As part of the Lunar New Year celebration, we shall devote two weeks of BTW (our acronym for “BGST This Week”) to a selection of “Good Books” by the erstwhile Singapore academic, the late Dr Lin Yutang (1895-1976), a former Chancellor of Nanyang University. The renewal of interest in the legacy of Lin Yutang coincides with the republication by Cultured Lotus, Singapore, of his famous trilogy: With Love and Irony (1934), My Country and My People (1935), and The Importance of Living (1937). The latter two books earned him a nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature and projected this vocal Asian academic to international acclaim.

Lin Yutang strikes me as the Asian counterpart of Malcolm Muggeridge. Both wrote fearlessly, unfazed by criticism from the Establishment, whatever shape that may take, whether academically, politically or even religiously. He was born in Changzhou, China, and was educated at St John’s University (Shanghai), and later received the Master’s degree from Harvard University and the doctorate degree from the University of Leipzig. As a professor with special interest in language studies, he saw importantly the need to romanize the Chinese language to rescue Chinese out of its isolation and push Chinese culture as a major player in the international arena.

It is his philosophical writings that we feature this week in BTW. An Oxbridge purist might look askance at Asian attempts to write philosophically as disorganized, puerile, and inexact. That is because the Western tradition indulges in abstractions and worships logical reasoning, deterring Easterners often from reading their writings. Some of us from the East who are educated in all things Western straddle the two mindsets: with some hard struggle we can cope with voluminous pages of philosophical fine print, but it is an exercise that often robs us of the joy of discovering that we can think, write and speak from the mind as well as from the heart! So when the blurb on the back cover of the Lin Yutang’s books speaks of his “genius”, his “wise, fearless and unaffected commentary”, his “sparkling humour”, and his “succinct and deliciously pungent” anecdotes, one is anxious to delve into the books.

Let’s listen to this piece of wisdom a la Lin Yutang: “Diogenes, the Corinthian philosopher, was once asked by Alexander [the Great] what favor he would ask of the great conqueror, and his answer was a request that the conqueror stand a little aside so that he could enjoy his sunshine. This was the cynical man who went about in daytime with a lantern to look for an honest man. He had only one rough garment for winter and summer, and he slept and lived in a tub. Once he had a cup, but on learning that he could drink water from his hands, he threw it away, believing that by so doing, he had one less desire in this world.

“Diogenes represents to us moderns an ideal very much opposite to ours, which seems to measure progress by the number of a man’s wants and luxuries.... The fact is, we are very much in confusion as to what we really want....

“Now it is of course very easy to tear Diogenes to pieces. First of all, Diogenes lived in the gentle Mediterranean climate. No lady therefore need be ashamed that, living in a colder country than Greece, she wants a fur coat. Secondly, I do not respect any man who does not keep at least two sets of underwear, in case he sends one to the laundry. A Diogenes in the story book may exhaled a certain spiritual fragrance, but a Diogenes as a bedfellow would be a different story.... Generally, it is the man who has many wants and desires and hopes that lives a richer and more complete life, not the one who goes on in life, indifferent to what is around him....

“The real charm of Diogenes for us lies in the fact that we moderns want too many things, and particularly that we often do not know what those things are. It is a trite saying that every society lady who goes the mad round of parties and pleasures soon is overcome by a feeling of utter boredom.... And her male counterpart ... has so many girl friends that he cannot even fall in love with one. That is the modern malady, which makes Diogenes sometimes appear like a hero to us.

“In our best and sanest moments, however, we know that Diogenes’ god cannot be our god, that we want a good many things in life, and that these things are definitely good for us. The man who knows what he wants is a happy man.”

