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Modelling “Self” through Writing – Lin Yutang as a Philosopher of the Art of Life

Abstract

In the paper, I reconstruct the philosophical practice of Lin Yutang and argue that his thought can be interpreted as a philosophy of the art of life. I point out that the essence of Lin's philosophical practice is the art of writing. Similarly to other philosophers of the art of life, Lin is both an artist and philosopher. Therefore, he himself is the central theme of his essays. In his performative art, Lin constructs his “self” and shapes the model of philosophical life deeply rooted in the tradition of Chinese leisure culture. The model of everyday life proposed by Lin is, thus, meant to inspire the reader.

Keywords

Lin Yutang, Chinese philosophy, modelling self, art, philosophy of life

Introduction

Incredibly popular in the 20th century, now mainly recognised as a novelist, Lin Yutang (1895 – 1976) was born in Longxi, Fujian. He was a leading essayist on the contemporary Chinese literary scene, debuting in the 1920s as a member of the Yusi (Thread of Words) literary group, spearheaded by two brothers, Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, and later went on to lead his own group, known as Analects, and edit a series of popular literary magazines, such as *Lunyu* or *Renjianshi* (*This Human World*) in Shanghai. Apart from the above-mentioned two esteemed writers, Lin's oeuvre has often been placed in the context of contemporary masters in humanistic studies such as Gu Hongming, Hu Shi, Zhu Ziqing, Liang Shiqiu or Feng Youlan.¹ Lin wrote more than thirty non-fiction books in English, mostly on philosophical themes and only seven novels.² Most of the latter also touches on philosophy, but even though they still enjoy popularity, the philosophical themes in Lin's oeuvre

1

See more on the subject, e.g. in: Tonglu Li, “Modern Chinese Essays: Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and Others”, in: Gu Ming Dong (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature*, Routledge 2018, pp. 290–302; Suoqiao Qian, *Lin Yutang and China's Search for Modern Rebirth*, Palgrave Macmillan, Newcastle upon Tyne 2017, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4657-5>; Er Liu, Hu-idi Ma, *Traditional Chinese Leisure Culture and Economic Development: A Conflict of Forces*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York

2017, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59253-8>. Lin himself mentions Gu Hongming and Hu Shi as two first-class minds that had a profound influence on his own thinking. – Yutang Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, The World Publishing Company, Ohio 1959, p. 44.

2

Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant. The Rice University Campbell Lectures*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008, p. 12.

are rarely addressed by research.³ Depending on the stage of his life and the current intellectual phase (as well as his interpreters’ personal preferences), he has been analysed as a thinker firmly rooted in Taoism, Buddhism or Confucianism. In contrast, some scholars have chosen to emphasise his orientation toward Western thought, including the thread of Christianity that runs through Lin’s oeuvre, especially after 1959. Although he was eager to share his philosophical insights in various shorter and longer texts and often recapitulated his “personal philosophy”, Lin Yutang avoided pompous names and designations. His essays are full to the brim with brilliant remarks, sparkling wit, and gentle self-irony; he preferred to distance himself from the image of a “grey-bearded old man” or “sage from the East”.⁴ Likewise, if he ever talked of “philosophy”, he always qualified it with a modifier, e.g. “lyrical”, “of living”, “of life”, or “personal”. Alongside the likes of Thoreau, Emerson, and Montaigne,⁵ he belongs to a large group of thinkers whose position among philosophers is not secure once and for all. As researchers are starting to notice,

“Some critics consider writings about life and living only amount to cultural criticism and doubt if they constitute the ‘philosophy’ as an academic discipline that should deal with concepts of subjective identity, existence and logic etc. For them, Lin’s ‘philosophy’ is, at best, ‘philosophy of life’ rather than serious philosophic scholarship. Such a parochial view ignores the long tradition of ‘moral philosophy’ that focuses on human behaviour and ethics [...]”⁶

Even though, as noted by Alexander Nehamas and Pierre Hadot, two authors of important monographs on ancient philosophy, the philosophy of the art of life is a historically valid form of philosophical activity, on a par with the strictly theoretical variety, philosophers of the art of life are now more often discussed in departments of culture studies, literature, or anthropology. In their focus on practising philosophy as an art of life, they distance themselves from philosophy understood as a purely theoretical enterprise. This kind of attitude, one that aspires to objectivity and scientific truth, is the target of Lin’s scathing criticism; the only philosophy he ever invokes is the philosophy of living. To my mind, Lin’s critique of academic philosophy⁷ and his protests that he is not a philosopher should both be viewed against the backdrop of the perennial dispute between philosophers-practitioners and philosophers-theorists. “If you want philosophy to involve hair-splitting, then I am not a philosopher”, Lin seems to be saying, “personally, I have never been interested in a philosophy of this kind”.⁸ It is a practical philosophy that he sees as his primary object of interest and field of activity. This article aims to show that placing his meandering thought in the context of the philosophy of the art of life allows us to pose questions other than those normally asked about contemporary philosophers, and thus allows us to better identify the most important elements of Lin Yutang’s philosophical practice.

Shaping the Philosophical “Self” – a Philosophical Dimension

Alexander Nehamas distinguishes between what he claims are two historically valid conceptions of philosophy. One is the province of those who seek answers to general and momentous questions, such as “What is a good life?” or “How should one live it?”, but approach the matter from a strictly theoretical angle. They do not seem to be convinced that their answers should translate into who they become. What matters to them, above all, is the formal quality of the answers they give. This form of philosophy often draws on the exact

sciences; its practitioners avoid a personal tone, often marginalising the concrete personality that stands behind the philosophical answers.

