The Thomas Merton—John C.H. Wu Letters: The Lord as Postman

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Introduction

The hitherto unpublished manuscript of these letters between Thomas Merton and John C.H. Wu (Ching-hsiung Wu, 1899-1986) marks a hidden yet seminal movement among the religious encounters between East and West in the twentieth century. Writing to Thomas Merton at the midway point of their correspondence (March 14, 1961—August 18, 1968), John C.H. Wu observes: "Between true friends the Lord Himself serves as the postman."[1] Wu's comment epitomizes the consciousness that he and Merton come to share regarding the true nature of the ninety letters they exchange:[2] theirs is a threefold encounter between self and other, Christianity and Asia, the human and the divine.

Working together on *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Thomas Merton and John C.H. Wu discovered a project and a friendship willed by God. Both published prior to their relationship—autobiographies that were simultaneously on the Catholic best-sellers book list,[3] and both were simultaneously presently writing works on Asian philosophies and religions.[4] Opposites in politics, brothers in the spirit of hermit and extrovert, and mourners over the loss of a woman, they inspire, teach and console each other through a correspondence of six and one-half years.

Part I: Relationships

As we begin to read the letters, it is interesting to observe that it is Thomas Merton who initiates a correspondence for which John Wu has been silently waiting. Writing to Wu to request his help with a translation of the Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi].[5] Merton asks for Wu's guidance in the study of the Chinese Confucian Classics and Taoist mysticism. Merton is familiar with Wu's books and feels Wu is "exactly the kind of person who would be of immense help."[6] John Wu is ecstatic. He

receives Merton's letter on the feast of St. Joseph, opening it after Mass while still on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament. He tells Merton that he has been waiting for Merton to take the initiative, believing their friendship is fated, and he is quite happy to serve Merton as his "altar boy."[7]

As their correspondence unfolds, direct address and signatures indicate the two men are soon on familiar terms, with Merton signing off as "Tom"[8] and Wu jokingly calling himself "your old good-for-nothing in Christ."[9] Before long Merton and Wu are fast friends, locked in their mutual translation enterprise and sharing the revelations of the Asian Holy Spirit.

Merton's initial need for Wu is professional—he seeks a specialist in ancient Chinese literature and culture.[10] Wu solicits a preface by Merton for a book Wu is doing on St. Térèse of Lisieux and Lao Tzu.[11] Soon, the two men discover through their mutual professional interests an admiration and need for one another. There are minor differences, quirks in personality and contrasting passions that appear along the way. Wu meets Merton's Abbot, James Fox, and writes Merton: "Ever since I came to know him, I have been in love with him. (He is your Joseph, Father.)"[12]—a comment which may have galled Merton, who struggled mightily with his Abbot. Merton informs Wu about issues of peace and war he writes about in *The Catholic Worker* which cry out for attention,[13] but Wu reads them not as personal calls to action for peace and justice, but as the reflections of a true mystic. Merton tries to draw out Wu on the Vietnam War, but Wu does not respond.[14]

From the start, Wu is candid and open regarding himself. Merton may admire his writing on St. Thérèse and Lao Tzu, but Wu laments "the yawning gulf" between his writing and his sinful self.[15] Wu agrees when Merton discerns that Wu's spirit is akin to the "playful samadhi" of the Chinese Zen (Chan) Master, Hui-Neng, combining light-heartedness and deep seriousness.[16] But in fact, as Wu tells Merton,[17] for several years he has been depressed over the death of his wife, Teresa Teh-lan Li (1899-1959), and feels he has been "nailed to the Cross with Christ."[18] He is deeply consoled by Merton, who is "indescribably moved" upon reading Wu's later published description of Teresa's "death in Christ,"[19] and calls it an Asian epiphany of Christ the Savior.[20] From time to time Wu deals with another mysterious depression that seems unrelated to the loss of his wife. There are moments of calm and peace writing calligraphy[21] followed by days of ashes,[22] and "the darkest tunnel

so far" when he discovers compassion for those who are suicidal.[23] In Wu's Preface to his *The Golden Age of Zen* he writes: "There is no telling how much the friendship of this *true man* [Merton] has meant to me during all these lonely years of my life."[24]

