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Lin Yutang's Philosophy of Living

Filozofia życia Lina Yutanga

The way cannot be separated from us for a moment.
What can be separated from us is not the way.
From *Chung-yung*[1] [Zhong Yong]

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie – z perspektywy filozoficznej – pewnej interpretacji pism Lina Yutanga (1895–1976), chińskiego pisarza, myśliciela, tłumacza, lingwisty i wynalazcy. Lin Yutang był przede wszystkim dwujęzycznym autorem i myślicielem, wychowanym i wykształconym w dwóch obszarach kulturowych, a mianowicie w kręgu tradycji chińskiej oraz w chrześcijańskim obszarze świata anglojęzycznego. Jego wielka erudycja i talenty intelektualne sprawiły, że mógł on stać się – w sensie metaforycznym i tym zupełnie dosłownym – pośrednikiem między tradycją chińską oraz dwudziestowieczną cywilizacją Zachodu. W ciągu swojego długiego życia Lin opublikował ponad sześćdziesiąt książek. Czterdzieści z nich ukazało się w przekładach angielskich – i tylko sześć stanowiły powieści. Lista niebeletrystycznych prac Lina jest znacznie dłuższa i obejmuje m.in. krótkie i długie eseje, monografie poświęcone chińskim mędrcom takim jak Konfucjusz, Laozi czy Zhuangazi, a także przekłady

1 Wei-Ming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness. A Revised and Enlarged Edition of Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-yung* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 6.

i antologie z tłumaczeniami ich dzieł. Szczególną popularność przyniosło Linowi kilka książek beletrystycznych, niezwykle wysoko ocenionych przez krytykę, popularność zyskał Lin również dzięki swym próbom częściowego przeszczepienia kultury chińskiej na grunt zachodni. Po opublikowaniu *My Country My People* (1935) oraz *The Importance of Living* (1937) Lin osiągnął wielką sławę jako „filozof chiński", jednak jego własna myśl filozoficzna, rozproszona w wielu tekstach, rzadko bywała przedmiotem zainteresowania uczonych.

Słowa klucze: filozofia chińska, filozofia praktyczna, filozofia życia, Lin Yutang, kultura chińska

Abstract

The purpose of this article has been to present an interpretation of the writings of Lin Yutang (1895–1976), Chinese writer, thinker, translator, linguist, and inventor, from a philosophical perspective. Lin Yutang was, above all, a bilingual author and thinker, raised and educated simultaneously in two cultures, i. e. the circle of Chinese tradition and Christian culture of the English-speaking world. His immense erudition and intellectual ability naturally marked him out– in both a literal and a metaphorical sense – as a go-between the Chinese tradition and 20th-century and the Western civilization. In his long life, Lin published more than sixty books, forty of which came out in English and only six of these were novels. The list of his non-fiction books is much longer and includes short and long essays, monographs on ancient Chinese sages, such as Confucius, Laozi or Zhuangzi, and their translations and anthologies. Lin gained remarkable popularity with several highly applauded fiction books and an effort to transplant Chinese culture in the West. And yet, even though he rose to great fame as a "Chinese philosopher" after the publication of *My Country My People* (1935) and *The Importance of Living* (1937), his philosophical thought, scattered throughout his many writings, has rarely been the subject of academic research.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, practical philosophy, philosophy of life, Lin Yutang, Chinese culture

Introduction

If we are indeed, as Peimin Ni claims, "facing an era in which the question will be (…) whether we can make the marriage of Chinese traditional thought and Western philosophy a constructive process through which philosophy, whether Chinese or Western, can be rejuvenated with

renewed legitimacy under the title originally coined by the Greeks, namely the love of wisdom",[2] then philosophers need to rise to the huge challenge of conducting in-depth research into the Chinese thinkers who provide a practical and universal philosophy of daily life.

A true lover of wisdom, Lin Yutang (1895–1976), was aware of the crisis of contemporary Western philosophy and the course it had taken, warning that "as for philosophy (…) the danger is even greater that we lose the feeling of life itself".[3] Based on his non-fiction, the article outlines Lin's critique of mainstream Western philosophy and draws a distinction between the philosophy of culture, for which he is best known, and his own personal philosophy. Against the backdrop of a broadly conceived concept of the Chinese philosophy of life, it discusses his metaphilosophical reflection and the central themes of his thought, which he variously referred to either as "lyrical philosophy," or, to emphasize its existential dimension, a "philosophy of living".[4] His thought focused on art, understood on the one hand as practice, and on the other, as the art of living dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom.

Lin Yutang and philosophy as a way of life

In his incredibly creative and accomplished life, Lin Yutang, the renowned Chinese philosopher, translator, novelist and transmitter of Chinese culture to Western audiences, created a kind of philosophy which he referred to as the philosophy of living. The philosophy of Lin Yutang is not a monolithic system in the Western understanding of the term:[5] it wove together many rather complex philosophical strands, changing shape as his original thought gradually developed and crystallized over time. Given his immense body of writing, I have decided to devote my study to his non-fiction (the bulk of which was written in English and has not been translated into Chinese by the author). Moreover, I have focused my attention on Lin's pre-religious phase, during which he referred to

2 Peimin Ni, "The Changing Status Of Chinese Philosophy", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40/3-4 (2013): 583.

3 Yutang Lin, *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1937), 142.

4 *Ibidem*, vii.

