

## Reading Passage

### THE ART OF READING

by Lin Yu T'ang

from *The Importance of Understanding*

1 Reading or the enjoyment of books has always been regarded  
among the charms of a cultured life and is respected and envied by  
those who rarely give themselves that privilege. This is easy to  
understand when we compare the difference between the life of a  
5 **man who does no reading** and that of a man who does. The man who  
has not<sup>3</sup> the habit of reading is imprisoned in his immediate world, in  
respect to time and space. His life falls into a set routine; he is limited  
to contact and conversation with a few friends and acquaintances, and  
he sees only what happens in his immediate neighborhood. From this  
10 prison there is no escape. But the moment he takes up a book, he

<sup>3</sup> **the man who has not** the person who does not have

immediately enters a different world, and if it is a good book, he is immediately put in touch with one of the best talkers of the world. This talker leads him on and carries him into a different country or a different age, or unburdens to him some of his personal regrets, or  
15 discusses with him some special line or aspect of life that the reader knows nothing about. An ancient author puts him in communion with a dead spirit of long ago, and as he reads along, he begins to imagine what that ancient author looked like and what type of person he was. Both **Mencius** and **Ssuma Ch'ien**, China's greatest historian, have  
20 expressed the same idea. Now to be able to live two hours out of twelve in a different world and take one's thoughts off the claims of the immediate present is, of course, a privilege to be envied by people shut up in their bodily prison. Such a change of environment is really similar to travel in its psychological effect.

25 But there is more to it than this. The reader is always carried away into a world of thought and reflection. Even if it is a book about physical events, there is a difference between seeing such events in person or living through them, and reading about them in books, for then the events always assume the quality of the spectacle<sup>4</sup> and the  
30 reader becomes a detached spectator. The best reading is therefore that which leads us into this contemplative mood,<sup>5</sup> and not that which is merely occupied with the report of events. The tremendous amount of time spent on newspapers I regard as not reading at all, for the average readers of papers are mainly concerned with getting  
35 reports about events and happenings without contemplative value.

The best formula for the object of reading, in my opinion, was stated by Huang Shanku, a **Sung poet** and friend of **Su Tungp'o**. He said, "A scholar who hasn't read anything for three days feels that his talk has no flavor (becomes insipid<sup>6</sup>), and his own face becomes  
40 hateful to look at (in the mirror)." What he means, of course, is that reading gives a man a certain charm and flavor, which is the entire object of reading, and only reading with this object can be called an art. One doesn't read to "improve one's mind," because when one begins to think of improving his mind, all the pleasure of reading is  
45 gone. He is the type of person who says to himself. "I must read Shakespeare, and I must read **Sophocles**, and I must read the entire **Five-foot Shelf of Dr. Eliot**, so I can become an educated man." I'm sure that man will never become educated. He will force himself one evening to read Shakespeare's **Hamlet** and come away, as if from a  
50 bad dream, with no greater benefit than that he is able to say that he

<sup>4</sup> **spectacle** an impressive display

<sup>5</sup> **contemplative mood** calm and thoughtful state of mind

<sup>6</sup> **insipid** dull; not interesting

had “read” *Hamlet*. Anyone who reads a book with a sense of obligation does not understand the art of reading. This type of reading with a business purpose is in no way different from a senator’s reading up on files and reports before he makes a speech. It is asking for business advice and information, and not reading at all.

Reading for the cultivation of personal charm of appearance and flavor in a speech is then, according to Huang, the only admissible kind of reading. This charm of appearance must evidently be interpreted as something other than physical beauty. What Huang means by “hateful to look at” is not physical ugliness. There are ugly faces that have a fascinating charm and beautiful faces that are insipid to look at. I have among my Chinese friends one whose head is shaped like a bomb and yet who is nevertheless always a pleasure to see. The most beautiful face among Western authors, so far as I have seen them in pictures, was that of **G.K. Chesterton**. There was such a diabolical conglomeration<sup>7</sup> of mustache, glasses, fairly bushy eyebrows and knitted lines where the eyebrows met. One felt there were a vast number of ideas playing about inside that forehead, ready at any time to burst out from those quizzically penetrating eyes. That is what Huang would call a beautiful face, a face not made up by powder and rouge, but by the sheer force of thinking. As for flavor of speech, it all depends on one’s way of reading. Whether one has “flavor” or not in his talk, depends on his method of reading. If a reader gets the flavor of books, he will show that flavor in his conversations, and if he has flavor in his conversations, he cannot help also having a flavor in his writing.

Hence I consider flavor or taste as the key to all reading. It necessarily follows that taste is selective and individual, like the taste for food. The most hygienic<sup>8</sup> way of eating is, after all, eating what one likes, for then one is sure of his digestion. In reading as in eating, what is one man’s meat may be another’s poison.<sup>9</sup> A teacher cannot force his pupils to like what he likes in reading, and a parent cannot expect his children to have the same tastes as himself.