For his part, Merton empathizes with Wu's suffering, deeply admires him, and comes to need his support when faced with a personal crisis of his own. In the first year of their correspondence, Merton remembers Wu in his Easter Masses, asking the Lord "to give you every blessing and joy and keep ever fresh and young your 'child's mind' which is the only one worth having. May He grant us as you so well say to be both inebriated and sober in Christ, Confucians and Taoists."[25] A year later, Merton offers Mass for Wu's intentions, for China and all Wu loves.[26] Wu's visit to Gethsemani the same year is a grace for Merton and the monastic community.[27] In Wu, Merton encounters the spirit of Chuang Tzu, and it is to Wu that Merton insists on dedicating *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.[28] Merton misses Wu deeply when the latter moves to Taiwan and writes that he keeps trying to get over his consternation that Wu is gone.[29] When Wu returns to New Jersey, Merton rejoices, eagerly looking forward to having Wu revisit Gethsemani.[30]

A poignant moment of personal want surfaces when Merton writes Wu, "As to me, I need your prayers, life is not always easy!!! I am in trouble, so please pray and get the saints at it too."[31] Although we cannot be certain, in all probability in this letter Merton is hinting about his relationship with "M," the student-nurse with whom he fell in love in March 1966, when he was hospitalized while recovering from back surgery. The relationship unfolds over the spring and summer of 1966, and Merton last sees "M" October 27 of that year.[32] In Wu's September 6, 1966 to Merton, he mentions receiving Merton's August 27, 1966 letter, but the latter is missing from the Merton-Wu manuscript. In his footnotes to the Merton-Wu letters, John Wu Jr. suggests his father may have destroyed Merton's August 27 letter to forestall a scandal.[33] There is no extant correspondence between Wu and Merton after Wu's September 6, 1966 letter until Wu writes again, January 2, 1967.

Merton's appeal for Wu's support and Wu's September 6, 1966 letter reflect the deep trust and intimacy Merton and Wu share. In his letter, Wu comforts and encourages Merton, echoing the role Merton often plays as Wu's friend. If we read Wu's letter as referring to "M," its meaning is clear.

Quoting Merton's missing August 27, 1966 letter (which I assume refers to "M"), Wu assuages Merton's agony by assuring Merton he is experiencing the way of the Cross and following the way of Tao: "It is so characteristic of you to write: 'It is a little hard to laugh off the heartbreak of another person.' Indeed, Father *Misericordieux* (I mean Compassionate), this is the worst cross to a man of boundless generosity like yourself. The simplest way out would be to turn the heart into steel. But this is the coward's or the cynic's way. Your way, I am sure, is [to] let the Lord beat your heart into pulp, so that it is no longer your heart but the Heart of God with its all-embracing Compassion. This is the Way of Tao in which you are so steeped, the Way of knowing the masculine but sticking to the Feminine."[34]

In a posthumously published private journal entry which Wu would not have seen, Merton reviews his affair with "M" and says most of the pain of loneliness he felt for "M" on Holy Thursday and Good Friday of 1966 came out, "but very obliquely," in the poem he wrote describing his hospital stay, "With the World in My Bloodstream."[35] Merton's reference to his suffering over "M" in the poem may have been oblique to Merton, but it seems that it was transparent to Wu. When Wu reads a copy of the poem sent by his son, Francis, he writes Merton that the poem is "a poetic version of 'beating the heart into pulp.'" "Even your hospitalization is fruitful," Wu assures Merton, citing the prophet, Isaiah (*Isaiah* 32:15): "Together with oxygen *the Spirit is poured upon you from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field.*" Quoting the closing lines of "With the World in My Bloodstream":

> While the frail body of Christ
> Sweats in a technical bed
> I am Christ's lost cell
> His childhood and desert age
> His descent into hell.[36]

Wu marvels "at the God who is working in you" and concludes that in becoming a fruitful field and descending into hell, "The poet has become a Divine Poem."[37]