5 About Lin's skepticism of all methodical and systematic approaches to philosophy see *ibidem*, 11, 412.

himself as "a pagan," and which scholars have described as a period when he remained under the dominant influence of Chinese culture.[6]

It is possible to distinguish at least two ways of approaching philosophy. One understands it as a kind of theoretical enterprise; the other treats it as a way of life. The latter is a transformative form of philosophy often based on somatic practice. In a chapter entitled "Chinese Wisdom: A Vindication of Comprehensive Harmony," published in *The Chinese View of Life*, Thomé H. Fang [Fang Dongmei] proposed yet another division, expanding the number of approaches to three: 1) the religious approach, through the aspiration for faith; 2) the scientific approach, through the possibility of knowledge; 3) and the humanistic approach, through the adventure of living.[7] There is little doubt that Lin Yutang's thought falls within the scope of philosophy, whether it be interpreted as a "transformative philosophy" based on somatic practice or a humanistic adventure of living. Important for the recognition of Lin Yutang's philosophical legacy is the fact that he referred to his own work as a "philosophy," even though he would often qualify the statement with modifiers like "lyrical," "of living," "of life," so as not to sound too presumptuous in his own claim; he also consciously drew on a very specific tradition of philosophical thinking.

In what follows, I shall explain how Lin understood such expressions in more detail; for now, suffice it to say that even though, throughout his life, he straddled the boundary between what he called the "oriental" and the Western approach to reality, his answers to the fundamental questions of metaphilosophy, i.e. what philosophy should study and how it should be practiced, sit squarely within the core of Chinese culture. As pointed out by scholars, "the predominant orientation of traditional Chinese philosophy is the concern about *how* to live one's life, rather than finding

6 Interestingly, few researchers have addressed the philosophical strands in his works and considered him as a philosopher, social philosopher, philosopher of culture, or thinker. Controversial as it may sound to refer to Lin in these terms, the bulk of his non-fiction may be recognized as an original philosophy rooted in Chinese culture, or, to put it differently, his individual philosophy forms the backdrop to most of his non-fiction writing (cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, "Lin Yutang, Critic and Interpreter", *The English Journal* 36/1 (1947): 1–7; Roslyn Joy Ricci, *What Maketh the Man? Towards a Psychobiographical Study of Lin Yutang*, School of Social Science/Centre for Asian Studies University of Adelaide, 2013, unpublished master's thesis available online (access: July 11th 2019): https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/90754/3/02whole.pdf, 187; Suoqiao Qian, *Lin Yutang and China's Search for Modern Rebirth* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 199.

7 See Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life. The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* (Hong Kong: The Union Press, 1957), 1.

out the truth about reality".[8] Accordingly, even though Lin's presentation also alludes to those Western philosophers who viewed philosophy as a way of life (such as H.D. Thoreau, R.W. Emerson, M. Montaigne, W. James and J. Dewey), a much more natural context for his thought is provided by the Chinese idea of a "philosophy of life and the universe".[9] In his writings, China is depicted as:

> a land where there is no system of philosophy, broadly speaking, no logic, no metaphysics, no academic jargon; […]. It becomes also a land where… there are no logicians in philosophy. In place of well thought out systems of philosophy, they have only an intimate feeling of life, and instead of a Kant or a Hegel, they have only essayists, epigram writers and propounders of Buddhist conundrums and Taoist parables.[10]

It should be observed that what Lin proposes here is in fact a certain *philosophical vision*; for that vision to speak to his readers' imagination, he draws a vivid contrast between the distinct features of Chinese and Western thought. Lin does not take a scientific approach to Chinese philosophy and culture. For that reason, although his views tend to correspond with what we find in Feng Youlan's roughly contemporaneous *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* or *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, the contrast between the two approaches could hardly be more striking: Feng's monographs present Chinese thought in all its diversity, including e.g. the work of Chinese logicians, while Lin focuses on highlighting what he personally stands for and announcing the kind of philosophy the reader may expect to encounter in his books. Scholars overwhelmingly agree that beneath this diversity in Chinese thought one finds certain themes, which Feng describes as the question of how one can attain sagacity within and how to acquire the Tao or the sage way.[11]

Not unlike Gu Hongming in his *The Spirit of the Chinese People*,[12] Thomé H. Fang in *The Chinese View of Life*, Wang Keping in *Chinese Philosophy on Life*, and many other philosophers with Chinese roots, it is

8 See Youlan Feng, *A Short History Of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: The Free Press. A Division Of Macmillan Publishing Co, 1966), 8.

9 Yutang Lin, *The Wisdom of Laotse* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2014): xv.

10 Lin, *The Importance*, 412.

11 See Feng, *A Short History*, 8.

12 On the influence of Gu Hongming on his work and Hu Shi as one of the most important Chinese humanists, Lin dedicated a chapter entitled "The Grand Detour Begins" in: Yutang Lin, *From Pagan to Christian* (Ohio: World Publishing, 1959), 44.

around this core that Lin built his narrative. Lin perceived Chinese thinkers as sages, whose most characteristic feature is that they talk about life as they are directly aware of it – others can at most talk about the sage's words, while the stupid ones argue about the words of those others.[13] What he underscored was his role as an advocate of philosophy as an art of living, as filtered through the eyes of Chinese artists-philosophers: "We are […] about to see a philosophy and art of living as the mind of the Chinese people as a whole has understood it".[14] He perceived most Chinese philosophy as a way of *gongfu* 功夫/工夫, a term used by the Song-Ming Neo Confucians to mean an art for life[15] or "various arts and instructions about how to cultivate the person and conduct one's life".[16] Thus, Lin draws attention to the aspects that allow various Chinese texts to function as guides to human life, an approach so novel and uncommon in the eyes of Western philosophers and scholarly rigorous academics that it often eludes them altogether. The thrust of his critique, therefore, is aimed at philosophy in a narrow sense, one that juggles concepts unintelligible beyond its own domain; in short, the form most commonly practiced at Western universities:

> One of the greatest contrasts between Chinese and Western scholarship is the fact that in the West there is so much specialized knowledge, and so little humanized knowledge, while in China there is so much more concern with the problems of living, while there are no specialized sciences. We see an invasion of scientific thinking into the proper realm of humanized knowledge in the West.[17]

Laughing with Laozi – Lin's critical approach to mainstream Western philosophy

Let me briefly look at his critique of mainstream Western philosophy. Considering his highly critical mind (he liked to call himself the "Little

13 Lin, *The Importance*, 412.

14 *Ibidem*, 3.