There can be, therefore, no books that one absolutely must read. For our intellectual interests grow like a tree or flow like a river. So long as there is proper sap,<sup>10</sup> the tree will grow anyhow, and so long as there is fresh current from the spring, the water will flow. When

<sup>7</sup> **diabolical conglomeration** devilish, ugly, or evil-looking combination

<sup>8</sup> **hygienic** clean; free from disease

<sup>9</sup> **what is one man’s meat may be another man’s poison** what is good for one person may be bad for another

<sup>10</sup> **sap** a liquid inside a plant that carries nutrients to its parts

water strikes a granite cliff, it just goes around it; when it finds itself  
90 in a pleasant low valley, it stops and meanders there a while; when it  
finds itself in a deep mountain pond, it is content to stay there; when  
it finds itself traveling over rapids, it hurries forward. Thus, without  
any effort or determined aim, it is sure of reaching the sea some day.

I regard the discovery of one's favorite author as the most critical  
event<sup>11</sup> in one's intellectual development. There is such a thing as the  
95 affinity<sup>12</sup> of spirits, and among the authors of ancient and modern  
times, one must try to find an author whose spirit is akin with his  
own. Only in this way can one get any real good out of reading. One  
has to be independent and search out his masters. Who is one's  
favorite author, no one can tell, probably not even the man himself. It  
100 is like love at first sight. The reader cannot be told to love this one or  
that one, but when he has found the author he loves, he knows it  
himself by a kind of instinct. We have such famous cases of  
discoveries of authors. Scholars seem to have lived in different ages,  
separated by centuries, and yet their modes of thinking and feeling  
105 were so akin that their coming together across the pages of a book  
was like a person finding his own image. **George Eliot** described her  
first reading of **Rousseau** as an electric shock. **Nietzsche** felt the  
same thing about **Schopenhauer**, but Schopenhauer was a peevish<sup>13</sup>  
master and Nietzsche was a violent-tempered pupil, and it was  
110 natural that the pupil later rebelled against the teacher.

It is only this kind of reading, this discovery of one's favorite  
author, that will do one any good at all. Like a man falling in love with  
his sweetheart at first sight, everything is right. She is of the right  
height, has the right face, the right color of hair, the right quality of  
115 voice and the right way of speaking and smiling. This author is not  
something that a young man needs to be told about by his teacher.  
The author is just right for him; his style, his taste, his point of view,  
his mode of thinking, are all right. And then the reader proceeds to  
devour<sup>14</sup> every word and every line that the author writes, and  
120 because there is a spiritual affinity he absorbs and readily digests  
everything. The author has cast a spell<sup>15</sup> over him, and he is glad to be  
under the spell, and in time his own voice and manner and way of  
smiling and way of talking become like the author's own. Thus he  
truly steepes himself in his literary lover and derives from these books

<sup>11</sup> **critical event** most important thing that can happen; a turning point

<sup>12</sup> **affinity** natural liking or attraction

<sup>13</sup> **peevish** bad-tempered; irritable

<sup>14</sup> **devour** read eagerly

<sup>15</sup> **cast a spell** used magic to influence him

125 sustenance<sup>16</sup> for his soul. After a few years, the spell is over and he  
grows a little tired of this lover and seeks for new literary lovers, and  
after he has had three or four lovers and completely eaten them up,  
he emerges as an author himself. There are many readers who never  
fall in love, like many young men and women who flirt around and are  
130 incapable of forming a deep attachment to a particular person. They  
can read any and all authors, and they never amount to anything.

Such a conception of the art of reading completely precludes<sup>17</sup> the  
idea of reading as a duty or as an obligation. In China, one often  
encourages students to “study bitterly.” There was a famous scholar  
135 who studied bitterly and who stuck an awl<sup>18</sup> in his calf when he fell  
asleep while studying at night. There was another scholar who had a  
maid stand by his side as he was studying at night, to wake him up  
every time he fell asleep. This was nonsensical. If one has a book  
lying before him and falls asleep while some wise ancient author is  
140 talking to him, he should just go to bed. No amount of sticking an awl  
in his calf or of shaking him up by a maid will do him any good. Such  
a man has lost all sense of pleasure of reading. Scholars who are  
worth anything at all never know what is called “a hard grind” or  
what “bitter study” means. They merely love books and read on  
145 because they cannot help themselves.

What, then, is the true art of reading? The simple answer is to just  
take up a book and read when the mood comes. To be thoroughly  
enjoyed, reading must be entirely spontaneous.

### About the Author

Lin Yu-T'ang (1895–1976) was born in China but received much of his education in the West—at Harvard University and at the University of Leipzig. He was a respected professor at Peking National University for many years, and later was the chancellor of Nanyang University in Singapore. A writer of novels as well as nonfiction, he is known for pieces which explain modern China to readers from other cultures.

<sup>16</sup> **sustenance** something, especially food, that supports life

<sup>17</sup> **precludes** prevents something from happening

<sup>18</sup> **awl** tool with a sharp point for punching holes in leather