We are left wondering what Merton may have said about "M" and her anguish in his missing letter. It is hard to imagine that she found her heartache redemptive, as Wu found Merton's. Wu's attention however, is on his friend, Merton, not on the woman he

leaves behind. What is significant is the way he responds to Merton's plea with a firm but timely sense of Asian grace. Here Wu reveals his instinctive awareness of the mutual flowering of Eastern and Judeao-Christian spiritualities when planted in a shared garden of Gethsemani. Compassion is self-bruising, Wu affirms. Merton's descent into hell and beaten heart are intimations of the Heart of God and the Way of Tao. Such inter-religious insights move Merton throughout the course of his correspondence.

Reviewing his first year of contact with Thomas Merton, Wu is deeply grateful for a divine gift of friendship.[38] Gradually, he comes to view Merton as his spiritual father, and himself as Merton's son.[39] For his part, Merton finds it is Wu who, like a spiritual father, spurs him forward with "my own vocation to see things Asian in their simplicity and truth." When Wu honors Merton's move to the hermitage with the Chinese pseudonym "Mei Teng" or "Silent Lamp,"[40] Merton feels he has been "'baptized' Chinese" by Wu with a Chinese name he must live up to, for "a name indicates a divine demand."[41] In the very last letter Wu wrote to Merton the year Merton died, Wu asks: "But need I tell you that your friendship has sunk so deep into my psyche that it has become a part of me?"[42]

Merton and Wu share an affinity for one another and similar personality characteristics. In many respects they are soul mates. In reading the letters, we find Wu often identifies with Merton. He tells Merton that the whole time he was reading an article Merton sent him on Mystics and Zen[43] he felt "as though every word came from my real self."[44] Sometimes Merton triggers in Wu an awareness of something latent within himself. Merton's comment in an introduction to Christian mysticism linking the spiritualities of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the German Rhineland mystics such as Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Henry Suso strikes Wu with a sudden illumination. The Rhineland mystics "are really Chinese,"says Wu, in that their spirituality is Chinese. And now that Merton has likened their spirituality to St.Thérèse's "little way" Wu understands "the secret of the magical power the divine witch of Lisieux has exercised on me."[45] "Every word of yours finds an echo in me," he tells Merton, who he says is "in a conspiracy with the Holy Spirit to enlighten me."[46] Reading Merton makes him realize that, like Merton, he has been haunted all his life by the desert within, and that it is the Lord who had led them

both into this desert where they "meet and take delight in each other." "The Lord has whispered to me," adds Wu, "'Seek first the desert, and everything else, including the friendship of my modern Prophet Thomas Merton will be added unto you.'"[47] When Merton moves into his hermitage, Wu writes that he himself is by nature a hermit and that in solitude they are now closer than ever and "[y]ou are more mine."[48]

At the close of their second year of correspondence, December 1962, Merton and Wu exchange two letters on the paradox of sanity and madness. Both are attracted, on the one hand, to the "madness" of the poet and the recluse. Merton especially is drawn to persons who are marginal or social misfits or radical critics. They rejoice together in the "insanity" of the Gospels and Chuang Tzu which is really the deepest sanity. In his Christmas letter, Merton tells Wu that the world cannot silence the Christ-child nor Chuang Tzu for "[t]hey will be heard in the middle of the night saying nothing and everybody will come to their senses." As for himself, Merton claims that "the very name of Chuang Tzu restores me to sanity." "Anything but his quiet debunking view is plain insanity." Merton delights in his discovery of the "mad" Nicaraguan poet, Alfonso Cortes, who writes "the most amazingly sane poetry" and who reminds Merton of Chuang Tzu, for "in his madness he accuses all the right things for the right reasons." Allying himself with both Chuang Tzu and Cortes, Merton encloses in his Christmas letter to Wu "another poem of a madman you know well [Merton]: he beats out his poems on the back of a saucepan, on top of a little hill, while the snakes dance in the woodshed."[49]