15 See more about that Peimin Ni, "Philosophy of Gongfu Revealed through Confucius: Responses to Chenyang Li and Huaiyu Wang's Comments on My Book Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu", *Dao* 17 (2018): 1.

16 Peimin Ni, "Kung Fu for Philosophers", *The New York Times forum "The Stone"*, (2010), Dec. 8; http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/08/kung-fu-for-philosophers.

17 Lin, *The Importance*, 411.

Critic"),[18] it should come as no surprise that he had a lot to say about mainstream Western philosophy. What is at the core of his critique?

Many years before Pierre Hadot, Lin pointed out that philosophy broke away from its very source in ancient Greece: taken over by mere talkers interested in the play and interplay of words, the discipline turned from the love of wisdom to the love of words:

> the divorce between philosophy and life became more and more complete. As time went on, the philosophers began to use more and more words and longer and longer sentences; epigrams of life gave place to sentences, sentences to arguments, arguments to treatises, treatises to commentaries, and commentaries to philological research; more and more words were needed to define and classify the words they used and more and more schools were needed.[19]

And, as he succinctly points out, "the process continued until the immediate, intimate feeling or the awareness of living has been entirely lost sight of".[20] These words allude to a philosopher considered by Lin as one of the most inspiring Western thinkers, i.e. Henry David Thoreau, who once wrote that "there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live".[21] Describing himself as "deprived of academic training in philosophy" and thus "less scared to write a book about it"[22]) Lin often makes an ironic show of his ignorance and lack of education in Western philosophy. Paradoxically, he argues, it is these alleged gaps in knowledge and the fact that he always "wandered outside the precincts of philosophy"[23] that give him the courage to philosophize in the first place. As he himself maintains, he is not well-read, didn't read Hume or Berkeley, and "technically speaking, his method and his training are all wrong, because he does not read philosophy, but only read life at first hand. That is an unconventional way of studying philosophy the incorrect way"[24] [quote modified].

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18 Lin started out as a columnist for "The Little Critic" column in *The China Critic*, the first Chinese-edited English-language newspaper in Republican China. It was printed in Shanghai.

19 Lin, *The Importance*, 418.

20 *Ibidem*.

21 For more about the context of this passage see: Pierre Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy. New Series* 19/3 (2005): 229–237.

22 Lin, *The Importance*, ix.

23 *Ibidem*.

24 *Ibidem*, viii.

Of course, whether or not he has read Berkeley or Hume, Lin's erudition, also in the realm of philosophy, is nothing short of immense; the quotation above illustrates his tendency to cast himself as a layman and amateur, saddled with an anti-theoretical mind, "content to be less philosophical and more practical".[25] As a thinker he has "always been repelled by idle philosophical speculations"; terms like Plato's "idea," Spinoza's "essence," "substance," and "attribute," and Kant's "categorical imperative" have aroused in him "a sense of suspicion that the philosopher was getting too much involved in his own thought".[26] In an introduction to the study of the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, entitled *The Wisdom of Laotse*, he describes himself in the following terms:

> I am still a child, looking at this extraordinary world with round eyes. There is so much I must learn; everything arouses my curiosity. I have only one interest, and that is to know more about life, past and present, and to write about it".[27]

He relishes quoting and translating other Chinese authors who would write in a very similar manner. For instance, making fun of himself, a scholar who spends all his time reading and writing, Lin takes real delight in the words of a poet, Po Yüchien, "too lazy to read the Taoist classics, for Tao doesn't reside in the books; too lazy to look over the sutras, for they go no deeper in Tao than its looks".[28]

Time and again in his writings, Lin echoes the words of Chinese poets, the bards of life. "Writing, writing, writing! What is writing compared with life?".[29] Thus, according to him, if it is to stand, philosophy should be expressed in action beyond mere utterances or textual inscriptions. This is why he looks to Daoism for inspiration, takes a step back from books, discards their theoretical knowledge, and warns the Western reader not to expect his writings to deliver philosophy as understood in the West or to engage in dialogue with its famous exponents. Lin claims that upon reading Laozi, the highest type of scholar will end up laughing with him

25 *Ibidem*, 124.

26 Yutang Lin, "Lin Yutang", in: *I Believe; The Personal Philosophies of Certain Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), 157.

27 Lin, *The Wisdom of Laotse*, vi.

28 Lin, *The Importance*, 154.

29 Yutang Lin, *The Little Critic. The Bilingual Essays of Lin Yutang* (Beijing: Jiuzhoupress, 2012), 342.

at the preoccupations of the philosophers of the day.[30] Lin makes no bones about his lack of interest and aversion to philosophy as a discipline removed from real life, created by specialists for specialists, and taught as a university course:

> Philosophy generally seems to be the science of making simple things difficult to understand (…). In spite of names like 'materialism', 'humanism', 'transcendentalism', 'pluralism', and all the other long-winded 'isms', I contend that these systems are no deeper than my own philosophy. Life after all is made up of eating and sleeping, of meeting and saying good-bye to friends, of reunions and farewell parties, (…) of watering a potted flower (…) and the dressing up of our notions concerning these simple phenomena of life in a kind of academic jargon is nothing but a trick to conceal either an extreme paucity or an extreme vagueness of ideas on the part of the university professors. Philosophy therefore has become a science by means of which we begin more and more to understand less and less about ourselves.[31]

Although Lin shows that naming, sorting, categorizing, and defining are fundamentally alien to Chinese thought—as attested by many scholars of Chinese ways of thinking[32] — he uses useful terms which were developed in the West to refer to this thought, such as like "humanism". He was not alone in this regard, joined by philosophers such as Wing-tsit Chan – who, incidentally, greatly appreciated Lin as a philosopher and translator[33] – and Tu Wei-ming. However, as Richard Shusterman rightly points out, the understanding of this term in the context of Chinese philosophy will be different than that adopted in the West.