My first exposure to Lin Yutang was in college in the early sixties when I picked up a copy of My Country and My People. My fascination with the book lies in the manner in which it introduced me, a westernised Chinese, to all things Chinese. I felt my education so far has robbed me of my ethnic culture. This highly acclaimed book was written in Lin Yutang’s pre-Christian days. I am curious that if he were able to revise this book after his conversion later to Christianity, what would it be like? Alas, he never got around to doing this little exercise, as far as I know. Here is the assessment of the book by another prominent Chinese writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Pearl S. Buck. She wrote in her Introduction that this book “is truthful and not ashamed of the truth: it is written proudly and humorously and with gaiety, appreciative and understanding of both old and new. It is, I think, the truest, the most profound, the most
complete, the most important book yet written about China.” A glance at the table of contents reveals his philosophical bent, for he starts with the bases of Chinese culture (the people, their character, mind and ideals) and extrapolates from these a fulsome appreciation of Chinese life, touching on topics such as a woman’s life (not a man’s!), social and political life, literary life, artistic life, and the art of living. He ends with a personal response to the Sino-Japanese War and he charts boldly the future course China must take. Here is a book where concrete, everyday realities lose their tinitness as they are skilfully merged together by the author into the cauldron of a proud civilization which struggled and must continue to do so to keep out the corrupting influences of foreign cultures while realizing painfully at the same time the need to renew itself, otherwise it would surely lag behind the massive developments that characterize our modern world.

The final volume in this trilogy is an autobiography of a rather unique sort. Lin Yutang would have liked The Importance of Living to be described as a “lyrical philosophy”. But that is too high sounding. So he settled for something more mundane. In his characteristically tongue-in-cheek style he wrote: “Very much contented am I to lie low, to cling to the soil, to be of kin to the sod. My soul squirms comfortably in the soil and sand and is happy. Sometimes when one is drunk with this earth, one’s spirit seems so light that he thinks he is in heaven. But actually he seldom rises six feet above the ground.”

This personal worldview has a bitingly cutting section entitled, “Why I am a pagan”. It is all the more intriguing for us because Lin Yutang’s father was a Pastor and he came from a godly Christian home. I will touch on this in my next week’s review of his journey back to Christianity in From Pagan to Christian (1959), written 22 years after his earlier statement concerning his paganism. With this I must end this week’s lengthy review, with apologies to the busy reader. (Review by Dr Quek Swee Hwa)

Chapel Notes

Last week’s chapel (6 Feb) was taken by Dr John Lim. He spoke from 2 Thess. 1:1-12 about “Hope in Times of Pressure”. In his message he shared that when a Christian is under pressure hope results from: (1) the power from God that one discovers under such conditions (vv.3-4); (2) the process that God allows a Christian to go through, painful as it may have to be sometimes (v.5); (3) the peace that one feels in the storms of life (vv.6, 11-12); and (4) the promise that comes with our relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is no Chapel this week (13 Feb): we are closed for Chinese New Year. Chapel will resume next Wednesday (20 Feb). The speaker will be Mr Walter Edman, who will leave at the end of Feb to return to the United States. This will be a good opportunity for all interested to hear him share at his last Chapel with us before he leaves. Come, join us at the usual time, 12 pm.

1. We are pleased to introduce to you our newest Faculty member: Dr John Lim Chin Boon is a Baptist minister. He has served in Baptist churches both overseas and in Singapore and has also taught at the Singapore Bible College and the Baptist Theological Seminary. He received his theological education in Singapore and in the USA and holds the D. Min. from the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He is married to Joy and they have a son Jonan (19 years). He desires to see how theology can be applied to ministry in the churches and elsewhere for the glory of God. His appointment at BGST is as lecturer in Applied Theology and Missions and he holds the position of Director of Co-Curricular Studies.

Sharing by Dr Lim: I was involved in the pastoral ministry as well as in theological teaching for the past fourteen years. My wife, Joy, and I have been praying for the Lord’s leading as I decided to seek the Lord’s will in the years ahead. So when Dr Quek Swee Hwa approached me to consider teaching at BGST towards the end of 2001, I was pleasantly surprised. I heard about BGST some ten years ago and have followed carefully its programmes and activities. I was initially apprehensive about accepting the invitation. But after prayer together with Joy, I have decided to accept this offer. I began working at BGST and as the days passed by, I can sense God’s Hand guiding me and giving me peace about my decision. I thank Almighty God for the wonderful working relationship within the Faculty, the administrative and library staff. I know that BGST is where God wants me to be. Praise God!

2. Erratum: NT 101 meets next on Feb 18, not Feb 9 and