The other group consists of the philosophers of the art of life, who, Nehamas argues, include the likes of Montaigne, Nietzsche, Foucault, Pascal, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau or Wittgenstein.⁹ According to Nehamas, these thinkers all share the belief that philosophical convictions, as long as they are actualised in daily life, *create a person*; it is only under their influence that philosophers become who they are meant to be.¹⁰ Characteristically, philosophers of the art of life do not consider personality as a given, but as an integrated whole that first needs to be shaped and moulded. Nehamas

3

So far, historical and sociological methodology prevails in research on Lin Yutang. No complete study of Lin Yutang’s philosophical ideas exists thus far in any Western language. Valuable, albeit partial discussions of his thought, can be found in: Wing-tsit Chan, “The Wisdom of Confucius by Lin Yutang”, *Pacific Affairs* 13 (1940) 4, pp. 483–487, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2750973>; Wing-tsit Chan, “Laotse, the Book of Tao, The Wisdom of China and India by Lin Yutang”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 65 (1945) 3, pp. 210–211, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/595823>; Wing-tsit Chan, “Lin Yutang, Critic and Interpreter”, *The English Journal* 36 (1947) 1, pp. 1–7, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/806572>; Jianming He, “Dialogue between Christianity and Taoism – The Case of Lin Yutang”, in: Mikka Ruokanen, Paulos Huang (eds.), *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids (MI) 2010, pp. 124–144; Roslyn Joy Ricci, *What Maketh the Man? Towards a Psychobiographical Study of Lin Yutang*, dissertation, School of Social Science – Centre for Asian Studies, University of Adelaide 2013; Suoqiao Qian (ed.), *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang: Critical Perspectives*, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley 2015; Shirley Chan, Daniel Lee, “Lin Yutang. Reinterpreting the ancients for moderns”, *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 47 (2015), pp. 116–137; Jianmei Liu, “Lin Yutang. Zhuangzi Travels to the West”, in: Jianmei Liu, *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature*, New York Oxford University Press, New York 2016, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190238155.001.0001>, pp. 106–126.

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This is how he was perceived by his Western audiences: primarily as a “Chinese philosopher”, “a wise man from the East”. – S. Qian (ed.), “Introduction. Western Universalism and Chinese Identity: Lin Yutang as a Cross-Cultural Critic”, in: S. Qian (ed.), *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang*, pp. 1–18, here p. 2.

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See: the analysis of motifs characteristic of Montaigne’s *Essays*, primarily in terms of rhetoric in Lin’s *The Importance of Living*: Rivi Handler-Spitz, “The Importance of Cannibalism: Montaigne’s Essays as a Vehicle for the Cultural Translation of Chineseness in Lin Yutang’s *The Importance of Living*”, *Compilation and Translation Review* 5 (March 2012) 1, pp. 121–158; Rivi Handler-Spitz, “Collaborator or Cannibal? Montaigne’s Role in Lin Yutang’s *Importance of Living*”, in: S. Qian (ed.), *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang*, pp. 143–161.

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S. Chan, D. Lee, “Lin Yutang”, p. 117.

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I have written more on the theme in “Laughing with Laozi – Lin’s critical approach to mainstream Western philosophy” in an article entitled “Lin Yutang’s Philosophy of Living” (forthcoming).

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Yutang Lin, “Lin Yutang”, in: Clifton Fadiman (ed.), *I Believe; The Personal Philosophies of Certain Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1939, pp. 157–174.

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This list could be expanded to include other philosophers who meet the relevant criteria. In Western tradition, it could feature figures such as Lucretius, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and today, Stanley Cavell, who also draws from this tradition.

10

Even though Nehamas does not mention Nietzsche by name, he is clearly inspired by the Nietzschean model of “becoming what one is”. He addresses the issue in: Alexander Nehamas, “How One Becomes What One Is”, *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983) 3, pp. 385–417, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184481>.

claims that this “self”, only initially influenced by accidental judgments and events,¹¹ is created by philosophers as they consolidate experiences gained in the process. A crystallised, integrated “self”, he argues, is one in which every part significantly contributes to the whole, which would be altogether different if any of its parts were missing. In this sense, each element is important, indispensable, no longer contingent. This self, constituted by means of philosophising, is the very essence of philosophy; this is why the philosophers of the art of life put such a scrupulous emphasis on personality and place it at the core of their writings. In this context, it should become clearer why Lin often emphasises that he only shares his personal philosophy, the expression of a highly individual and personal outlook.¹² By reflecting on a personal level, Lin makes his philosophical insights attributable to a specific person, even if his convictions are not always internally coherent. In this form of philosophy, which departs from the individual author, man is perceived as “the last irreducible, ultimate source of all valid thinking. He, and he alone, is the touchstone on which all philosophies must be tested for validity”.¹³ The thinker documents the state of his soul by encapsulating it in an aphorism. As Wittgenstein observed:

“You write about yourself from your own height. You don’t stand on stilts or on a ladder but on your bare feet.”¹⁴

In this context, the lack of censorship and freedom of expression are, for Lin, the *sine qua non* of writing “for freedom is the very soul of art”.¹⁵

Psychological credibility matters more than internal coherence. He writes thus about his essays:

“These are my probings into the world of things and ideas which excite me, or amuse me or amaze me, which concern me deeply and which arouse my curiosity. They are my candid shots into the realm of thinking.”¹⁶

He writes what he would say to his intimate friends when he is at home and on his home ground. To achieve the effect of “intimacy” in the author-reader relationship, Lin falls back on many tried-and-tested techniques.¹⁷ The appeal of his writings largely stems from the fact that they seem to be offhand notes, intended not as elaborate conceits, but rather simple personal confessions. Therefore, personality is a sort of philosophical project that can serve as a source of inspiration; it is the creation of a convincing model, with the personality of the philosopher at the centre, that stands out as the key aspect of philosophy thus understood. How to tell, on Nehamas’s view, that this personality is philosophical, rather than artistic? We know it because it is shaped by philosophical reflection, and in this sense represents a philosophical enterprise; the “self” has views on subjects traditionally considered to belong to the province of philosophy. Philosophers of the art of life