> Such humanism, which need not exclude a wider spiritual dimension, is not the hubristic view that ordinary human existence is the supreme expression of the universe and that humanity is defined by its oppositional contrast to the natural world. It is rather the insistence that philosophy is inevitably shaped by the human condition and human purposes and that

30 See Lin, *The Wisdom of Laotse*, xv.

31 Lin, *The Importance*, 202.

32 See i.e. Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples India-China-Tibet--Japan* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1964).

33 See Wing-Tsit Chan, "Laotse, the Book of Tao, The Wisdom of China and India by Lin Yutang", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 65/3 (1945): 210–211; *idem*, "Lin Yutang, Critic and Interpreter".

> it should be primarily directed to the aims of preserving, cultivating, and perfecting human life.[34]

This is why, in the Chinese context, Lin frequently speaks of "Chinese Humanism",[35] and not simply of humanism. Humanism understood in this way, in the "Chinese" sense, is correctly identified by Shusterman as being synonymous with pragmatic philosophers such as James or Dewey[36]. This pragmatic context allows us to better understand Lin's call to humanize Western philosophy, Western logic, his explication of the need of humanized thinking and his desire to have philosophy deal with the problems of the individual life.[37] It is in this pragmatic context that I also understand the way he weaves his narrative about the West and the East.

When talking about academia, Lin lashes out against "academic stupidity"[38] condemning it in the same breath with "all forms of pose, sham, learned nonsense".[39] He distances himself strongly from academic philosophers: "the more they talk (…), the more confused we become";[40] one of his favorite pastimes is satirizing the figure of a typical Western philosopher:

> Any true philosopher ought to be ashamed of himself when he sees a child, or even a lion cub in a cage. How perfectly nature has fashioned him with his paws, his muscles, his beautiful coat of fur (…) and his sense of fun! The philosopher (…) should be ashamed that he wears spectacles, has no appetite, is often distressed in mind and heart, and is entirely unconscious

34 Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatism And East-Asian Thought", *Metaphilosophy* 35/1-2 (2004): 17.

35 See Lin, *The Little Critic*, 121–132.

36 cf. Shusterman, "Pragmatism And East-Asian Thought". As we can read in two brilliant articles by Handler-Spitz, Lin was heavily influenced by Montaigne without directly referring to him (see Handler-Spitz 2012; 2015). It is also worth remembering the influence of William James on Lin. Lin refers to his philosophy and the way James thought about philosophy, saying, among other things, that William James "spent his life trying to prove and defend the Chinese way of thinking, without knowing it" or that he "was Chinese in his keen awareness of life and the varieties of human experience" (Lin, *The Importance*, 421).

37 See Lin, *The Importance*, 85; 411.

38 *Ibidem*, 83.

39 *Ibidem*, 202.

40 *Ibidem*.

> of the fun in life. From this type of philosopher nothing is to be gained, for nothing that he says can be of importance to us.[41]

What Lin seems to have in mind here is an appetite for life. As he writes in another passage: "The feast of life is (…) before us, and the only question is what appetite we have for it. The appetite is the thing, and not the feast".[42] An alternative to the absence of scientism and a philosophy which skirts around real life is presented as the "true philosophy" or the "real philosophy of life/living"; any man who knows how to practice it deserves to be hailed as a "true philosopher," characterized by the features also praised by Thoreau, another important source of inspiration for Lin. Thoreau believes that "to be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically".[43]

Philosophical creativity versus drawing from tradition

Lin's vision outlined above of what philosophy should and shouldn't deal with goes to show that the task of Lin Yutang as a thinker is, at the very least, twofold, and, in a manner typical of all contemporary Chinese philosophy, the two roles interweave to the extent that they can often no longer be told apart. He creates his own original philosophy and, at the same time, styles himself as a philosopher of culture, offering interpretations of Chinese tradition, including its way of life, art, philosophical dialogue, and book writing, etc. Thus, when interpreting this thinker, it would be a major methodological error to adopt a one-sided perspective and slice up his thought, as its elements illuminate one another. Lin, who delighted in elaborate self-commentaries and showed himself profoundly conscious of the processes of authorial self-creation, often made contradictory statements (in his understanding, in fact, contradiction serves as an important element of philosophy). In private correspondence dating back to the late 1930s, he thus wrote to Richard Walsh, his editor:

41 *Ibidem*, 143.

42 *Ibidem*, 145.

43 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009): 9.

> I really ought to write a book called MY PHILOSOPHY or MY VIEWS OF THINGS. I really believe that I have an original philosophy of my own regarding all problems of life, from the habits and *art of living* to (…) such unimportant things as (…) lying in bed (…) and the foolishness of social conventions and the importance of birds and flowers in our life. Nature, art, religion, Immortality, Society, happiness, sorrow, death—all will be treated in a cynically kind and profoundly naive and gaily serious manner.[44]

However, when the book in question was finally published, described by Lin's daughter Lin Taiyi as the "grand synthesis of his philosophy",[45] and originally entitled "My Life and Philosophy",[46] its author declared:

> I am not original. The ideas expressed here have been thought and expressed by many thinkers of the East and West over and over again; those I borrow from the East are hackneyed truths there. They are, nevertheless, my ideas; they have become a part of my being. If they have taken root in my being, it is because they express something original in me, and when I first encountered them, my heart gave an instinctive assent.[47]

Lin's *oeuvre* is thus an elaborate, insightful commentary and dialogue, or, as one of his scholars puts it, a "cross-cultural commentary on a philosophy of life drawn from his own creative interpretation of Chinese cultural tradition".[48] However, if that was all there was to his writing, if it aimed to do no more than present Chinese culture, as Lin understands it, in the most attractive way possible, would *The Importance of Living* have become the national bestseller for non-fiction in the USA in 1938? Would readers have hailed it as "the most satisfactory and enjoyable book they have ever read"? Would they have written letters to Lin to say: "your philosophy has given me courage and made me realize how much there is left in life to enjoy"?[49] In another self-commentary, Lin emphasized his subjective approach. *The Importance of Living* is meant to outline his personal insights; he aims to write only about what he has lived through and understood of his culture, and, most importantly, what he has filtered through his own *personal experience*:

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44 Qian, *Lin Yutang and China's Search*, 202.

