly used in lectures is a confrontational shouting game.¹³ Li will bring a student or several students up to his stage, and with the students on one team and Li on his own team, the two groups jab their fingers in their opponents' faces while shrieking sentences like "You had better study hard!" If taken out

¹³ Please see picture in Appendix.

of context, this activity would be highly abusive; but in the Crazy English setting, Li hopes that it will ignite passion and courage within students' hearts.

The hand/arm gesticulation that supposedly aids pronunciation can also be seen as another psychological activity. Li hopes that by coordinating the body while learning English, students will be more engaged in the learning process, as well as excited by what they are doing. Two foreign ESL teachers in China agree with Li: "It is kinetic. It is learning by doing. It is effective. It works" ("Doing the ESL Thing and ... Enjoying It," 2004).



Li plays motivational 'shouting games' with young students during an outdoor lecture in Longhuixian, Hunan. Thousands of students hold practice sheets with Li's image printed on front while screaming the phrase 'You had better study hard.'

Click image to play video (time: 1 min.)

From *Crazy English*, directed by Zhang Yuan. Xian Film Studio, 1999.

The Potential for Success of the Crazy English Method

Academic Success

The academic success of Crazy English is dubious. Skills in English writing, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension are not improved, as these are not

even objectives of the method. As for speech, its coherency and fluidity are not improved by the method and, indeed, may be impaired by the emphasis on incoherent and random sentence and vocabulary usage. Slight gains may be made in pronunciation, though this would not be attributed to the arbitrarily coordinated hand/arm movements. But in interviews Crazy English students, especially those who use the method sporadically (as most do), have reported that they quickly forget what they practiced in the lectures.¹⁴ Without emphasizing proper pronunciation within extended narratives, it is difficult for students to connect a mere repetition of a vowel sound with its general application. Perhaps the only academic success of Crazy English is that it publicizes the need for more spoken practice in English language learning classrooms.

Fortunately, one academic source analyzing the pedagogical success of Crazy English is on its way; Lydia Li of Australia's Melbourne University is researching this subject for her PhD dissertation. She has visited two Crazy English centers for several months, following students' progress and interviewing students and teachers on their perceived academic achievement. Lydia Li's findings will be crucial to advancing the discussion of the Crazy English movement, for if her analysis indicates the method's ineffectiveness as a successful tool for English learning, then the premise on which Li bases his movement will be shattered.

Motivational Success

Li Yang's success as a motivational speaker is slightly greater than his achievements as an English pedagogue. Li's lectures are generally entertaining and enjoyable, a true account of "making learning fun." His efforts to instill passion and motivation within his students are laudable, as are his arguments against the fear of losing face or the fear of failure. Undoubtedly, his messages and his own legend of coming from little to achieving great personal success inspire many of his students. This inspiration, however, may not reach as far as improving language skills. Within the context of Crazy English lectures, students may feel impassioned to shout English slogans along with the other audience members; but once they are taken out of Li Yang's world, they are

¹⁴ Amber R. Woodward, "Survey on Li Yang and Crazy English," Survey, Oct. 2006.

confronted with entirely different circumstances that do not support individualism, bravery, or risk-taking. In this way, Li Yang's psychological method falls short of its goal.

Li Yang Crazy English Politics: The Madness

Li Yang's Personal Ideology

The sweeping phenomenon of Li Yang Crazy English is important for reasons greater than mass language learning and motivational speaking. Crazy English lectures have become an outlet for Li Yang to propagate his personal political and social ideologies. Li's goal for Crazy English goes far beyond the innocent helping of exasperated Chinese students feel confident in their spoken English skills; he hopes that through an increase in the quality of the Chinese people's English, the Chinese can promote their country and help it rise to a position of (economic) dominance over America, Europe, and especially Japan. While it is not uncommon for American celebrities to comment on national and international current events during a live concert or other public appearances in China, the government has rarely accepted mass gatherings in which a single figure advocates his or her social or political opinions.

When surveyed about their understanding or knowledge of Li Yang's relationship with the government, the Chinese students did not have much to say (Woodward, "Survey on Li Yang Crazy English," Oct. 2006). Most merely wrote that they were not sure. One student said that she was "*not too sure, [and I] don't really pay attention to this sort of thing. It seems like the media has discussed it*" ("不太清楚，也不太关心这些事情。媒体好像也报道过"). Another student from East China Normal University seemed to know about Li's political opinions, but instead provided a mistakenly optimistic point of view: "[Li Yang] did a lot to promote mutual understanding and communication between China and US government by acting as an interpreter. Both Chinese government and US government appreciate his performance. I know these [*sic*] through media." Despite the students' lack of awareness or attention to Li's political ideology, the broader goals of Li Yang Crazy English are no secret. Li broadcasts his ambitions for China

during his lectures and readily answers reporters' questions regarding his political ideology.¹⁵ His two main concerns are the support for Chinese nationalism and the promotion of hatred or racism against the Japanese (among others). These ideals are interrelated, though the former is more perceptible in Crazy English lectures and products, and the latter is more subtle in its connection to Crazy English.



This clip is taken from the Introduction sequence to one of Li's earlier (and uncontroversial) computer programs. Its chaotic visuals, going-to-war music, and nationalistic and anti-foreign themes are astoundingly provocative and precede an otherwise entirely non-political learning tool.

[Click image to play video \(time: 3 min. 49 sec.\)](#)

From *Li Yang Yingyu*, performed by Li Yang. Digide A.

Nationalism

Li believes that a simple strategy can bring about his core ambition that China rise as the world's leading nation. First, Chinese students should learn to speak English, the current *lingua franca* of commerce and foreign political relations. Li says, "If China is to be an economic power, its citizens must speak the language of global commerce well

¹⁵ The reporters who ask about his ideology are all foreign, specifically European and American, and not Chinese. However, even if Chinese reporters do not ask about his political ideology, Li is sure to bring it up.