“... construct their personalities through the investigation, the criticism, and the production of philosophical views – views, that is, that belong to the repertoire of philosophy as we have come to understand it. The connection is historical: even though the philosophers of the art of living often introduce new questions, their inspiration always comes from the tradition that we already accept as the tradition of philosophy. More important, the philosophers of the art of living make the articulation of a mode of life their central topic: it is by reflecting on the problems of constructing a philosophical life that they construct the life their work constitutes.”¹⁸

One may suppose that identifying Chinese tradition as the main philosophical context of Lin Yutang, known as the translator of Zhuangzi and Laozi, author of commentaries on Chinese classics, and populariser of Chinese culture,

should be fairly uncontroversial. However, it must be kept in mind that the shared feature of contemporary Chinese thought, also when it draws on Chinese philosophical tradition, is its ongoing dialogue with Western philosophy. Moreover, the form of philosophical essay chosen by Lin Yutang practices is inspired by both traditional Chinese culture and Western philosophy, science and literature.¹⁹ Lin also enjoyed a wide-ranging, Western-oriented education, so it would perhaps be more apt to say that he continually negotiates between the two cultures, or, as he likes to put it, that his “two legs straddle the cultures of East and West”.²⁰

Lin often hints that what matters is the vision of life conveyed by his writings, and that is a philosophical subject. His portrait of a philosopher relies not so much on objective philosophical reflections as on personal insight and experience, which often requires a certain stretch of imagination to even qualify as “philosophical” in the Western sense, although it is typical for philosophers-artists from the *wenren* (a man of culture, educated, civilised) circle of traditional Chinese thought. In Lin’s writings, this figure is either introduced as a self-portrait or a portrait. These (self-)portraits are created in such a way as to create an impression of meeting a person of flesh and blood to. To achieve the effect of “intimacy” in the author-reader relationship, Lin falls back on many tried-and-tested techniques. The appeal of his writings largely stems from the fact that they seem to be offhand notes, intended not as elaborate conceits, but rather simple personal confessions. Nehamas emphasises that philosophers who strike us as flesh-and-blood people affect our sensibility in this way. Not unlike friends, we meet them as individual persons. We are interested in their character as a whole, rather than their individual traits or views in isolation. Even their flaws and weaknesses are inseparable from their personality. Lin thought along similar lines. Lin had an incredibly personal relationship with Chinese philosophers-artists, including the greatest sages, and their impact on the development of his philosophical self can hardly be

11 In his discussion of the “self”, Nehamas makes a distinction between what he says are two equally valid philosophical uses of the term. Thus, more broadly, we can talk of the “self” in the sense of every person being an individual from birth. In a narrower sense, only some people create or arrive at a sense of “self” and become fully themselves over time. It is in this second sense that Nehamas conceives of the philosophers of the art of life.

12 See: e.g. Yutang Lin, *The Importance of Living*, Reynal & Hitchcock, New York 1937, p. vii; Y. Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, p. 16.

13 Yutang Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, World Pub. Co., Cleveland 1962, p. 7.

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, Georg Henrik von Wright (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford 1980, p. 10.

15 Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 368.

16 Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, p. 11.

17 Lin describes his style as “unbuttoned”, “intimate” or “conversational”. He discusses the techniques that serve to make the language sound “intimate”. See more on this subject in: Suoqiao Qian, “Introduction”, in: Yutang Lin, *The Little Critic. The Bilingual Essays of Lin Yutang*, Suoqiao Qian (ed.), Jiuzhoupress, Beijing 2012, pp. 1–19.

18 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 1998, p. 6.

19 About the role Lin Yutang played in developing the self-centered orientation in the modern Chinese essay tradition as creative nonfiction prose see: T. Li, “Modern Chinese Essays: Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and Others”.

20 Y. Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*, p. 63.

overstated. He was always in their company and referred to some as his “best old friends”, “life companions”, “lifelong friends / kindred souls”, and, lastly, “masters”:

“There is a method of appealing to one’s own intuitive judgment, of thinking out one’s own ideas and forming one’s own independent judgments, and confessing them in public with a childish impudence, and sure enough, some kindred souls in another corner of the world will agree with you. A person forming his ideas in this manner will often be astounded to discover how another writer said exactly the same things and felt exactly the same way, but perhaps expressed the ideas more easily and more gracefully. It is then that he discovers the ancient author and the ancient author bears him witness, and they become forever friends in spirit. There is therefore the matter of my obligations to these authors, especially my Chinese friends in spirit. I have for my collaborators in writing this book a company of genial souls, who I hope like me as much as I like them. For in a very real sense, these spirits have been with me, in the only form of spiritual communion that I recognise as real when two men separated by the ages think the same thoughts and sense the same feelings and each perfectly understands the other.”²¹

Lin shares Nehamas’s intuition that, not unlike our choice of friends, the philosophers we admire reveal something very important about our own personality. Lin says that he is made up of quotations and cannot know whether a given thought is somebody else’s or his own because he has become so intimate with it:

“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.”²²

Lin’s philosophical self is modelled through a lively dialogue with his ancestors, but is that all that there is to it? His writings abound in perseverations; he seems to circle the same topics for years, touching upon them repeatedly in what seems a kind of meditative practice. The art of close reading, to which Lin devotes a whole chapter in *The Importance of Living*, bears all the hallmarks of contemplation, during which the philosopher seeks to externalise the content of words by writing about them afresh in an attempt to conjure up a personal experience from the dead, written dogma. This is why we find so many variations on a single theme in Lin; he takes the daily effort to look inside himself and find the appropriate formulas that will shape and renew him. Writing thus becomes a difficult exercise and, as is the case with all meditation, the trick is to be mindful and completely engaged in practising the “way of ancestors”. Lin allows the explanation of, and meditation on, the ancestors’ words to really shape his mind; it is an attempt to inhabit their minds on a deep level.²³ Thus, writing illustrates the process of shaping a high personality, which is, according to him, the very soul of every art.²⁴

Shaping the Philosophical Self – a Literary Dimension

For the philosophers of the art of life, the task of shaping their own “philosophical self” is an enterprise that, apart from the philosophical aspect, also has an inextricably linked literary dimension. As observed by Nehamas:

“It is literary because the connection between those philosophical views is not only a matter of systematic logical interrelations but also, more centrally, a matter of style.”²⁵

In this context, it is easy to understand that the “self” project of a philosopher of the art of life always includes a *literary* dimension. It would not be an over-

statement to claim that Lin places the question of style at the very centre of his philosophy; style is also very important in his reception of other thinkers, who use stylistic devices to articulate a philosophical vision. The literary becomes an extremely important and significant means of conveying philosophical insight. In an essay devoted, among other things, to the Chinese nomenclature for scholars and writers, Lin discusses the rare (even in China) combination of a profound knowledge of books, wide experience in life, and supple literary style, which makes one rise from the rank of scholar or professional man of letters to that of *hongru* – a thinker.²⁶ In a chapter entitled “The Art of Writing”, Lin writes that

“... no amount of grammatical or literary polish can make a writer if he neglects the cultivation, of a literary personality. As Buffon says, ‘The style is the man.’ Style is not a method, a system or even a decoration for one’s writing; it is but the total impression that the reader gets of the quality of the writer’s mind, his depth or superficiality, his insight or lack of insight and other qualities like wit, humor, biting sarcasm, genial understanding, tenderness, delicacy of understanding, kindly cynicism or cynical kindliness, hardheadedness, practical common sense, and general attitude toward things.”²⁷

Lin’s writings clearly show that the project of establishing a philosophical life is largely self-referential. Lin is aware that the philosopher figure he creates represents the evolution of his thought and, to a certain extent, functions as a literary character, since it appears in the context of a specific work. Literary language for him, a talented artist and philosopher, is the most natural way of expressing important philosophical issues, rather than an end in itself. Lin says that “one who has the artistic temperament shows it wherever he goes”.²⁸ Sparkling with metaphor, literary language is but a means to an end, leading to the self-creation of a philosophical self. Nehamas observes that, bar a few exceptions, the construction of the philosophical self in philosophers who can be identified as the forerunners of this tradition²⁹ occurs precisely through creative writing. The philosophers of the art of life play a dual role: they are the authors of their writings and the characters at their core. They are at once the creator, and the work of art, the product of their own life-shaping/self-shaping activity. According to Nehamas, this is why this form of philosophy requires an original style and often finds fulfilment in literary creation. Philosophers-artists, as they would be called in the context of Chinese philosophy, never let the reader forget that the views they express belong to

21 Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. ix.

22 Ibid., p. viii.

23 This practice is discussed by an outstanding translator and scholar of Chinese literature, the author of a recently published book, entitled *China Root: Taoism, Ch’an, and Original Zen*. See: “The Root of Zen: An Interview with David Hinton”, interview (by Randy Rosenthal and David Hinton), *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom For Our Time* (4 December 2020). Available at <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-root-of-zen/> (accessed 14 December 2020).

24 Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 374.

25 A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 3.

26 Y. Lin, *The Little Critic*, p. 2.

27 Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 385.

28 Ibid., p. 284.

29 Nehamas names Socrates as an example; in Chinese thought, the same is true for Confucius, “that great artist of life”, as Lin puts it. – Ibid., p. 203.

specific people with all their idiosyncrasies. Their works are self-consciously literary. The same literary practice of philosophy can be observed not just in Lin Yutang but also in the broader tradition on which he draws. In Lin, we see a multidimensional process of self-creation that consciously taps various literary genres and styles. It can be appreciated in almost every single sentence of his prose, which sparkles with metaphor, irony, periphrasis, allusion, and hidden quotations from poets. This dimension cannot be reached without the process of writing, which is why Lin devotes long passages to analyse this practice as a form of art.

Writing as Practice

The literary dimension of philosophy cannot be actualised without the process of writing. One of the most important conclusions Nehamas reached after years of research on philosophers such as Plato and Nietzsche was that writing is an inseparable part of the art of life, an indispensable practice:

“The art of living, though a practical art, is therefore practiced in writing. The question whether its practitioners applied it successfully to themselves is secondary and in most cases impossible to answer. We want a philosophy that consists of views in harmony with the actions, with the mode of life of those who hold them. But the main question still is not whether, as a matter of historical fact, someone else succeeded in living that way but whether one can construct such a life oneself. That can be done in two ways. One can either try to apply someone else’s conception to one’s own life, and to that extent live well, perhaps, but derivatively; or one can formulate one’s own art of living. But it is difficult to imagine that one can formulate one’s own art of living without writing about it because it is difficult to imagine that the complex views that such an art requires can be expressed in any other way. Further, unless one writes about it, one’s art will not be able to constitute a model for others in the longer run. [...] had not Plato created an art of living in his name – and in writing – there would be nothing for us to think about, no art and no model to accept, reject, manipulate, or even pass by indifferently. [...] the life it requires is a life in great part devoted to writing. The monument one leaves behind is in the end the permanent work, not the transient life.”³⁰

Lin devotes a lot of space and attention to the art of writing in various passages of his work, claiming that:

“We have to go deeper than the surface of the art of writing, and the moment we do that, we find that the question of the art of writing involves the whole question of literature, of thought, point of view, sentiment and reading and writing. We have to go deeper than the surface of the art of writing, and the moment we do that, we find that the question of the art of writing involves the whole question of literature, of thought, point of view, sentiment and reading and writing.”³¹

For Lin, writing is a process related to the inner work of thought that allows to take down amorphous intuitions in the form of intellectually perceptible signs. Writing almost every day for many years, Lin reflects on various issues, incessantly transforming and reshaping his philosophical self. “Thinking is an art, and not a science”, says Lin,³² analysing in detail both of these interrelated activities in the subsequent chapters entitled “The Art of Writing” and “The Art of Thinking”. He perceives thinking and writing as two arts, which he understands performatively – their essence does not lie in the product, but the process itself; this is related to creative and spontaneous expression, which sometimes comes as a surprise to the author himself.³³ Art must be spontaneous as “in spontaneity alone lies the true spirit of art”.³⁴ Construing writing and thinking as an art, Lin places them in the context of Chinese aesthetics, in which art is directly related to the circulation of vital energy:

“We fail to understand art and the essence of art if we do not recognise it as merely an overflow of physical and mental energy, free and unhampered and existing for its own sake. [...] In order to understand the essence of art at all, we have to go back to the physical basis of art as an overflow of energy. This is known as an artistic or creative impulse.”³⁵

Art leads to joy – as an activity, it is animating, it enhances creativity – and it is also an expression of creative freedom. Lin’s concept of art is directly related to two Chinese concepts: *le*, meaning “relational pleasures that accrue through the long-term beneficial practices and associates deep satisfactions”³⁶ or action: pleasure-seeking/taking³⁷ (which Lin renders as “pleasure(s)”, or – less often – as “joy”); *hsien*, as Lin notes,³⁸ a commonly used word meaning “leisure”. For him:

“... art is both creation and recreation. Of the two ideas, I think art as recreation or as sheer play of the human spirit is more important. Much as I appreciate all forms of immortal creative work, whether in painting, architecture or literature, I think the spirit of true art can become more general and permeate society only when a lot of people are enjoying art as a pastime, without any hope of achieving immortality. [...] It is only when the spirit of play is kept that art can escape being commercialised.”³⁹

Shaping the Image of a Philosophical Life

To be able to recognise that we are dealing with the philosopher of the art of life, and not simply with a writer, his writing activity, although it may fill a significant part of his life, must definitely be subordinated to life itself. “The purpose of philosophy as the art of living is, of course, living”, Nehamas notes.⁴⁰ In this spirit, Lin exclaims in one of his essays:

“Writing, writing, writing! What is writing compared with life?”⁴¹

He further points out that instead of reading philosophy, he only reads life at first hand. According to Lin, all spheres of human life play a service role to life itself:

30
A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 8.

31
Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 386.

32
Ibid., p. 411.

33
For more information about spontaneous expression as a unique method of artistic creation that emerged from within a circle of Chinese Confucian scholar-philosophers, see: Rafał Mazur, “Spontaneous Expression and Spontaneous Improvisation: What Contemporary Improvising Artists Can Learn from Chinese Artist-Philosophers”, *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (2014) 1, pp. 53–65.

34
Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 367.

35
Ibid., p. 368.

36
Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book*, Zone Books, New York 2018, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911819000779>, p. 42.

37
Nylan argues that neither “joy” (since it implies something disembodied) nor “happiness” (since it is more closely associated with being satisfied with one’s life as a whole) is an accurate translation of *le*. More about *le* in: “Introduction and Coming Attractions”, in: *ibid.*

38
Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 443.

39
Ibid., p. 367.

40
A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 8.

41
Y. Lin, *The Little Critic*, p. 342.

“Stated in the simplest terms, science is but a sense of curiosity about life, religion is a sense of reverence for life, literature is a sense of wonder at life, art is a taste for life, while philosophy is an attitude toward life, based on a greater or lesser, but always limited, comprehension of the universe as far as we happen to know it.”⁴²

Readers of the philosophers of art of life, as Nehamas notes,⁴³ can find in their writings a number of convincing models of how to construct a unified, meaningful life. It is the very image of a life shaped by the philosophical reflection that makes one of the most important themes in Lin’s writings. Lin employs models available in Chinese culture to formulate an art of living, using the convention of a quasi-biography (such as Confucius or Su Tungpo) or quasi-autobiography.⁴⁴ Although he uses biographical details that give the reader a model of a philosophical life that is colourful, concrete, and tangible, Lin always makes it clear that his story should not be taken at face value – it is neither a story about himself nor about others, as no complete presentation of any poet or philosopher is attempted there.

The above remarks, as well as the game Lin plays with a potential reader curious about his real character, clearly show that, not unlike other modern philosophers of the art of life, he is aware that his way of writing inspires an interest in his own actual life. In this context, however, Nehamas’s recognition that for philosophy conceived as a way of life, “the question whether its practitioners applied it successfully to themselves is secondary and in most cases impossible to answer”⁴⁵ seems to be very accurate. What is important here is a certain model of philosophical life that is proposed to us. The question to what extent this “convincing model” is applicable in a specific biography, although often raised by historians, recedes into the background from a philosophical perspective. It is philosophically fruitful to study *the image of philosophical life in the writings themselves*, not anything else. Nehamas even goes as far as to suggest that this image should be considered from the point of view of everyday life, but ours rather than the author’s:

“... the most important accomplishments of these modern thinkers are the self-portraits that confront us in their writings. [...] the image of life contained in their writings is a philosophical matter, and though it too will remain a matter of contention, the contention will be over whether that image is or is not coherent or admirable. That is a different question altogether. It concerns the nature of the character constructed in their writings, the question whether life can be lived, and whether it is worth living, as they claim. It is a question about us and not primarily about them.”⁴⁶

