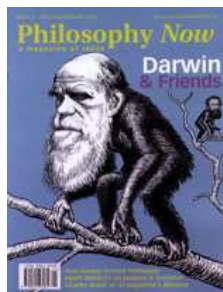


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## Books

# The Importance of Living by Lin Yutang

Mark Cyzyk finds out how to be a loafing scamp.

A beloved literature professor gave me a nice hardbound 1937 edition of this book during my undergraduate days in the spring of 1985. I read it that summer. The following spring I found myself studying in China, traveling around the north, climbing the Taoist holy mountains Hua Shan and Tai Shan, visiting the tomb and family mansions of Confucius, and thinking quite a bit about this book. Here, in essay form, were simple lessons for living. Here was a genteel, mandarin manner of approaching the world – one that surely was swept away in the violent storms of the Cultural Revolution twenty years earlier? And yet, amid the vandalized Buddhist temples, the crumbling *hutongs* of back Beijing alleyways, and the concrete midrise apartment complexes in whose shadow they covered – amid prominent Party proclamations that citizens must strive for more production and efficiency, amid the surge for modernization and industrialization – amid all of this, I captured glimpses of what came before. In Chufu, outside the K'ung family compound, an old scholar pleaded with my companion and I to return and study calligraphy under his tutelage. Atop Tai Shan, small shrubs with large rocks crammed into their branches and crannies were evidence of a centuries-long folk belief that good luck and enhanced fertility for this soon-to-be-siblingless society would surely follow. High in the monasteries of Hua Shan, robed Taoist monks performed their quotidian duties, some of them not having bothered to descend into the valley for thirty years or more, ignoring the Revolution below. Lin Yutang and his *The Importance of Living* belong to this time before. And the relevance persists.

How should one live one's life? Surely a perennial philosophical concern. How should I live *my* life? And why would I now reread this book, twenty years later, forty pounds heavier – a husband, a divorced and remarried father and stepfather, a busy professional with a career to attend to, a monotonous and sometimes soul-crushing daily and weekly schedule, a house, cars, lawn, retirement investments to maintain, PTA meetings, community association functions, and no time for much of anything?

Precisely.

Lin Yutang's ideal is the 'scamp' – an amiable loafer who wanders through life, learning, loving, living. He is a good-natured Renaissance Man, dabbling here and there, connoisseur of nothing, dilettante extraordinaire. He is earthbound, a man of his biology and of his senses. (For Lin, happiness is "largely a matter of digestion." He favorably quotes a college president who admonished his freshmen that "There are only two things I want you to keep in mind: read the Bible, and keep your bowels open.") Lin's loafing scamp is a profoundly embodied mind, not a brain on a stick. And most of all, he's eminently 'reasonable' – a trait Lin mentions throughout, and points to as the very foundation of the Chinese character.

So much in this book is charmingly anachronistic. Lin is a product of his time (1895-1976) and place. His eulogies on the smoking life point to the quiet, meditative nature of this particular vice. His views on women are condescending and sexist, although his obvious intent is always to be appreciative and respectful. He notes the 'mental house-cleaning' that occurs while simply lying in bed, and points to this as being one of life's greatest pleasures: a pleasure lost to those of us who must leap out of bed to keep to our daily schedules.

In the end, what we find here is an insightful mélange of life observations – an essayistic miscellany which addresses the grand philosophical topics of human happiness and the meaning of life, but also such idiosyncratic issues as:

On Having a Stomach  
On Having Strong Muscles  
On Playful Curiosity: The Rise of Human Civilization  
On Dreams  
On Being Wayward and Incalculable  
Man the Only Working Animal  
This Earth the Only Heaven  
What is Luck?  
Celibacy a Freak of Civilization  
On Sex Appeal  
On Lying in Bed  
On Sitting in Chairs  
On Smoke and Incense  
The Inhumanity of Western Dress  
On House and Interiors  
On Rocks and Trees  
On Going About and Seeing Things  
Good Taste in Knowledge  
Why I Am a Pagan

*The Importance of Living* belongs on the same shelf as *The Enchiridion* of Epictetus, *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau's *Walden*, the essays of Emerson and the aphorisms of Baltasar Gracian, not because it agrees with any one of them to a great degree (with the exception of *Walden*), but because, in the same non-systematic way as these other great classics, it illustrates a life, and how to live one.

My beloved literature professor died several years ago, at a venerable age. I think of him often. I recently learned that an equally-beloved philosophy professor, who introduced me to Chinese philosophy, died last year. He was only 54. I think of the significant and important lives they both led. I think of China and my time there. I think of Lin Yutang and the life he led; learning, loving, living, just like my professors.

It's funny how mere reverie and rereading a cherished book can revive enthusiasm, exuberance, zest. Suddenly, the weight of twenty years lifts. I don't feel so middle-aged and graying anymore. I feel something else: like a college senior studying abroad, silently standing atop a holy mountain in China, looking down on the clouds.

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In fond memory of Professor Jesse Fleming (1953-2007).

"Darkness within darkness.  
The gateway to all understanding."

*Tao Te Ching*, 1

• Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*, Harper Paperbacks, 1998, 462 pps .95. ISBN: 0688163521

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