enough to be understood" (Meijdam, 1999). Once Chinese students have perfected their pronunciation and speaking abilities, Li suggests they go abroad to Europe or North America and serve as Chinese language teachers or become students of business, particularly American business practices. During this time abroad, they should speak English to many foreigners, promoting the superiority of the Chinese people. "I want [the Chinese] to use English and spread Chinese as a world language.... Mastering English and therefore enriching our country is an act of patriotism," Li says (Yamane, 2005). At minimum, Chinese abroad should educate foreigners about Chinese culture and the Chinese language; it is even better if they advocate tourism and study abroad in China. This nationalist outlook is Li's way of lessening the PRC Ministry of Education's fear that students who study in the West will either forget about China or think less of the Chinese government and societal standards. Li says, "I promote the love-thy-country angle because I don't want our people to forget China after they acquire English" (Friedman, "Crazy English"). Zhu Pu, Shanghai's director for primary and secondary schools agrees with Li that English is a crucial survival skill; he says, "English is not just a class.... It is an international symbol of status" (Cheng and McGregor, 2003). Li also invokes the Chinese tradition of filial piety when encouraging students' role in China's development. He tells the students that it is their duty to their country and to their parents to help China's economy rise above the top three economies: America, Europe (Li aggregates individual national economies into the "European economy"), and Japan. Li cries, "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" (Walsh, 1999). This invocation of a modern filial piety seems rather effective; when the students hear this and begin to repeat Li's phrases "Never let your parents down! Never let your country down! Never let yourself down!" some of them, especially the female students, begin to sob.¹⁶

Li Yang's nationalist propaganda also includes a bit of tough love. Part of Li's motivation for building up China is his disgust with the country's current state of affairs. In 2000, Japanese news source *Asian Political News* discussed Li's point of view:

¹⁶ The same thing happened in the 1950s and 1960s with Mao Zedong and his little red book.

The Chinese government, apparently favoring his nationalistic approach, has allowed Li to use historic spots such as the Great Wall, the Marco Polo Bridge, and the Forbidden City, helping stir media interest in his classes. But Li said during the interview [with Kyodo News] that his real purpose in using those places is to make Chinese people realize that China is no longer the great country it used to be, and that learning English is the only way to regain national prosperity. "We have a splendid ancient civilization, but we should not be proud of it," he said. Printing, papermaking, gunpowder and the compass are known as the four great ancient inventions of China, but "now we are importing all our machines from foreign countries," Li said. "We should not just be proud of something glorious in the past. We should be ashamed of the distance we lag behind." ("Crazy English' teacher in pursuit of Chinese dream," 12 June 2000)

Presumably Chinese government officials would not admit that China lags in "modernization," as Li Yang does. Li uses these harsh feelings to elicit passion—passion directed at his goals for China—in his students. It is important to note that Li promotes nationalism and Chinese patriotism, but not communism, specifically. There is no reason to believe that Li is against Communism, but he does not frequently mention it, even in his entirely political lectures. He does quote Marxist slogans, but these are in pursuit of success. Li's ideology also differs from the current government's in that he advocates learning Western business practices and the like (albeit to improve the Chinese society); most of the Chinese Communist Party's current leaders are considered conservative, or inward-looking, and do not advocate Western influence.

Racism

Li Yang's other type of commentary, with its overtones of racism, is more subtle than his nationalist ideology. He is particularly critical of the Japanese, Americans, and Europeans. Unlike Li's racism against the Japanese, his resentment towards Americans

and Europeans is primarily based in their economic dominance over China. Li's feelings towards the Japanese, however, are personal. In his lectures, he derides the Japanese as stupid (they cannot speak Chinese or good English) and as thieves of Chinese innovation and culture. He tells his students that they should be embarrassed and horrified that the Chinese economy has fallen behind the Japanese economy. And while Li usually avoids teaching English to elementary school students (he believes that children should not learn English until they are old enough to have mastered Chinese), he will visit primary schools to lecture about the history of Japanese animosity towards the Chinese. In one scene of Chinese independent director Zhang Yuan's documentary, *Crazy English*, Li Yang and reporter Mia Turner from *Time Asia*¹⁷ discuss Li's anti-Japanese sentiments¹⁸:

Time Asia— "So yesterday when you were talking, you mentioned about Japan, and you said, you know, '*Japan has stolen our things*'"--

LY— "*Correct.*"

Time Asia— "*Stolen the world's...*"--

LY— "*Yes.*"

Time Asia— "What did you mean by that?"

LY— "Japanese people are just a.... Japanese people.... I, I did one thing.... I collect a lot of photos about the Japans [*sic*] invasion in China. *I took scenes of the Japanese murdering people.... I collect these photographs. That is to say, I print them out. I want to show them to Chinese elementary school students, to let them know that we absolutely cannot forget the events of 1937, about 60 years ago. Because now they [Chinese children] are already indifferent, because they use Japanese products [and] think that Japanese things are great. It already feels like [the events are] largely forgotten. If you are old and bring up these things, they [Chinese children] think it is very weird. We absolutely cannot forget this. This is already the Chinese nation's humiliation, Japan's savagery and cruelty; a lot is revealed. So I am really not asking that everyone—I*

¹⁷ Mia Turner interviewed Li Yang for Anthony Spaeth's *Time Asia* article on Li Yang.

¹⁸ Both parties alternated between speaking English and Mandarin. The sentences in italics were translated by Amber Woodward; unitalicized words were originally spoken in English. Please see Appendix for original transcript.

am really not encouraging everyone—to hate the Japanese. I encourage them to hate themselves. So I want to make.... I.... the reason I collect these picture [sic] to show to the elementary school students is that.... I don't want to promote hate into [sic] Japanese and Chinese people, I want to encourage Chinese people to hate themselves."

Time Asia— "Why?"

LY— "Because you're weak. You were weak, so you were invaded. If you are strong no one can, no one dare to do that to you. So, the best way to show you love your country, the best way to show you hate Japan—or to show you remember that terrible history sixty years ago—is try to make yourself strong.... So, that's my way to remember history."

While it is true that we must all learn from history and correct our mistakes, Li's comments are more mindless hatred than consideration. Even after his attempt to counter the reporter's visible reaction against his racist comments by asserting, "I don't want to promote hate," moments later Li forgets himself and says that "the best way to show you hate Japan [...]." After he says this, he jumps in his seat and rushes to correct himself by substituting his words, "or to show you remember that terrible history sixty years ago," but the damage is already done. At least twice during the interview, he used the word "hate" regarding the Japanese, so he cannot say that he does not hate or does not promote hate against them. In another situation, a Chinese student who disliked Japanese people confronted Li and sought Li's advice. Li told him, "If you really want revenge against Japan, then master their language"¹⁹ (LoBaido, 2001). Li later claimed that he did not intend to advocate Chinese revenge against the Japanese. These numerous candid statements against the Japanese undoubtedly qualify Li as an advocate of anti-Japanese sentiment.