Merton's "Chineseness" in his Christmas letter amazes Wu. He muses that he will not know why Merton is so Chinese in the way he thinks until they both get to Heaven. Even Merton's use of "madman" is typically Chinese, reminding Wu of the Tang poets. He simultaneously views Merton's "madness" in both Asian and Christian terms. Wu claims St. Paul was also very Oriental, like Merton, when St. Paul affirmed the sanity-madness paradox, saying "If we were out of our mind, it was for God; if we are sane, it is for you . . . ." He links Paul's "madness" with a traditional Chinese notion of intoxication, translating St. Paul's phrase as, "if we are *drunk* . . . if we are sober." Expanding on his drinking metaphor, Wu tells Merton that no one can be a saint who has not been filled "by the intoxicating Spirit of Love. And, Father, you have drunk like a whale." With his "overwhelming hospitality," "our

Divine Host" and "mad Lord" has urged Merton to "bottoms up"[50] over and over again, and Merton's resistance, even worse than Wu's, has been "almost nil." Only a "dead-drunk man" like Merton can understand Wu's own "timeless moment of void."[51] Three years later, Wu wraps up the theme of madness, concluding that: "Only a contemplative like you can burn with such Christ-Love as you have radiated in all your letters. You are mad with the very madness of Christ; yet this madness is a mysterious blend of the Fire of Love and the Water of Wisdom."[52]

There is one feature of the relationship that we find peculiar to Wu, and that is an admiration for Merton that sometimes borders on adoration. That extreme degree of respect partly stems from the intensity and flamboyance of Wu's personality, but mainly results from Wu's appreciation for Merton's understanding of Asian thought and culture.

There are many examples of Wu's awe for Merton the person coupled with Wu's esteem for Merton the student of the East. At one point in his collaborative project with Wu translating the Chuang Tzu text, Merton tries to learn a little Chinese. Knowing Merton's intellectual prowess, Wu imagines Merton making great strides studying Chinese and comments: "the fire of your spiritual wisdom turns every bit [every Chinese written character] into *light*, informing all information."[53] The truth is Merton had no time to study Chinese and got practically nowhere learning Chinese characters. What is noteworthy is Wu's utter confidence in Merton's light-transforming wisdom. For Wu, meeting Merton face to face the first time at Gethsemani, and walking and talking with him and sharing silence are blissful experiences.[54] He wants Merton's "holy hands" to touch up his translations of Chinese Buddhist texts.[55] Praising what he calls Merton's "Integral Humanism," Wu remarks that since the apex of Merton's pyramid is in heaven, "you [Merton] could not be otherwise than universal".[56] Indeed, Merton is a masterpiece, created by the Divine Artist using nature and grace, a "sublime" landscape of "towering peaks hidden in clouds and mists," of flowing streams merging "with the infinite Void," and an "ineffable" blend of Confucianism and Taoism.[57] "All things you do and write, Father, are poetry; and you are His great Haiku," writes Wu.[58] "Every time I receive a letter from you, I feel as though I had a new satori!" he exclaims. "A subtle and indefinable peace begins to seep into my soul and fills it with a deep and inexplicable satisfaction."[59] "If this is at-

tachment, let there be more attachment!" Wu chortles.[60] Reading Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Wu feels like he is "strolling on a mountain, breathing the pine-scented air."[61] Sending Merton a newspaper clipping where a photograph of Merton and another of Pope Paul VI appear side by side, Wu tells Merton he likes to see the two famous figures together, as they represent "the two aspects of Christ—the inner and the outer. You are supporting his diplomatic efforts ontologically."[62]

Part II: Christianity and the East

Poor Merton! How his ears must have burned! And how he must have loved it! How did Wu get this way, an altar boy idolizing his priest? We might also ask, what is it that Merton discovers in Wu? While never effusive, Merton clearly needs and respects Wu, loves him and learns from him.