45 Lin, *The Wisdom of Laotse*, vi.

46 See Qian, *Lin Yutang and China's Search.*

47 Lin, *The Importance*, viii.

48 Qian, *Lin Yutang and China's Search*, 25.

49 *Ibidem*, 208.

> I have also chosen to speak as a modern, sharing the modern life, and not only as a Chinese; to give only what I have personally absorbed into my modern being, and not merely to act as a respectful translator of the ancients.[50]

The obvious contradiction between Western European and – to use a well-known phrase by T.S. Eliot – "tradition and individual talent",[51] turns out to only be apparent in the Chinese context. The point is the creative internalization of the tradition, making it the subject of our own experience, drawing from it in a highly personal, individual way. In a sense, by declaring his allegiance to Chinese tradition, he needs to inscribe himself within the culture of continuity that requires thinkers and artists to emphasize that they merely elaborate on the achievements of their ancestors and their role, at best, is to interpret and explain their work. When reading Lin Yutang, one should never lose sight of the huge importance of lowliness in Chinese culture (unprecedented on a global scale), or the fact that even its inarguable founder and most prominent figure, Confucius, declared he was only editing and continuing the work of his ancestors. Confucian culture, therefore, is created by the disciples of the masters, by those who receive their teachings and attempt to imitate them. Imitation, however, is not what we are used to in the West. In *The Chinese Theory of Art* Lin writes as follows:

> The question of the influence of artists on one another is always interesting. (…) It is usually said that such-and-such an artist shih another artist. Literally, shih means 'take for master' (…). In actual usage, it means only 'model oneself or one's style upon', there being usually no teacher-pupil relationship. As a result, it would be simpler to say that such-and-such an artist 'derived' from another, but with the understanding that he deliberately copied and tried to imitate a certain artist, ancient or contemporary. Artists often speak of themselves as deliberately choosing another ancient artist for their model. This involves an intensive study of the master's style and technique.[52]

50 Lin, *The Importance*, x.

51 Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932).

52 Yutang Lin, *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967): 14.

In many passages, Lin reflects on a practice common among Chinese artists and philosophers, which consists in modeling oneself or one's style upon sages, worthies, wise men, great painters. What he has in mind is that in deriving from one another, these men cultivated not only a specific spiritual tradition but also took pains to "imitate" a certain kind of technique or techniques. Importantly, he is well aware that his techniques are not entirely his own. They have come down from Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and other Chinese masters; perhaps because of his Christian upbringing, he was dissatisfied with, in his own words, his "half-baked knowledge of Chinese" literature,[53] and thus he became a "classicist by training".[54] It was only as a mature man that he made up for "overlooking" Chinese literature and philosophy,[55] opting to draw from the culture of his ancestors in which the "ability in writing was always closely tied to a knowledge of the classics" and in which texts "consisted of a series of phrases or idioms generally taken from old texts",[56] Lin no more than borrows and makes free use of them in his writings. By imitating the masters, he takes their example and carries them with him everywhere; he calls them his "best old friends," "lifelong friends," "forever friends/companions in spirit," and "masters." Their influence is so strong that the reader no longer knows where Lin's commentaries end, and his own observations begin. Is he still talking about the master or just using him to talk about his own approach? This is a deliberate and conscious strategy, which Lin describes as follows: "I have sometimes let these souls speak directly to the reader, making proper acknowledgment, and at other times, I have spoken for them while I seem to be speaking for myself".[57]

The main stimulus and inspiration to take up the life of an artist-philosopher and train oneself in different arts comes from the figure of the master himself. It is not the intellect that should have the say in life, as observes Peimin Ni: in Chinese tradition ethics is "a matter of cultivating embodied character traits, for which modeling after an exemplar would be the primary method of learning. This not only resembles the

53 Yutang Lin, *Memoirs of an Octogenarian* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1975): 31.

54 *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Suoqiao Qian (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2015): 2.

55 See He Jianming, "Dialogue between Christianity and Taoism: The Case of Lin Yutang", in: *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. Miikka Ruokanen, Paulos Huang (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

56 Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern*, 205.

57 Lin, *The Importance*, x.

process of learning an art, but it is also a process of learning an art (the art of living)".[58]

In *The Wisdom of Confucius*,[59] *Zhuangzi* passages translated and commented by Lin in *The Wisdom of Laotse*,[60] as well as in other his translations and commentaries such as those compiled in a volume entitled *The Wisdom of China*[61] which provided him with a lifelong source of inspiration, not to mention various literary texts, we find minute descriptions of the ways in which the master ate, attended to his disciples, slept or dressed, because all these daily activities are seen as not merely "done" but rather "practiced". With great pleasure and curiosity, Lin holds forth on Confucius' preferences in color, taste, the smell of rice, or the way in which food should be cut before being served, calling the master a "fastidious artist of life",[62] or, on another occasion, "that great artist of life".[63] As for the *Analects*, Lin takes particular interest in the stories/anecdotes from the master's life, such as when he cries for no reason; these depict Confucius as a highly emotional man, full of contradictions, and unafraid to reveal his "human side".[64] In a chapter entitled "Philosophy of Life" in his *Confucianism. A modern Interpretation*, Chi Yun Chang explains that "The central topic of Confucianism is life, man's life. (…) It is a humanist philosophy in the sense that it considers man as man, with full respect to man's individuality (…). A special characteristic of Confucianism is its emphasis on (…) 'down to earth' approach to man's practical problems".[65]

For this reason, all the details in Chinese philosophical works are important,[66] not so much in the ethical as in the practical sense, since they teach us how to become artists of life. A lot of space is devoted to ethically indifferent, common activities, such as walking, enjoying trees, or, to name but a handful of examples from Chinese philosophical classics, the spontaneous singing of Confucius, Laozi emerging from water, and

58 Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (New York: SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, 2017), 27.