Thus, let us take a closer look at how Lin describes his own life and try to determine whether he really constitutes a model for the reader, and if so, what kind of model it is. Like Zhou Zuoren in his multiple essays, such as the famous “Tea Drinking”, Lin is promoting humour and leisure through elaborations on the art of both enjoying and practising sensual activities such as lying in bed, smoking, taking long walks etc. Lin declares that he does not know whether he is “more in dead earnest about light topics or in a lighter mood when dealing with serious ones” or even “has no sense of their relative importance”.⁴⁷

The analysis of Lin’s writings on the theme of everyday life, addressed to the Western reader before 1959,⁴⁸ reveals that he is only seemingly carefree in his choice of subjects and could only, if at all, be considered “a lazy fellow from Fujian Province who smoked too many cigarettes”⁴⁹ as a result of an extremely superficial interpretation. A reconstruction of the ontological, epistemological and ethical assumptions of Lin’s philosophy allows us to understand that

his detailed narratives serve as a way to paint a surprisingly consistent portrait of himself. The portrait is modelled on a Chinese philosopher-practitioner who has not lost a sense of values, of the proper end of human life, which is amazingly simple. And it is precisely the restitution of those simple values of life that Lin perceives as the first task of contemporary man’s intelligence.⁵⁰

In a period of extreme political darkness in the world,⁵¹ Lin Yutang applauds the simplicity and gaiety of spirits such as Zhuangzi or Tao Yuanming. As a remedy for the West he deliberately prescribes the model of traditional Chinese leisure culture, in which “the man who is wisely idle is the most cultured man [...]. The wisest man is therefore he who loafs most gracefully”.⁵² As a result, he premeditatedly sets up the “old rogue”, the “scamp” or the fisherman-amateur as an ideal. Thus, he creates an evocative image of a man who has the courage to devote himself to a simple activity that makes him happy and “if the question is asked, ‘What are you doing in this life?’ the fisherman can answer it more easily and quickly than the rest. ‘I am enjoying life – the gift of living’”.⁵³

In the dialogue on the subject of philosophy with philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson or Friedrich Nietzsche, Lin proposes an art of living, which following Nietzsche, he hails as the “gay science”, since “only a gay philosophy is profound philosophy; the serious philosophies of the West have not even begun to understand what life is”.⁵⁴ He quotes a Chinese poet marvelling at how rarely in life one laughs out loud, believing the world is far too serious and “being far too serious, it has need of a wise and merry philosophy”, and he adds that for him personally,

“... the only function of philosophy is to teach us to take life more lightly and gayly than the average business man does. [...] The world can be made a more peaceful and more reasonable place to live in only when men have imbued themselves in the light gaiety of this spirit. The modern man takes life far too seriously, and because he is too serious, the world is full of troubles.”⁵⁵

42

Y. Lin, “Lin Yutang”, p. 158.

43

A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 6.

44

Y. Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*; Yutang Lin, *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*, Mei Ya Publications, Taipei, New York 1975.

45

A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 8.

46

Ibid., pp. 7–8.

47

Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, p. 11.

48

In 1959 Lin converted to Christianity. He describes his spiritual evolution, e.g. in Y. Lin, *From Pagan to Christian*.

49

Martha Bayles, “‘The Importance of Living’ by Lin Yutang”, *The Wilson Quarterly* 20 (1996) 4, p. 103.

50

Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, p. 21.

51

About the political context of Lin Yutang see: Suoqiao Qian, *Liberal Cosmopolitan: Lin Yutang and Middling Chinese Modernity*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2011, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004192133.i-272>; S. Qian, *Lin Yutang and China’s Search for Modern Rebirth*; S. Qian (ed.), *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang*; S. Chan, D. Lee, “Lin Yutang”.

52

Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 150.

53

Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, p. 20.

54

Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 13.

55

Ibid.

Elsewhere he writes:

“On the whole, our life is too complex, our scholarship too serious, our philosophy too somber, and our thoughts too involved. This seriousness and this involved complexity of our thought and scholarship make the present world such an unhappy one today. [...] Man becomes the slave of the ideas, thoughts, ambitions and social systems that are his own product. Mankind, overburdened with this load of ideas and ambitions and social systems, seems unable to rise above them. Luckily, however, there is a power of the human mind which can transcend all these ideas, thoughts and ambitions and treat them with a smile, and this power is the subtlety of the humorist [...]. Now it happens that subtle common sense, gaiety of philosophy and simplicity of thinking are characteristic of humor and must arise from it.”⁵⁶

In this very spirit, Lin promotes humor and pens theoretical treatises on the phenomenon. Humor occupies an important position in his philosophy, as laughter allows for natural relaxation of the mind and body:

“There is a certain wholehearted concentration on the material life, a certain zest in living, which is mellower, perhaps deeper, anyway just as intense as in the West. In China the spiritual values have not been separated from the material values, but rather help man in a keener enjoyment of life as it falls to our lot. This accounts for our joviality and our incorrigible humour.”⁵⁷

In Lin’s philosophy, the somatic affects both writing and thinking – he is pleased to find his intuitions confirmed by Western science and points out that they are also supported by the writings of many obscure Chinese writers, albeit in a language whose modality differs from that of the West (and which Lin prefers as more vivid). He writes:

“We are beginning to see today, with the help of biological knowledge, that the whole organisation of our mental life is regulated by the increase or decrease and distribution of hormones in the blood, acting on the various organs and the nervous system controlling these organs. Even anger or fear is merely a matter of the supply of adrenalin. An obscure Chinese novelist, without the modern knowledge of hormones, made a correct guess about the origin of all activity as due to ‘worms’ in our body. [...] The writing of a book, say a novel, is again due to a species of worms which impel and urge the author to create for no reason whatsoever.”⁵⁸