Similarities between Li Yang and Other Controversial Leaders

Comparisons between Li Yang and certain controversial historical figures are

¹⁹ We must then ask if Li's determination to teach English is a way for China to get revenge against America and other English-speaking nations.

undeniable. The two characters with whom Li is most compared are Adolph Hitler and Mao Zedong. There are many examples of Li Yang emulating Hitler.²⁰ Li's sociopolitical ideology is similar to that of Hitler and the Nazi party. His goals for China's rising are much like Hitler's ambitions for the Third Reich. Hitler called for Nazi Germany's domination of the world, just as Li demands that students work to bring China to a position of global dominance. Most obvious is Li's use of Nazi gesticulation—the "Heil Hitler" arm movement—as a common Crazy English action by raising the right arm straight up to a 45-degree angle while shouting Crazy English phrases. This movement is even more horrifying when the mass audience that Li leads is a group of outfitted PLA soldiers in Tian'anmen Square or on the Great Wall of China who are screaming the phrase "Never let your country down!"²¹ The behavior of Crazy English mass audiences is also similar to that of the Nazis; they blindly repeat leader Li's words and actions, sometimes sobbing with passion when he calls them to fulfill the mandates of filial piety. These scary scenes are captured in photographs and video footage from both the Li Yang Crazy English company and its participants. The combination of a passionate mass audience (especially the army), Nazi arm movements, and the repetitive shouting of political phrases is reminiscent of the Holocaust scenes wherein Hitler and thousands of Nazis and Germans repeat Nazi propagandist slogans and raise their hands and arms up to the "Heil Hitler" position.

Li Yang and his Crazy English seem to mimic other features of Hitler and the Nazi party, as well. Since about 2003, Li has hosted English language learning camps, which he called "concentration camps" (McDonald, 2003). These camps span twelve days with ten hours of class per day. The cost is about 1,660 yuan per person (around US\$200), with only thirty people in each camp to enhance individual learning. Li Yang Crazy English recently changed the program name to "intensive camps." Despite Li's claim that his English is superb, and despite employing several native English speakers on the Li Yang Crazy English staff, it is surprising that Li still chose such a tainted term, "concentration camp," for his seemingly innocent language learning program. Every Westerner knows that the term "concentration camp" is forever reserved to describe Nazi

²⁰ Please see Appendix for a side-by-side visual comparison of Hitler and the Nazi party and the Li Yang Crazy English movement.

²¹ Please see pictures in Appendix.

camps during the Holocaust, places where millions of innocent men, women, and children were maimed, murdered, and starved or worked to death. We can only presume that Li was made aware of the meaning of this term by his many foreign employees before he opened the camps. Still, it is not surprising that Li still chose to call his program "concentration camps," because it aligns with Li's desire to always follow the crazy, in-your-face path.

Li Yang is also compared to controversial Chinese figures, such as former Chinese communist party leader 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, just as Mao began as a teacher and grammar school principal in Changsha. Both men advocate strength for the mind and the body: Mao was an avid swimmer and Li has his own body building facility. Both men have determinedly conquered fear. 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 colossal followings and retained the power within these groups. Li's record is lecturing 100,000 people in one day at Chengdu, while Mao Zedong had 90,000 followers on the *chángzhēng*, or Long March, in retreat from the Kuomintang soldiers. The Long March was the major event that led to Mao's elevation to leadership of the Communist Party of China.

While Mao Zedong and Li Yang's goals for China may be congruous, their plans of action are, thus far, dissimilar. Though both share the hope that China will reach a level of superiority and greatness in political, economical, social, and industrial global spheres, Mao immediately used his power to mobilize his followers into violent action. Li has not yet demonstrated Mao's violent thread through action, though his words do indicate a deep hatred of the Japanese and the desire to defeat the three leading economies. Unlike Mao, Li does not advocate war or rebellion. One physical action that Li openly might support is an embargo on incoming Japanese goods, as predicted by Li's disgust with Chinese children's use of Japanese products. Although Li's slogans may be anti-Japanese, anti-American, or anti-European, he has not shown any signs of direct political action.



Li lectures to the People's Liberation Army atop the Great Wall. While he teaches them phrases like "How are you doing?", he also compels them to chant "Never let your country down" as they use an eerily Nazi-like gesticulation.

Click image to play video (time: 1 min. 20 sec.)

From *Crazy English*, directed by Zhang Yuan. Xian Film Studio, 1999.

Similarities between Li Yang Crazy English and Li Hongzhi's Falun Gong

The most relevant comparison to Li Yang Crazy English is Li Hongzhi's Falun Gong. Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa, was developed by Li Hongzhi in 1992 and spread quickly throughout the public sphere. It is difficult to know how many followers subscribed to the group, though the Chinese government estimated 70 million in China. With his practices, Li Hongzhi seeks to enlighten the spirit and improve physical health by practicing slow movements in daily exercises. Li Hongzhi's story is similar to Li Yang's. Both men are young and charismatic and have founded organizations, or movements, that command the attention and devotion of millions of people. Both men have lectured to thousands of people at a time, though the head counts of Li Yang Crazy English lectures far exceed that of Falun Gong's. Both men received acclaim for developing methods that greatly benefit the populace: Li Hongzhi cultivates the spirit and improves physical health, while Li Yang teaches English and raises self-confidence. Most

importantly, both men and their methods received acceptance and support from the Chinese government. The major difference between the two is that Li Yang incorporates a strong nationalistic theme in his lectures, whereas Li Hongzhi was not limited by national boundaries and frequently lectured around the world.

The development of Li Hongzhi's Falun Gong is important to understand due to its similarities with Li Yang's Crazy English. On May 13, 1992, Li Hongzhi gave his first lecture at the Fifth Middle School of Changchun City, Hunan, which was sponsored by the Changchun City Human Body Research Association. After a mere four months, Falun Gong had become very popular and was officially accepted as a direct branch of the China Qigong Research Association. Li Hongzhi received a nationwide permit to teach Falun Dafa in China ("Answers to Commonly Asked Questions about Falun Gong," 2004). On September 21, 1993, the Public Security Ministry in China published a laudatory report to the effect that people's health greatly improved after practicing Li Hongzhi's *qigong* treatment. Li Hongzhi continued to receive awards, both private and sponsored by the government, for the health benefits of his *qigong* techniques. Li Hongzhi became the "Most Popular Qigong Master." He published books on Falun Gong and cultivation throughout the world.