59 Yutang Lin, *The Wisdom of Confucius* (New York: Carlton House, 1938).

60 Lin, *The Importance*, 249.

61 *Ibidem*, 203.

62 *Ibidem*, 249.

63 *Ibidem*, 203.

64 See "Confucius as I Know Him" in: Lin, *The Little Critic*.

65 Chi Yun Chang, *Confucianism. A Modern Interpretation*, transl. Orient Lee (Zheijang University Press, 2012): 61.

66 See more about that in: François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, transl. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000), especially chapter "From the Master to the Disciple: The Proposition Is Only an Indication".

many other, seemingly irrelevant examples of spontaneous expression. Spontaneous though they are, these activities require preparation and technique, which takes a long time to master. What matters is the very readiness to learn: any artist of life must wish to learn how to enjoy life.[67]

The art of life

Even though the theme of life as an art and of philosophy as a creative act lies at the core of the philosophy of life, the outward, aesthetic dimension of an art piece, though indispensable, is in a sense secondary, and the matter with which we work contingent: it can be any of the traditional arts practiced and brought to perfection in Chinese culture over the centuries (various martial art techniques, calligraphy, the art of tea brewing or sound oriented improvisation). However, in order to underscore that practice and exercise belong to the initiate's everyday life, far beyond the six traditional arts, Chinese philosophers also delight in descriptions of experiences normally not associated with the arts, or with morality, at all, such as the art of catching cicadas, cutting up an ox, or listening to the wind.[68] Writing from within that perspective, Lin notes that:

> Art is very much broader than painting and music and dancing, because there is good form in everything. There is good form in an athlete at a race; and there is good form, too, in one's laughter or spitting, as so carefully practiced by the old Mandarins in China. Every human activity has a form and expression, and all forms of expressions lie within the definition of art. It is therefore impossible to relegate the art of expression to the few fields of music and dancing and painting. With this broader interpretation of art, therefore, good form in conduct and good personality in art are closely related and are equally important.[69]

Anything that is or becomes an element of everyday life, any domain in which one achieves mastery, invisible as it may be to an outside observer, can thus be considered an art. Masters of any given art may rise to excellence, but excellence is not what is at stake here: "beauty is merely

67 See Lin, *The Importance*, 222.

68 All examples taken from *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, transl. B. Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

69 Lin, *The Importance*, 369.

good form, and there is good form in conduct as well as in good painting or a beautiful bridge".[70]

That various practices belonging to Chinese aesthetic culture (painting, calligraphy, poetry, etc.) were so eagerly practiced by Chinese literati is quite understandable in view of the fact that these were deeply related to improving their wisdom and intelligence and had a great influence on their quality of life. Much more controversial is Lin's thesis that everyday activities could be performed as forms of art: according to Lin they also provide a way to achieve and cultivate illuminative self-consciousness. The everyday factor is the most important here as art is not a sophisticated escape from the actual world that the artist inhabits. It is also a perfect way to be more present in the world and a way to make things more alive. Based on his elaborate description of the posture of the human body at rest, it could seem that Lin looks at aesthetic experience from a soma perspective. To the contrary, however, he takes the perspective of mind-body practice, as developed early in China and continued through the ages (one of the most popular Lin's antecedents is Chinese poet Li Liweng (1610–1680 AD) and his "The Art of Sleeping, Walking, Sitting and Standing".[71]

For Lin, writing is the most accessible, everyday form of practice: he also places philosophical writing squarely within the sphere of aesthetics. Naturally, this will have important consequences: he will often mix literary and philosophical language and alternate between objective speech and poetry. The author will be at once a philosopher and a writer. Not unlike many other Chinese thinkers, Lin relies on the category of ambiguity and suggestiveness typical of Chinese tradition.[72] The veracity of his stories takes the backstage; the telling of the story as such, by definition anecdotal, is a pretext to practice the art of writing and invites the reader to enter his world: "It is difficult for me to describe the qualities of this love of life; it is easier to speak in a parable or tell the story of a true lover of life, as he really lived".[73] In its various manifestations, creativity is a way of participating in the feast of life. For this reason, Lin radically distances himself from "objectivity" and instead emphasizes that his philosophy is "lyrical," a word he defines as "a highly personal and

70 *Ibidem*, 369.

71 See in Yutang Lin, *Harvest Moon on West Lake. Selected Essays on Life Philosophy of the Chinese* (Wrocław: Amazon Fulfillment. Poland sp. z o.o., 2017).

72 See Ming Dong Gu, "Aesthetic Suggestiveness in Chinese Thought: A Symphony of Metaphysics and Aesthetics", *Philosophy East and West* 53/4 (2003): 490–513; Jullien, *Detour and Access*.

73 Lin, *The Importance*, 115.

individual outlook".[74] In the introduction to *The Importance of Living*, he writes: "This is a personal testimony, a testimony of my own experience of thought and life. It is not intended to be objective and makes no claim to establish eternal truths. In fact I rather despise claims to objectivity in philosophy; the point of view is the thing".[75]

Since his creative, poetic language helps open the gate to Chinese philosophical space, so distinct from that of the West, Lin's philosophy is largely constructed on the metaphors of Chinese culture. It is full of poetry; it balances on the boundary of language, juggles metaphors that involve dynamic change and movement, presents living, moving images, relies on musicality; it is often laced with paradox and irony. "I write to please no one, and may displease some,"[76] is a sentiment he repeats in various ways, and in fact – what he writes aroused considerable controversy during his lifetime, mainly in China.[77] Fully aware of the interdependence between reader and writer, Lin changes the message depending on the recipient/reader he is writing to. This is one of Lin's communication strategies which are designed to keep him in touch with the reader.