As noted previously, Wu, like so many readers, identifies with Merton spiritually and emotionally. Prior to letter writing, Wu is deeply touched by Merton as monk and spiritual writer. But why does Wu say that he has been waiting for Merton to write? There is in Wu an intuitive sense that their encounter is providentially ordained. Before their correspondence begins, Wu has made a significant discovery: Merton understands the East. Through subsequent letters, while at the same time reading unpublished or recently published Merton writing on Asia, Wu awakens more and more profoundly to the awareness that Merton grasps the spirituality of Chinese Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Chinese poetry in a contemplative Christian sense that is uniquely his own. Equally momentous for Merton is the fact that Wu approaches the Gospel through Asian spirituality. Wu's findings, and his revealing and teaching his own understanding, must have thrilled Merton, as Wu brings out a latent awareness in Merton. Equally momentous for Wu is that his waiting has come to an end.

Let us turn to the practical evidence of Wu's and Merton's grasp of things Chinese, and then move to Wu's theory of the mind of Thomas Merton through which he makes sense of Merton's and his vision of the Christian need for the East.

At one point barely two months after they have initiated correspondence, Merton comments to Wu: "Now I enjoy the quiet of the woods and the song of the birds and the presence of the Lord in silence. Here is Nameless Tao, revealed as Jesus, the brightness

of the hidden Father, our joy and our life. All blessing to you, joy and grace in Him."[63] We do not know Wu's reaction, but we can surmise that he is deeply moved with the awareness that Merton has penetrated the mystery of Tao through the visible Christ who reveals the invisible Source. "To have seen me is to have seen the Father," as Christ says to Philip in the Gospel of John.[64] Wu is ardent about the *Logos*, the Word-Event that is Christ in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and which he sees in classical Chinese texts.[65] Both Merton and Wu respond to this Word-Event, Christ, with the whole of their beings. In his very first letter to Merton, Wu speaks of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the forefathers of Taoism, and tells Merton that "the Logos of God who enlightens everyone coming into this world illuminated their minds." Through Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, God prepared both the Chinese mind and the modern "post-Christian" mind to recognize the True Light. Conversely, says Wu, we cannot fully understand the Taoists nor the Confucianists unless we are one with the Word incarnate."[66] In his second letter to Merton, dated Good Friday, 1961, Wu reiterates his conviction about the Logos and Tao. While reading Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Wu is constantly reminded of the moral intuitions and spiritual insights found in sayings and anecdotes by Chinese Sages such as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Mencius and Buddha. This experience reveals to Wu a thrilling truth: "*The Tao Incarnate* is absolutely the *Same Tao* who was from the beginning with God and is God. Before Lao Tzu was, He *is*" (Wu italics).

Assuming this close identification between Logos and Tao, Wu readily points out to Merton his awareness that the post-Christian West needs the spirituality of the East to re-discover Christ and to be re-Christianized. The natural wisdoms of the East are meant by God to remind Christians of a richer heritage that either they are unaware of or have forgotten.[67] Indeed, Wu surmises, the ancient would be better Christians than many today, because had they heard Christ's teachings they would have understood them, while Christians have lost their ear for the words of the Gospel and the "'impractical' living counsels of the Living LOGOS" [Wu capitals]. Were Christ's sermons or Paul's letters to be submitted to chancery offices today, says Wu, many passages would be considered heretical.[68] Merton concurs with Wu in his belief that Christians need the East and that a whole new orientation is required. An erroneous sort of "supernaturalism" and blind adherence to le-

galistic formulas, gestures and rites have impaired living and understanding the Gospels. Allowing that many of his fellow priests would not understand his perspective, Merton speaks of a need at present for the "wonderful natural wisdoms that came before Christ" and that are fulfilled in Christ and the Gospel, so that Christians may themselves achieve the fulfillment Christ requires of them.[69]

One concrete example of Merton's East-West integrative approach that impresses Wu is Merton's teaching on self-nature or the person as void. According to Merton, in the West the person is commonly viewed as a divided self—an individual empirical ego and an inner real self. The truth, says Merton, is:

> What is most ourselves is what is least ourself [*sic*], or better the other way round. It is the void [emptiness] that is our personality, and not our individuality that seems to be concrete and defined and present, etc. It is what is seemingly not present, the void, that is really I. And the "I" that seems to be I is really a void . . . It is the No-I [not I] that is most of all I in each one of us. But we are completely enslaved by the illusory I that is not I and never can be I except in a purely fictional and social sense.
>
> And of course there is yet one more convolution in this strange dialectic: there remains to suppress the apparent division between empirical self and real or inner self. There is no such division. There is only the Void which is I, covered over by an apparent I. And when the apparent I is seen to be void it no longer needs to be rejected, *for it is I.* How wonderful it is to be alive in such a world of craziness and simplicity."