In 1998, however, Falun Gong met its first major obstacle. During a television interview in May 1998, He Zuoxiu, a member of the Chinese Academy of Science, attacked Falun Gong practitioners for being superstitious about the physical practices' supposed health benefits. A few months later, several government agencies began an investigation of Falun Gong, which they suspected of being an evil cult, but they concluded that it was innocent and beneficial to physical health. In 1999, He Zuoxiu published an article, again denouncing Falun Gong. By 1999, the PRC and General Secretary Jiang Zemin suddenly declared Falun Gong illegal and demanded the arrest of anyone who continued its practices. Many incidents of violence against unarmed protestors resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries. *Xinhua News Agency* reported that the Ministry of Civil Affairs banned Falun Gong because it "had been engaged in illegal activities, advocating superstition and spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting and creating disturbances, and jeopardizing social stability" (July 22, 1999). The Falun

Dafa Clear Wisdom website has its own speculation about the government's motivation for the massacre (Sept. 1, 2004):

Since its introduction in 1992, the number of Falun Gong practitioners simply grew too large for the liking of a faction of the Party leadership led by the dictator Jiang Zemin. Falun Gong's 70-million-plus practitioners in China far outnumbered Party members. Jiang ordered the persecution out of personal jealousy, and a sense that he could not totally control the people's hearts and minds.

Many were shocked by the Chinese government's sudden reversal of its policy and its feelings towards Falun Gong. If we are to believe the theories of Falun Gong practitioners that the movement "simply grew too large," then we must consider seriously the possibility of a similar outcome for Crazy English, which has thus far enjoyed government support, but has already exceeded the norms for massive gatherings. True, Li Yang's patriotic themes give him an advantage with the Chinese government, but what if one high official fears that Li Yang will use his nationalism to gain political support or power? For Li Hongzhi, it took only one man, He Zuoxiu, to convince the government that Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong were a threat. The similarities are certainly striking between the beginnings of Li Yang and Li Hongzhi's stories, but only time will tell if they suffer the same fate.

Recent Controversy for Li Yang

Until recently, Li Yang's words were the only evidence condemning him as a potential leader of a disturbing movement. Then, in September 2007, a controversy over Li Yang's status as a leader of a movement began to spread across the blogosphere. After a trip to the Crazy English Training Base in Baotou, Inner Mongolia, Li posted a picture on his blog showing approximately 3,000 students kneeling before him, at his insistence.²² The blogging community went wild with accusations that Li was demanding

²² Please see pictures in Appendix.

religious reverence for himself or authoritatively commanding some sort of cult. One blogger, Bob Chen, organized the various blog commentaries into one article, "China: Has Crazy English gone crazy?" Chen published the outrage of people who condemn Li as a wannabe god or king, a hierarch of an evil cult, and a Nazi oppressor. They believe that this act, with its deep traditions in Chinese history as a demonstration of servitude or reverence, is not appropriate for schoolchildren. Though there were a few statements of justification made by Li Yang supporters, most agreed that the students' kneeling to the speaker was outrageous, inappropriate for the setting. Chen writes, "No one can definitely tell whether Chinese are too sensitive with the past servile age, or it's just a stunt by BSP Sina.com, or even a trick by Li Yang to catch eyeballs in an unusual way. All in all, in this cross swords of either side, Li Yang, the protagonist under focus, might be the most resolute man clinging to his point." Indeed, Li himself responded twice to the controversy and the accusations. In his September 8, 2007, blog entry, Li wrote, "*Here, I would like to state my point of view: first, it was I who suggested that the students kneel in gratitude to their teachers; second, I think that is a common [but] great kneel.*"²³ Two days later, Li was again compelled to comment on the situation. He wrote, "*The pictures of the kneeling are real, I am already accustomed to this frequent [kneeling], the students kneeling is respectful of their teachers. In a few days I will go to Chengdu to give a lecture, [and] I believe that I can make all of those among Chengdu's best middle school students kneel.*" Li also posted a letter from a teacher who was present at the event and admires Li for making the students show respect to their educators. Thousands of people posted on Li's blog in response to the incident and in response to Li's justification, though most of these direct comments were in support of Li's decision. This event is the first time that Li has commanded his audience to perform an act based on his personal philosophy that is not related to the Crazy English method. This is a profoundly significant step towards the dark path feared by those who speculate about Li's potential as a leader of a sociopolitical movement.

Another, subtler, example of Li Yang's possible intentions of promoting a hate campaign is evidenced in a DVD created by the Stone Cliz Company. The DVD intends to introduce potential new consumers to the Crazy English method by showing Li give a

²³ Translated by Amber Woodward; please see Appendix for original Chinese transcripts of both responses.

thirty-minute lecture on the proper 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 the Crazy English hand gestures to demonstrate certain sounds, but he is far from waving wildly about as usual. His voice only grows louder to encourage the audience to increase the volume of their own voices. 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" or "cultish" ways, then it would make perfect sense for him to soften the promotional DVD lecture in this way. However, viewing the introduction to the DVD makes it obvious that the DVD lecture is not watered down for political purposes. Whereas the DVD lecture shows an intelligent man teaching a large group of students, the four-minute-long introduction to the lecture portrays a mad mob leader and seemingly violent masses. The introduction is highly dramatic, using black, white, and red to color the scenes. The film clips are not narrated, though they are accompanied by what can be described only as going-to-war music. As the intensified musical harmonies and the pounding of drums build, a woman's screams are perceptible. This is not the sort 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 pass in time to the music. In the clips, people by the thousands surround Li Yang and repeat his arm and hand movements in the oft-seen Nazi 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 any Western audience member the undeniable impression that the DVD is about social unrest and political upheaval. What a surprise the audience receives when the scene that follows this dramatic introduction is that of a funny language learning exercise! The marketing department of Li Yang Crazy English may have created such an introduction for their promotional DVD for dramatic effect and to introduce the

craziness of Crazy English. But the introduction is too intense and horrifying to pass it off as merely a marketing ploy.

With such accounts of Li Yang as a racist Chinese patriot and an imitator of Nazi patterns, it is easy to picture the man as a scary demagogue, but Li shares the charismatic, attractive, and personal likeable qualities commonly attributed to despots such as Hitler and Mao. During World Wars I and II, especially before the "discovery" of the Nazi Holocaust, Hitler was an icon to German children and students, founding the popular Hitler Youth program. Chinese propaganda often portrayed Mao as a kind and generous father figure, always looking out for the neglected classes. Now, Li Yang, too, is extremely popular with children, schools, and families. There is no doubt that he is a captivating motivational speaker, and nothing about his character seems phony or rehearsed. Indeed, both Crazy English products and other media and entertainment sources depict Li as enthusiastic, hardworking, sincere, and kind. One would never guess Li's alarming bigoted tendencies from his televised interviews or video-recorded lectures (unless, of course, he happens to discuss his views in them!).