In his work, the art of writing goes hand in hand with the art of reading, and it seems that Lin, be it a thinker, translator or editor, never forgets about the other side of the coin. As a reader himself, influenced and inspired by the proverbial, practical wisdom found in philosophical writings, Lin devises similar structures to serve as a springboard for meditation and initiate a meditative process in the reader. The purpose is to facilitate a task thus described by Tu Wei Ming: "Interpretation in this particular connection is not the imposition of a fixed notion of rationality of the text, but a process of opening oneself up to the text".[78] Lin would no doubt agree that the reader needs to arrive at "an appreciation of the text's inner meanings"; that his is a process of studying text as "the unfolding humanistic vision".[79]

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74 Cf. *ibidem*, vii.

75 *Ibidem*, vii. Since Chinese philosophy is a philosophy of balance, shunning one-sided perspectives, Lin also invokes "a sense of detachment (takuan) toward life" as an ideal of Chinese art and philosophy. He claims that "from this detachment comes high--mindedness (k'uanghuai)" (*ibidem*, 2). The limited scope of this article, however, does not allow me to address this issue in more detail.

76 Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, 16.

77 See a list of such controversies in Chan, "Lin Yutang, Critic and Interpreter".

78 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 3.

79 *Ibidem*, 78.

In order to make that possible, the text needs to be "designed" along specific lines. It is not just the ambiguity and suggestiveness of the philosophical vision, weaved from various quotations from ancient sages, that serves to promote a personal experience in the reader. It does not suffice to say the link between the work and the personal life of the author also plays a role, as it is clearly more than that. Lin appeals to a concrete conception of philosophy which is not meant to merely be a theory but rather something which is realized and practiced in life. This type of vision can be also found in other Chinese and Western thinkers who practiced philosophy as a way of life; they were all keen on diary-like forms (Nietzsche), personal notes (Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau), commentaries (Wang Bi), essays (Montaigne), or combined all these elements, which made their works resemble notes taken from a stream of consciousness. Importantly, thinking is also an art that needs to be studied; it calls for an open mind and, above all, honesty. A key chapter in Lin's *The Importance of Living* entitled "The Art of Thinking" starts with the following words: "Thinking is an art, and not a science".[80] What he finds extremely important about writing and thinking is that they are spontaneous processes that should be free from outside interference; there is a strongly performative aspect to both. The essence of "real" reading and writing lies in "traveling the bypaths", taking "really good, long, leisurely discourses extending several pages at a stretch, with many detours".[81] One gets the impression that Lin's method relies on simply "jotting down the thoughts" as they emerge (it is far from a coincidence that the formula first appears in the commentaries of Zhuangzi), as if taking notes from his own stream of consciousness. The casual essay form,[82] in which his thought is free to wander, is his favorite genre. Thus understood, philosophy for Lin is "the exercise of the spirit par excellence".[83]

He describes his thought as a kind of "lyrical philosophy", and by doing so, draws the reader into a kind of game in which he repeatedly thumbs his nose at Western expectations. "Lyrical philosophy," however, is not the same as "sentimental philosophy"; its purpose, rather, is to lay bare and overcome the limits of propositional language. Traditional, mainstream Western thinking continues to use language in a propositional, referential way. This is not the case for philosophy as a way of life,

80 Lin, *The Importance*, 411.

81 *Ibidem*, viii.

82 For more about the form, described as "little essays" by Lin and as "humorous essays or familiar essays" by his editor and scholar, see Lin, *The Little Critic*, 9.

83 Lin, *The Importance*, 143.

one that Lin looks for in other writers as well, be they Zhunagzi, Laozi, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Emerson. As Lin declares in one of his articles: "That philosophy alone can be of use to us which joins hands merrily with poetry and establishes for us a truer vision, first of nature and then of human nature".[84] Lin identifies poetry as a special characteristic of his philosophy, so thoroughly steeped in the Chinese spirit: "It accounts for the fact that the Chinese philosopher's view of life is essentially the poet's view of life, and that, in China, philosophy is married to poetry rather than to science as it is in the West".[85]

A philosophy of living

In one of his passages Lin writes: "Only by placing living above thinking can we get away from this heat and the re-breathed air of philosophy and recapture some of the freshness and naturalness of true insight of the child".[86] In this context, "living" refers to the process of life understood as the experience of "now," further emphasized by the gerund form that suggests a continuous action/state. What is at stake here, therefore, is a philosophy that does not disengage one from the experience of the here and now, such as when our minds are constantly engaged in thinking. Living happens only in the present – it is here and now. Instead, in Western philosophy life is rather analyzed from some external point of view or after it ceases,[87] which is why there is talk on the meaning/purpose of human existence/life,[88] rather than the meaning of human living. The fundamental question is this: what engages us deeper in the unfolding experience of the present and what disengages us from it? In the Chinese approach, the key term is attention; it is attention that opens up one's senses to the experience of any given moment. Therefore for Lin, the most natural approach to philosophy is from within a living, changing world, as there is nothing to separate or divide us from it. In Chinese tradition, the philosophy of living is strongly connected to the notion of *dao*, an unfolding active experience, every step and stage of

84 *Ibidem*.

85 *Ibidem*, 9.

86 *Ibidem*, 143.

87 For more about differences between Western and Chinese philosophy of life/living see brilliant book Jullien François, *The Philosophy of Living*, transl. Michael Richardson, Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016).