Lin most frequently talks of the “over-supply of energy” (*qi*) since the word “energy” encompasses both the mental and the physical, and thus perfectly captures the somato-mental dimension of action driven by the aesthetic impulse. Lin explains:

“... there is an ease and gracefulness and attendance to form in whatever we do. Now ease and gracefulness come from a feeling of physical competence, a feeling of ability to do a thing more than well – to do it beautifully. In the more abstract realms, we see this beauty in anybody doing a nice job. [...] In the more concrete details of our life, there is, or there can be, ease and gracefulness and competence, too.”⁵⁹

It is plain, then, that for Lin

“... 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. There can be a luxury in our bodily movements, as in the movement of a symphonic poem.”⁶⁰

Stiffness and flexibility are then related to Lin’s proposals concerning lying down or sitting, starting from the Chinese observation that the two posture features are both somatic and mental – the close interdependence of the mental and the corporeal is quite understandable in a philosophy rooted in an image of man as a living, organic whole. Only when we learn to adopt a different posture of the body, move in a non-automatic and mindful way, and

realise how important it is to relax our body through the joy of movement, will our mind become more open, and we ourselves – happier. This is why the figure of a philosopher-aesthete, created in Lin’s writings, attaches so much importance to the way in which he performs various activities of everyday life, elevating them to the rank of performative art. As Lin writes:

“There is an ease, a sureness, a lightness of touch, that comes from mastery. After all, only he who handles his ideas lightly is master of his ideas, and only he who is master of his ideas is not enslaved by them. Seriousness, after all, is only a sign of effort, and effort is a sign of imperfect mastery. A serious writer is awkward and ill at ease in the realm of ideas [...]”⁶¹

Thus, in the early days of his work, Lin presents himself as the opposite of the stereotype of a philosopher living apart from his own body. As we would say today, he even presents himself – as a *body philosopher* proposing some kind of somatic philosophy.⁶² The model of philosophical life is also constructed here in contrast to the stereotype of the life of a word-focused philosopher-observer, which is reduced to, borrowing a phrase from Safranski, *seines Denkens*.⁶³ This stereotype dates back to Pythagoras, who compares people in general to those who come to the games: some take an active part in them, some earn money on this occasion, but the best of all – philosophers – observe.⁶⁴ As Richard Shusterman notes, the philosophical pose of disinterested objectivity is extremely tense, rigid, and speculative, which translates into a certain attitude: We will look and write a description, but we do not want to touch anything or get involved in anything.⁶⁵ The observer’s attitude requires a detachment from the current of what is being observed; objectification is associated with disembodiment. And disembodiment means being cut off from the sources of life and treating thought as unrelated to the body, as if it could be extracted, detached from the psycho-bodily self. Whereas, Lin takes it for granted that personality, including the philosophical one, is not only expressed through the mind:

“The thing called ‘self’ or ‘personality’ consists of a bundle of limbs, muscles, nerves, reason, sentiments, culture, understanding, experience, and prejudices. It is partly nature and partly culture, partly born and partly cultivated. One’s nature is determined at the time of his birth, or even before it.”⁶⁶

56

Ibid., p. 80.

57

Ibid., p. 326.

58

Ibid., p. 368.

59

Ibid., p. 370.

60

Ibid., p. 369.

61

Ibid., p. 81.

62

I use the terms *body philosopher* and *somatic philosophy* in the understanding proposed by Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Educating Humanities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007; Richard

Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness And Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008.

63

Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche. Biographie seines Denkens*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München 2000.

64

An excellent analysis of the stereotype can be found in Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Malden (MA) 2013.

65

Cf. R. Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body*, p. 19.

66

Y. Lin, *The Importance of Living*, p. 390.

And therefore “any good practical philosophy must start out with the recognition of our having a body”.⁶⁷ Hence, according to Lin, the problem of the body is at the core of practical philosophy, and thus, of his own philosophical project. Practice is a bodily, or rather embodied, practice, as Lin shows on plenty of examples, such as, to mention but a few, calligraphy, poetry, tea-drinking, painting. He believes it to be a misunderstanding to reduce the body to a mechanism and carries out a severe critique of post-Cartesian philosophy based on dualism. “The most obvious fact which philosophers refuse to see is that we have got a body”, he argues in one of the chapters entitled “Spirit and Flesh”, while “man is made of flesh and spirit both, and it should be philosophy’s business to see that the mind and body live harmoniously together, that there be a reconciliation between the two”.⁶⁸ Observing that “A heathen can have a heathenish devotion to the life of the present and envelop both spiritual and material values in one outlook, which it is difficult for a Christian to imagine”,⁶⁹ Lin is inspired by those educated in the Daoist tradition as well as Buddhism *chan* or *zen* techniques of focusing awareness on what is happening here and now. Long-term, deepened interest in the subject strengthens Lin’s belief that it is thanks to the practice of mindfulness through daily activities that we retake possession of our true selves.⁷⁰ In a flash of understanding, we feel:

“Gratitude for living, a direct sense of wonderment for the benefit of being alive, a mystery which is implied in the performance of the humblest domestic chores. What mysterious joy that one is cutting a carrot, or drawing water from the well! There is so much to love and to admire in this life that it is an act of ingratitude not to be happy and content in this existence.”⁷¹

Conclusions

In the context of the above, it seems that Lin belongs to the last genre of the art of living, defined by Nehamas as the aestheticist type. Here is how he describes it:

“The third and final genre of the art of living is [...] the least universalist of all. According to it, human life takes many forms and no single mode of life is best for all. Philosophers like Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault articulate a way of living that only they and perhaps a few others can follow. They do not insist that their life is a model for the world at large. They do not want to be imitated, at least not directly. That is, they believe that those who want to imitate them must develop their own art of living, their own self [...]. As in the acknowledged arts, there are no rules for producing new and exciting works. As in the acknowledged arts, there is no best work – no best life – by which all others can be judged. [...] As in the acknowledged arts, the aim is to produce as many new and different types of works – as many different modes of life – as possible, since the proliferation of aesthetic difference and multiplicity, even though it is not often in the service of morality, enriches and improves human life. It is within this third genre that the notion of the individual finds its central place. Those who practice the individualist art of living need to be unforgettable.”⁷²

Summing up, Lin Yutang’s writings include the key elements of the philosophical practice undertaken by the philosophers of the art of life. Lin understands the practice as a self-oriented process that inherently includes an orientation toward others. For him, an inherent part of writing is publishing, which enables a dialogue with the reader. Through many years of daily writing practice, to which he devotes much space in his works, employing various literary devices with extraordinary talent, he manages to construct a sort of self that is unforgettable and inspiring and likeable for many readers. However, for Lin, literariness is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a vehicle for formulating

important philosophical questions. The daily life of the Chinese philosopher, as shown by Lin, is woven from philosophical reflection – it is its immediate consequence and extension. Thus, placing Lin Yutang’s thoughts in the context of philosophy as the art of life opens up new avenues of research on his work, especially interesting and promising in the field of complex somatic philosophies. In view of this fact, we should also thoroughly examine his contributions to modern thought, such as his pragmatic views on the body’s central role in the mental and moral life. Further, his views on somaesthetic experience in everyday life must also be considered.

Ultimately, for the philosophers of the art of life, as well as for its adepts, it will be worth remembering Nehamas’s remark, particularly apt in the context of Chinese thought, that “the moment one writes about the art of living, the question for others again becomes not whether its originator succeeded in practising it but whether they can in turn practice it on their own”.⁷³ This is because practical philosophy, as proposed by Lin, aims to bring one to a state in which “men’s energies are consumed in living”.⁷⁴ It is an experimental, action-oriented philosophy that promotes creativity and fluidity and takes the physical, as well as sensual, to a higher level; a philosophy free from a fettering psychosomatic rigidity, which enables readers to transcend their role as passive witnesses of the author’s philosophical practice and instead use it as an effective instrument for developing their own art of living and thus improve their everyday experience.

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67
Ibid., p. 24.

68
Ibid., p. 25.

69
Ibid., p. 326.

70
Cf. Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*,
p. 20.

71
Ibid., p. 51.

72
A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 10.

73
Ibid., p. 8.

74
Y. Lin, *The Pleasures of a Nonconformist*, p.
20.

Magdalena Filipczuk

**Oblikovanje »sebe« putem pisanja –
Yutang Lin kao filozof umjetnosti života**

Sažetak

U radu rekonstruiram filozofijsku praksu Lina Yutanga i argumentiram da se njegova misao može tumačiti kao filozofija umjetnosti života. Ističem da je bit Linove filozofijske prakse umjetnost pisanja. Slično drugim filozofima umjetnosti života, Lin je umjetnik i filozof ujedno. Dakle, on sam središnja je tema njegovih eseja. U svojoj performativnoj umjetnosti, Lin konstruira svoje »sebstvo« i oblikuje model filozofijskog života duboko ukorijenjenog u tradiciju kineske kulture dokolice. Model svakodnevnog života kako ga predlaže Lin je, stoga, mišljen da nadahne čitatelja.

Ključne riječi

Yutang Lin, kineska filozofija, oblikovanje sebe, umjetnost, filozofija života

Magdalena Filipczuk

**Sich „selbst“ durch Schreiben formen
– Lin Yutang als Philosoph der Lebenskunst**

Zusammenfassung

In der Arbeit rekonstruiere ich die philosophische Praxis von Lin Yutang und argumentiere, dass sich sein Gedanke als Philosophie der Lebenskunst auslegen lässt. Ich lege Nachdruck darauf, dass die Quintessenz von Lins philosophischer Praxis die Kunst des Schreibens ist. Ähnlich wie andere Philosophen der Lebenskunst ist Lin zeitgleich Künstler und Philosoph. Mithin ist er selbst ist das zentrale Thema seiner Essays. In seiner performativen Kunst konstruiert Lin sein „Selbst“ und entwirft ein Modell des philosophischen Lebens, das sich tief in der Tradition der chinesischen Freizeitkultur verankert hat. Daher ist das Modell des Alltagslebens, wie Lin es vorbringt, dafür gedacht, den Leser zu beflügeln.

Schlüsselwörter

Lin Yutang, chinesische Philosophie, das Formen von sich selbst, Kunst, die Philosophie des Lebens

Magdalena Filipczuk

**« Se » façonner à travers l'écriture
– Yutang Lin comme philosophe de l'art de vivre**

Résumé

Dans ce travail je reconstruis la pratique philosophique de Yutang Lin et je soutiens que sa pensée peut s'interpréter comme une philosophie de l'art de vivre. Je souligne que l'essence de la philosophie pratique de Lin est un art de l'écriture. Comme pour d'autres philosophes de l'art de vivre, Lin est à la fois artiste et philosophe. Il constitue ainsi lui-même le thème de ses essais. Dans son art performatif, Lin construit son « soi » et façonne le modèle philosophique de la vie, profondément enraciné dans les loisirs de la tradition culturelle chinoise. Le modèle de la vie quotidienne, tel que Lin le propose est, par conséquent, pensé afin d'inspirer le lecteur.

Mots-clés

Yutang Lin, philosophie chinoise, façonnement de soi, art, philosophie de la vie