Zhang Yuan's 1999 Documentary, *Crazy English*

In 1999, the Li Yang Crazy English Public Relations department had their hands full: Chinese independent director Zhang Yuan premiered his documentary, *Crazy English* (《疯狂英语》), sometimes known by its title in pinyin *Fengkuang Yingyu*), which follows Li Yang as he gives Crazy English lectures and classes across the country. While most companies would jump at the opportunity to be the subject of a documentary (essentially a free marketing campaign), Li was less than thrilled. For one thing, Zhang Yuan's previous movies had all been banned from domestic sale by the Chinese government, as they contained socially and politically sensitive subject matter. Moreover, Zhang Yuan's international renown was growing with his success at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 1996 and the Venice International Film Festival in 1999. Li Yang did not want a Western audience—an unintended audience for his nationalistic and racist messages—to be the first to view the documentary. Perhaps to the relief of Li Yang Crazy English, *Crazy English* was the first of Zhang Yuan's films to pass the Chinese government

censors and receive approval for domestic distribution, after a few minor edits from the censorship bureau. This is significant in that, by allowing the release of the film despite the troubled relationship with the film's director, the government demonstrates its tacit acceptance of Crazy English and Li Yang, including Li's intertwined political messages.

Zhang Yuan: An Underground Director

Zhang Yuan's filmography includes an extensive repertoire of documentaries and dramas that reveal controversial social or political issues in China, such as the struggle of a single mother as she raises her mentally retarded son in *Mama* 《母亲》, the underground escapades of rock stars in *Beijing Bastards* 《北京杂种》, and alcoholism, insanity, and parental abuse in *Sons* 《儿子》. One of Zhang Yuan's most contentious films is 《东宫西宫》, translated as *East Palace West Palace*,²⁴ or sometimes *Behind the Forbidden City*, about a young homosexual man and his encounters with a Chinese police officer. According to *The New York Times*, the film can be perceived as "a cogent argument for gay rights and a forceful appeal for a government benign, liberal, and wise enough to embrace dissidence" (Van Gelder, 7 July 1998). Due to the combination of a highly sensitive social issue (homosexuality) and the negative portrayal of the government and PRC police, the film was banned, and Zhang Yuan was placed under house arrest, had his passport confiscated, and was prevented from attending the 1997 Cannes Film Festival where he was to show the movie (his friends premiered it on his behalf). Zhang Yuan remained undaunted, and he continued to direct and produce films with startling content. In 1999, he premiered 《过年回家》 (translated as *Home for the Holidays*, but known as *Seventeen*) about a teenage girl imprisoned for the homicide of her stepsister and abandoned by her stepparents. This premiere coincided with the release of *Crazy English*.

²⁴ "East Palace West Palace" is a slang term for the bathrooms outside of Tian'anmen where homosexual men allegedly rendezvous.

Crazy English as a Controversial Topic

Why did Zhang Yuan choose *Crazy English* as the subject for his documentary when his other films are so controversial? One reason is that Zhang was eager to have his work shown in his home country and therefore chose a more acceptable topic—a patriotic English teacher—which would certainly pass through censorship. In that sense, *Crazy English* was a success. However, Zhang was unlikely to wholly abandon the theme of his film career, namely controversy. He probably chose to film *Crazy English* because he observed the disturbing overtones within Li Yang's methods and ideals, namely, nationalism, cultural chauvinism, patriotism, cult customs, and brainwashing (conditioning of the mind).

The "Portrayal" of Li Yang

There are many differences between a documentary and a scripted movie. In the movies that Zhang Yuan wrote and directed, controversy is created and conclusions are controlled. In documentaries, however, controversy is conveyed by the events that are shown. For *Crazy English*, Zhang Yuan simply set up microphones and turned on the cameras: no scripts, no staging, and no subjectivity. In one interview Zhang said,

My own attitude must be neutral. This film would be worthless if I showed even a tiny trace of subjective judgment. ... I try to abandon any subjective views as an artist. I often forget that I am making a film and focus all my attention on how to accurately portray what has provoked my interest. ... I rarely think about how I should show off my techniques in lighting, camera movements and editing. For me, the content is much more important than the style. (Wheeler, 1999)

The documentary pieces together five- to ten minute-long scenes from about a dozen Li Yang Crazy English lectures across the country. There are also segments from interviews with Li, Li Yang Crazy English meetings, and other events like the Crazy

English running exercise. Before each lecture, Zhang Yuan films a few seconds of the surroundings, like the cityscape in Shanghai or the rolling countryside in Heilongjiang. Sometimes the lecture clip begins with the Crazy English team setting up for the lecture, while other times the scene opens halfway through a lecture. As most Crazy English lectures follow the same format, teach the same phrases, and utilize the same jokes, the film cannot help but to seem a bit repetitive. Zhang Yuan attempts to limit repetitiveness by focusing on different parts of each lecture and interweaving the lecture scenes with the other scenes, like the interviews. Except for one interview between Li Yang and *Time Asia* reporter Mia Turner, there is hardly any English spoken in the film. Most of Li's lectures are in Chinese with only the lessons' vocabulary spoken in English, and there is no narration to the documentary (Chinese or English). This fact itself returns us to the question of how much (coherent) spoken English practice is actually occurring in Li Yang Crazy English lectures.

Though some sources differ on Li's reaction to the movie, it is generally understood that Li hated the documentary because he believed that the portrayal of himself was inaccurate and harsh. In one interview he snapped, "The movie was stupid. It was not a real documentary because its intention was to please a Western audience" (Loras, 2004). It is surprising that Li scorns the film and its director, as a documentary is naturally a raw reflection of its subject. Also surprising is that, in 2003, a year earlier than Li's interview with Loras (2004) as quoted above, Li said in an interview with Professor Kirpal Singh of Singapore Management University that he has learned to ignore negative or critical commentary from others. Li also said that there are things that he does not like about himself, and that he has taken criticism and tried to change for the better. According to the Loras article, however, he is still sensitive about material that could be considered critical. But Li found at least one advantage in the documentary; one Japanese source wrote that Li was glad to receive fame and influence from the film, "[Li] said he believes almost all of China's estimated 415 million English learners know at least his name by now" ("Crazy English' teacher in pursuit of Chinese dream," 12 June 2000).

Framing in the Documentary

By pairing certain scenes or giving more emphasis to one aspect of the content over another, a director can subtly lead the audience to form certain intended comparisons or conclusions. Though not as direct or consequential as in a scripted film, a director's editorial decisions affect the audience's ability to form independent opinions. Zhang Yuan is very successful in limiting narrative devices; there is no dramatic music to heighten the emotional experience, no interviewing or commentary, and no injection of other clips that would compare Li Yang to other notorious caricatures. There are only four scenes in *Crazy English* where Zhang Yuan's framing is evident, as described below.