88 Lin is highly skeptical of this approach, see Lin, *The Importance*, 124.

which is more important than its destination; the most important feature of *dao*, it would seem, is mobility, change. If life is a huge performance of the dao, then one can grasp life itself only when in motion. On this view, man is immersed in the world as a participant in a constant flow of events that he, importantly, must accept; this is what Lin refers to as "living in the Tao".[89] Acceptance is associated with the joy of life at every stage and with an understanding that "there is good form in a man leading a beautiful life from childhood and youth to maturity and old age, each appropriate in its own time";[90] perfection is present in all the phases of life, especially in old age, which the Chinese hold up as a symbol of ultimate earthly happiness.[91]

Conclusions

Let us now indicate what practical conclusions result from such a philosophy. By connecting life so strongly to nature, Lin shows that there is no such thing as an abstract formula of happiness. Why not? Because a happy life is one lived in harmony with one's surroundings. For a man, he says, "it is enough that he has a place, and by living in harmony with nature around him, he will be able to form a workable and reasonable outlook on human life itself".[92] A very similar idea appears in his philosophy during the same period: "Forget the unknown and uncertain heaven, and live close to the rocks and the trees, and after watching the sunset watch the twinkling stars. This earth, this visible universe, I say, is enough! It is, in fact, spiritual, visibly so".[93] Harmony [*he*] is one of the most essential elements in Chinese art, as well as in Lin's art of living. Lin, however, has his own special take on it. Looking at titles like "On Having a Stomach," "The Feast of Life," "Human Happiness is Sensuous," etc., we can better appreciate his down-to-earth attitude.[94] It seems that one of the practical effects of his philosophy is that Lin values life at its fullest more than books, or that at least he does not make a strong distinction

89 *Ibidem*, 410.

90 *Ibidem*, 369.

91 *Ibidem*, 198.

92 *Ibidem*, 126.

93 Lin, "Lin Yutang", 167.

94 This falls neatly within the convention of Chinese philosophy, for example Zuo Qiuming's Commentary on "The Spring and Autumn Annals"). See chapters of *Chinese Philosophy on Life* (Wang Keping, *Chinese Philosophy on Life* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2005), e.g. "The Soup Allegory of Harmony").

between the intellectual/spiritual and the material/physical aspects of life: "With his spirituality based on a kind of material, earth-bound existence, [Chinese] fails to see the distinction between the spirit and the flesh. And the Chinese fails to see why a sympathy of tastes in the enjoyment of food is less spiritual than a symphony of sounds".[95]

Lin's philosophy, therefore, is based on a search for simplicity; he dwells on material life and the main ingredient of *his thought* is "matter-of-fact prose, a level easier to maintain because more natural".[96] Elsewhere he writes: "I prefer talking with a (…) maid to talking with a mathematician; her words are more concrete, her laughter is more energetic, and I generally gain more in knowledge of human nature by talking with her. I am such a materialist that at any time I would prefer pork to poetry, and would waive a piece of philosophy for a piece of fillet".[97] It is only through these small things in life, not through metaphysics, that the true meaning of life can be revealed, according to Lin. Since Lin's is a philosophy of full immersion in life, of co-creating the world, where the latter is not seen as the object of consciousness but its partner, it is best learned from common people encountered in everyday situations: "a Shanghai street car conductor; his cook's wife; a lion cub in the zoo; a deck steward who made one good remark; all news in boxes and any writer who does not kill our sense of curiosity in life or who has not killed it in himself".[98]

Lin often emphasizes that experience is what life is; there is no external meaning to life. We do not need to seek perfection not because we are already perfect here and now, even though the main goal of Lin's thought, and which features in all of Chines philosophy, is: "how shall we enjoy life, and who can best enjoy life? No perfectionism, no straining after the unattainable, no postulating of the unknowable; but taking poor, mortal human nature as it is, how shall we organize our life that we can work peacefully, endure nobly and live happily?"[99]

Perfection and perfectionism usually have quite a pejorative connotation in Lin's works, as they usually appear as something unattainable, invented, impractical (e.g. mere perfection of technique;[100] abstract

95 Lin, *The Importance*, 159.

96 *Ibidem*, vii.

97 *Ibidem*, 142.

98 *Ibidem*, viii.

99 *Ibidem*, 96.

100 *Ibidem*, 375.

perfection;[101] "impossible logical perfection"[102] and typically surface in two contexts: the first is the Confucian pursuit of perfection, e.g. in calligraphy, while the second is Christian thought, in which perfection means sinlessness, angelicity, being incorporeal. as a flesh and blood person whose calligraphy was terrible, and who is mortal and imperfect.[103] Our task is learning, not self-improvement. Quoting Walt Whitman's words "I am sufficient as I am," Lin comments: "It is sufficient that I live and am probably going to live for another few decades and that human life exists"[104].[105] This brings Lin's thought into a stark contrast with the typically Western projection into the future, where life is viewed as "a project" to be carried out. He describes his approach as the greatest secret of Chinese philosophy, essentially beyond the reach of most people in the West.

It is clear, therefore, that Lin would show no interest in discussing the purpose of life; as he soberly remarks, philosophers who ponder the issue of life and happiness tend to boil it down to what *ought to be* its goal, what human life should be like. They discuss values and, of course, every single one sets up another value as his beacon: "the point of dispute is not what is, but what should be, the purpose of human life, and it is therefore a practical, and not a metaphysical question. Into this question of what should be the purpose of human life, every man projects his own conceptions and his own scale of values. It is for this reason that we quarrel over the question, because our scales of values differ from one another".[106]

If there is any purpose to life at all, Lin holds, it cannot be conceived in discursive terms, but rather grasped perceptively through sensuous experience alone. This is what Lin proposes and what best encapsulates the message of his philosophy: when you are naked, alone "listen (…) the blood coursing through your veins, and you'll get a truer mystic realization of the purpose of human life than from volumes of philosophy".[107]

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101 *Ibidem*, 142.

102 *Ibidem*, 418.

103 Lin gives this assessment of his calligraphy by his father, a teacher brought up in Confucian culture, and for whom it was an important element of education. See Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, 32.

104 Lin, *The Importance*, 124. See also his critique of the notion of perfection in Christianity in: Lin, "Lin Yutang", 135.

105 See also his critique of the notion of perfection in Christianity in: *ibidem*, 135.

106 Lin, *The Importance*, 124.

107 Lin, *The Little Critic*, 358.

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