In one scene, Zhang Yuan films people, presumably Crazy English students, reciting the Crazy English mantras in English. The people make many mistakes, even though they are only asked to recite one memorized English sentence into the camera. Most of the people's speech is unintelligible. In the scene, Zhang has chosen to include the re-take scenes of the people performing incorrectly, rather than editing those out. As this is one of the opening scenes in the film, the audience is forced to realize that the Crazy English method, which touts perfection in pronunciation and confidence, may be a fraud.

In a second scene, Li Yang is lecturing the PLA atop the Great Wall.²⁵ As the soldiers march along the wall, Li Yang instructs them to sit and raise their arm, which they do in perfect unison. As Li teaches them English phrases, like "Never let your country down," he encourages them to speak louder and faster. While this moment is quite disturbing on its own—an army being led by a single leader in a nationalistic chant with their arms raised straight up in the "Heil Hitler" position—Zhang Yuan chooses to emphasize the moment by inserting scenes of the mountainous landscape surrounding the Great Wall while continuing to play the audio of the PLA shouting. This pairing of the hills and chanting makes it seem as though the army voices are echoing throughout the entire region. Whether or not this was the case, Zhang chose to elaborate that moment to cement his own impression within the audience's minds.

In one part of the film, Zhang Yuan pairs scenes from several lectures, one in

²⁵ Please see Appendix for pictures of this scene in the documentary.

Heilongjiang, one at the Taimiao Ancestral Temple in Beijing's Forbidden City, and one at a nightclub in Beijing. The lectures are characterized by Li Yang's use of rap or rock music to engage the young audience. Sometimes techno music plays on the loudspeakers just before Li's entrance to excite the audience. The music stops when Li speaks, but starts up again when Li wants to energize the group. At other times, Li asks the audience to scream English phrases on their own, while music with a techno beat plays loudly and drowns out the shouts of the audience. At the Beijing nightclub lecture, an audience made up of university-age students stands in a smaller concert venue, completely dark except for disco lights, and forms a mosh pit in front of the stage. The youthful audience jumps up and down, unrhythmically waving their arms to the *Y-M-C-A* song and cheering before the lesson begins. The final section in the trio of scenes shows the original lecture site after a Crazy English lecture has finished. Li Yang and his native English-speaking assistant sit at tables and receive a long line of people who want their autographs. Zhang's film crew captures the shot from above to better demonstrate the length of the lines. The way that Zhang Yuan edited these three scenes together primes the audience to consider another facet of Li Yang Crazy English: Li Yang as a celebrity pop star and Crazy English lectures as rock concerts.

The fourth example of framing in the film is the only one in which it may be legitimately charged that Zhang Yuan undermined Li Yang and his Crazy English. It is possible that Zhang shows a disproportional number of lectures and interviews wherein Li discusses his nationalistic and anti-Japanese/foreigner racism. Unless we were to attend every one of Li's lectures and courses and keep a tally of which of those included mentions of Li's personal opinions, it is very difficult to know the ratio of pure English lessons versus English lessons infused with nationalistic themes. According to the proportions included in Zhang's *Crazy English*, it would seem that Li frequently discusses his political ideals. However, when compared with Li Yang Crazy English products, which rarely have blatantly racist or anti-foreign themes, it is hard to judge the actual frequency of political intrusion. Given Zhang Yuan's tendencies to portray controversy, the complete lack of awareness of Li Yang's political and social ideals as represented in the surveys, and the absence of racist themes in Crazy English products, it is probable that Zhang overemphasized this tendency. This would also satisfy the

question of why Li's reaction to the documentary was so negative, despite the fact that Li generally came off well and the film was good publicity for his company. While such exaggeration of the frequency of scary sociopolitical themes would lead to comparisons of Li with other cult leaders, Zhang Yuan himself says, "That's going too far.... Even if Li Yang does have that tendency, it's a funny and cool one" (Eckholm, 1999). Disagreeing with Zhang, many find no humor in a powerful figure's tendencies towards building enthusiasm for violent cult movements.

Crazy English Publicity

Other than Zhang Yuan's documentary, little academic or critical analysis has countered the Crazy English movement and its educational, social, and political implications. Li frequently appears as a guest on Chinese talk shows or as a teacher on children's educational programming. One of Li's Crazy English performances was even broadcast live on Japan's NHK public television station.²⁶ Many journalists and bloggers, both professional and amateur, write articles about Li Yang and his English method, but few reach beyond obvious points of interest, such as Li's rags to riches story and the massive turnout for Crazy English lectures. *Time Asia*, *City Weekend Beijing*, and *China Today* are among the few credible news sources that published articles on Li Yang Crazy English, but even these avoid political discussions. All articles on Li Yang tend to take one of two angles: they present Crazy English as popular, entertaining, and potentially useful, or they present Crazy English as weird and wild. No article has printed more than two pages on the subject, except for this author's paper in *Sino-Platonic Papers* (No. 170, Feb. 2006). Very few individuals have voiced their concern over Li Yang's political ideology; those who do tend to write in personal blog entries or commentaries, in response to online articles. The recent controversy in Baotou, Inner Mongolia, where Li Yang instructed thousands of local high school students to collectively bow before

²⁶ NHK is not subject to government censorship, so it may have been easier for Li to secure airtime. When Li lectures in Japan, his racist statements against the Japanese are muted. Although many news sources in Japan have revealed Li Yang's political ideology, that does not seem to keep droves of Japanese citizens from buying his products. In fact, Li believes that Japanese need his products more than any other group, as their spoken English is the worst and their fear of losing face is the greatest.

himself and the other English teachers, may have caught the attention of the blogging community but it has not advanced critical attention from legitimate news sources. If Western sources were to pay closer attention to sensationalist stories such as this, at least it would draw critical attention to the potentially world-shaking implications of the Crazy English movement.

Government Response to Li Yang

The PRC government, like all communist governments, does not tolerate mass gatherings where people spout political or religious ideology. Yet there is much evidence indicating that the PRC is tolerant and even accepting of Li Yang and his Crazy English. This is not surprising, as the political messages that Li broadcasts are all pro-China arguments. Li has concrete examples of his patriotism; for one, until 2000, he had never left China, despite his international goals. In addition, Li recently changed his image from a more Western style (bleached hair, thick glasses, conservative clothing) to his native Han appearance (black hair, natural skin color, business clothing).

As discussed earlier, Li's personal political ideology is saturated with nationalism. One interview with Dr. Weiguo Qu, the professor at Fudan University mentioned above, revealed the secret to Li's luck in avoiding major clashes with the government. When asked what the Chinese government thinks of Li Yang, he said:

Li Yang is very clever because he is talking about, you know, nationalism and patriotism and everything, and that is much in line with the general policy of the government now, because the government is much more worried about the overexposure to the Western influence. And also because [Li] seems intellectual—so maybe people are sort of leaning to the Western side, forgetting about the old ideology and tradition—so by saying you learn English in order to learn the enemy's language and compete with them, and learning English is a way to enhance your nationalism and national identity, I think the government is very happy

with that. And Li Yang is actually very clever because he just stops at that, he doesn't move into specific ideological issues concerning nationalism. (personal interview, 6 Nov. 2006)

The government does not ignore assemblies, and it is much harder to get permission for larger assemblies, especially for religious gatherings. While Li does not discuss his religious ideology, Dr. Qu believes that Li's theme of nationalism and, more importantly, specific use of socialist and historical Chinese statements is helpful in obtaining government approval. For example, one Marxist slogan, often attributed to Karl Marx himself, is "Foreign language is a weapon for the Proletariat." Li mirrored this famous socialist statement in his popular blog, when on August 1, 2007, he wrote, "What is English? English is an international language. English is a powerful weapon. English is a beautiful companion." Li seems to look up to Karl Marx, as he directly quotes him in other blog entries. Li also mimics traditional Chinese slogans. The slogan of the Self Strengthening Movement in China (1860s to 1890s), written by historian Wei Yuan, was "*Learn the superior techniques of the foreigners in order to control them*" ("师夷长技以制夷"). Li alludes to this slogan in his own lectures, wherein he tells students to go abroad to learn American and Western business practices and bring that knowledge and experience back to China. In addition to gaining approval for lecture venues, Li's theme of learning English to promote Chinese culture is pleasing to the Ministry of Education. Dr. Qu says that the Ministry of Education fears that students will learn English abroad and become mini-Westerners, so Li's obvious counter to this fear ("love your country, make money internationally") is useful in gaining official support for his educational method.

The censorship bureau's approval of the documentary *Crazy English*, despite the government's unfriendly relationship with the film's director, Zhang Yuan, is concrete evidence of government approval of Li Yang and Crazy English. Although the documentary contains scenes from Li's most controversial lectures, only minor editing was required for the bureau's approval. The government must have felt that the audience would be so positively affected by listening to Li's pro-China goals that it was more important than keeping a rebel like Zhang Yuan from achieving national

acknowledgment. The government further shows its acceptance of Li Yang by granting him permission to hold gatherings as large as 30,000 at historically significant locations such as the Forbidden City, the Marco Polo Bridge, and the Great Wall. The government has not stopped him from broadcasting or publishing his theories in lectures, in books, or online. Most telling of all, Li is routinely invited to teach massive English lectures to PLA soldiers, government officials (such as the mayors of Beijing), and volunteers for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Li Yang further pacifies officials by donating some of his accumulated wealth (he is a multi-millionaire) 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, this act also secures a small government dependence on his contributions.

However, not everyone approves of Li. In 1996, two years after Li established Li Yang Crazy English, the Crazy English method became popular in Guangdong Province against the will of traditional English teachers there. In response, the local government prohibited Li from giving seminars in the area for six months. The government in Chengdu, Sichuan also banned Li from teaching for an extended span of time (Spaeth, 1999). Other than these minor setbacks and the personal complaints of teachers devoted to traditional English language learning, Li and his company have progressed smoothly so far. Yet we must not forget similar stories of the initial acceptance of seemingly innocent groups like Falun Gong, which abruptly became both the enemy and the victim of the modern Chinese government. Any day, the government could construe Li Yang's belief that China has fallen behind other nations as criticism of the Communist party, therefore altering a fragile relationship between the two.

Connection between the Method and the Madness

What is Li Yang's reason for connecting his Crazy English method with his personal goals for China's rising? Several possibilities exist: Li is attracted to the power held by others like Hitler and Mao; he is a megalomaniac; or he simply seeks bargaining power with the PRC to hold large lectures and make more money. Although many people believe that the third reason—commercial motivation—is the only rational answer,

evidence of the first two possibilities is too significant and horrifying to pass them off. There is dictator within Li who demands of thousands, "repeat after me," "do as I do," and, recently, "kneel before me," and who gets paid millions of dollars for sharing his personal academic, motivational, and political philosophies.

In an interview with *Channel NewsAsia*, the interviewer asked Li, "Do you really see [your method] as pedagogically sound?" Li evaded the question, but provided another enlightening answer, one that indicates Li's intentions are anything but commercial:

First, I am very comfortable with my personal goal, with my mission. My mission is helping my people becoming [*sic*] bilingual, becoming [*sic*] internationally confident. That's my basic mission, that push [*sic*] me to work hard for the past ten years. And I care about my people's responses, their response very positively [*sic*]. I only care about these two things... I try to make it more efficient and more powerful. (interview with Kirpal Singh, June 2003)

Li Yang combines his academic and psychological methods and his political opinions for more than just commercial success, though that is undoubtedly one motivating factor. To engage in such intense work and to promote such passionate ideology truly necessitates a bit of madness. Hitler once said, "The broad masses of a population are more amenable to the appeal of rhetoric than to any other force" and "The doom of a nation can be averted only by a storm of flowing passion, but only those who are passionate themselves can arouse passion in others." A few years later Mao echoed, "I have witnessed the tremendous energy of the masses. On this foundation it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever." Now, Li Yang instructs his audiences, "You have to have passion, you have to do something," and believes, "A good speech has the power to change the course of history or affect an entire generation to change their lives" (blog entry, 8 June 2007). The philosophies of these three leaders are eerily similar.

The question of what the future holds, however, remains problematic. Current analysis does not indicate that Li Yang would use his Crazy English to start a violent movement, though his speeches could initiate a verbal hate campaign. If the government

allows him to continue to spew his racist messages and dreams of world dominance, then it is tacitly approving that position. Another possibility is that the PRC could turn on Li Yang, despite its close relationship with him. Less than a decade ago, the country was shocked when the government suddenly and severely reversed its support for Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong. Who is to say that this could not happen again with Li Yang and his Crazy English? It is important to continue to observe Li Yang and the PRC's ongoing relationship with him.

Appendix

I. Amber R. Woodward, "Survey on Li Yang and Crazy English" (Distr. Oct. 2006).

Li Yang and Crazy English 李阳和疯狂英语

Do you know of Li Yang and his Crazy English? In what way? 你知道李阳和他的疯狂英语吗? 通过什么渠道?

Media 媒体 School 学校 Friends 朋友 Family 家人 Other 别的渠道

Have you attended one of Li Yang's lectures? When and where? 你听过李阳疯狂英语的讲演课吗? 在什么时间、什么地点?

Have you bought Li Yang's products? If so, what and how many? 你是否购买过李阳疯狂英语的系列学习用品? 假如买过, 是以下哪种形式, 购买数量是多少?

DVD/Video DVD 或录像带 Audio Tape 录音带 Book 书 Other 别的

What is Li Yang's method for teaching? 李阳教授英语的方法是什么?

Why does Li Yang use this method? 他为什么用这个办法?

Do you think Li Yang's method is effective? Has it helped you? 李阳学习英语的办法是否对你有帮助? 这个办法是否帮你提高了英语能力?

In your opinion, how important or unimportant is "losing face?" 李阳所谈到的学英语中要敢于“丢脸”, 对你来说“丢脸”是不是一件很重要的事?

In your opinion, how important or unimportant is it that Chinese citizens speak English? Fluently? 对你来说, 中国人会说英文是不是一件重要的事? 他们说得流利与否是不是也很重要?

Have you heard of director Zhang Yuan? What kinds of movies does he make? (*Beijing Bastards, East Palace West Palace, Mama, Sons, Home for the Holidays*) 你知道张元吗? 他制作过什么样的电影, 这些电影有什么样的题目? (北京杂种, 东宫西宫, 母亲 (妈妈), 儿子, 回家过年)

Have you heard of Zhang Yuan's film "Fengkuang Yingyu" ("Crazy English")? Have you seen it? What was your reaction? 你听说过他的一部名为《疯狂英语》的电影吗? 你看过吗? 你对这部电影有什么看法?

Do you know anything about Li Yang's relationship with the government? How did you hear about it? 你是否知道李阳和中国政府之间有关系? 你怎么知道的?

Do you know anything about Zhang Yuan's relationship with the government? How did you hear about it? 你是否知道张元和中国政府之间有关系? 你怎么知道的?

II. Original transcript of the interview between Li Yang and Mia Turner of *Time Asia*, as captured in Zhang Yuan's documentary, *Crazy English*. The reporter and Li switched between English and Chinese when speaking.

Time—"So yesterday when you were talking, you mentioned about Japan, and you said, you know, '日本就是偷我们东西,'" --

LY—"对."

Time—"偷世界上的...."--

LY—"是."

Time—"What did you mean by that?"

LY—"Japanese people are just a.... Japanese people.... I, I did one thing...I collect a lot of photos about the Japans invasion in China. 我把日本杀人的很多镜头全部。。。照片都收集起来。说起,我把它印起来.我要给中国的小学生看,知道一九三七年,应该是六十年前,发生的事情.是绝对不能忘记的。因为他们现在已经无所谓了。因为他们用的是日本的产品,觉得日本东西很好了。已经觉得大忘了。你老提那东西,他们觉得很奇怪。它是绝对不能忘记了。那已经是中国中华民族的耻辱,日本的残暴残酷。多能显现出来。那么我并不是要求大家,我并不是鼓励大家去恨日本人,我要鼓励大家恨自己。So I want to make.... I.... the reason I collect these picture to show to the elementary school students is that.... I don't want to promote hate into [sic] Japanese and Chinese people, I want to encourage Chinese people to hate themselves."

Time—"Why?"

LY—"Because you're weak. You were weak, so you were invaded. If you are strong no one can, no one dare to do that to you. So, the best way to show you love your country, the best way to show you hate Japan—or to show you remember that terrible history sixty years ago—is try to make yourself strong.... So that's my way to remember history"

III. Original transcript Li Yang's responses to media attention over the kneeling incident in Inner Mongolia, as posted on his blog at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/lyce>

“在这里，我要申明我的观点：第一，是我提议学生给他们的老师跪下感恩的；第二，我认为这是普通的、伟大的一跪！” Li Yang, September 8, 2007.

“下跪的照片是真的，我已经习以为常了，学生下跪是对老师的尊重。过几天我还要去成都讲课，相信可以让成都最好中学的全体学生下跪。” Li Yang, September 10, 2007.

IV. Pictures of Li Yang Crazy English. Pictures accredited to personal photos, those posted on Li Yang's blog, scenes from Zhang Yuan's documentary, and pictures posted for public use on Google Images.

CRAZY ENGLISH METHOD

Mind, Body, and Soul



Scissor Hands: pronouncing the "eh" sound



Confrontational Activity



Saying "You"



Hands Ready for the "oh" Dip



Li Yang's profile picture on his Blog



CRAZY ENGLISH MASSES

Li Yang at the Forbidden City



Large Student Lecture



Kneeling before Li Yang



University Lectures or Concerts? Li's form of "New Entertainment"



Large Public Lecture



The Public Waits in Line for Autographs



Li lectures the People's Liberation Army



Li lectures a group of students and People's Liberation Army soldiers



SCENES FROM ZHANG YUAN'S *CRAZY ENGLISH* DOCUMENTARY

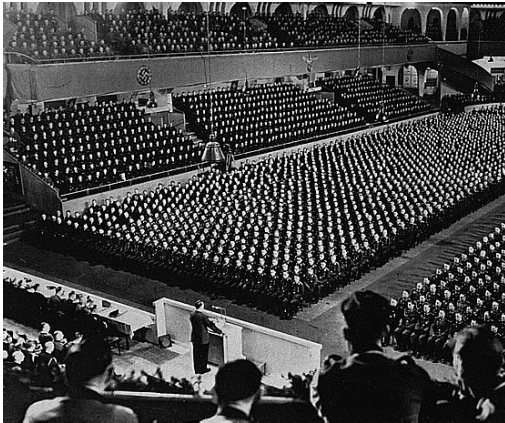
Li Yang lectures the People's Liberation Army on the Great Wall



A LI YANG CRAZY ENGLISH MOVEMENT?

Comparisons of Hitler and the Nazis (left) to Li Yang and the Crazy English movement (right)

(pictures of Li Yang Crazy English adjusted to black and white for comparison)





Li Hongzhi's Falun Gong, all pictures depict striking similarity to Crazy English



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(* represents a Web log or blog-like entry, not an academic or accredited source)

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