Merton adds, poking fun at his analysis: "I get this way from sleeping nights in the hermitage and watching the stars."[70]

Wu, in contrast, terms Merton's analysis a "transparent perception" penned by the "Not I." Merton is "Father Void," a wizard, pointing to the moon. "With this fundamental insight" about the nature of self as void, says Wu, "we can spin the Buddhist scriptures" like boys playing tops. As he signs off, Wu extends Merton's East-West insight as to human self-nature to the divine nature of Ultimate Self: "With filial love in the Word Who is the Void."[71] Here Wu links Christ the Word with Buddhist emptiness (Void), intimating but not explaining this mysterious and provocative analogy.[72]

Wu's study of Tang Chinese Buddhism, *The Golden Age of Zen*, and Merton's role in its formation reflect the shared vision of East-West encounter we find throughout the Merton-Wu correspondence. In terms of their production, *The Golden Age of Zen* and Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* mirror one another, as Wu longs for Merton's assistance with his work, while Merton absolutely requires Wu's for his.[73] Wu very much wants Merton's input and criticism as he writes,[74] and he sends manuscripts of chapters, asking for "a sound beating" from Merton the Master.[75] Merton begs off the editing job, claiming incompetence as well as being too busy.[76] He gently finds fault, saying Wu's statements sometimes miss his target, his choice of words may be inappropriate, or more explanations are needed for the general reader. Later he compliments Wu on the readability of his revisions, especially in one section where he is charmingly informal and spontaneous.[77] Wu feels Christ himself has praised him.[78] Merton believes in the worthiness of Wu's book project, and he revels in reading material he considers magnificent. "It is a wonderful book," Merton concludes, "and certainly one of the best things on Zen that has come out. It provides a very welcome change of pace and perspective from Suzuki, and throws such abundant light on Chinese Zen, it is going to be invaluable."[79] In a subsequent letter to Wu, Merton says students of Zen will find the book indispensable.[80]

What Wu really wants from Merton is an Introduction to his book that is similar to the one Merton writes for *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.[81] "Am I asking too much?" he asks, pleadingly, adding with emphasis, "*O Father, hermit or no hermit, I need your help.*"[82] Again and again he begs and cajoles Merton for the Introduction. When at last Merton sends the Introduction to Wu in Taiwan, and its arrival is delayed in the mail, Wu comments: "Our friend the Devil is trying to hinder the publication of this book, whose aim is to open the door of Our Church."[83] Upon reading the Introduction when it does arrive, Wu is elated. He finds Merton's comparative study of Christianity and Zen "a living bridge between East and West," and "a masterful summing up of the spirit of Zen."[84] In his own Preface to the book, Wu generously suggests *The Golden Age of Zen* may be regarded as a long footnote to "the profound insights embodied in his [Merton's] introduction."[85] We have here an indication of Wu's high hopes and expectations. *The Golden Age of Zen*, like *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, may unbolt closed doors and

provide access to Asian spiritualities helpful for the reawakening of Christian contemplation.

Part III: Wu's Theory of Merton's Mind

We glean from various remarks Wu makes during the first two years of their correspondence the emergence of a general theory of Merton's intellect. As he dialogues with Merton or reads his letters and writing, Wu observes Merton's mind in action and comments on its qualities and the way it works. Perusing Merton's *Disputed Questions* as well as *The Thomas Merton Reader*, Wu remarks:

> Your mind is like a crystal not only in its transparent clarity, but in the wonderful fact that every unit of it possesses the characteristic features of the whole. And is this not how the Creator Himself works? There is no atom which does not reproduce more or less faithfully the structure of the solar system!"[86]

Because of this transparent clarity, Merton's vision is genuine. He exemplifies Goethe's ideal thinker: "one who can divide so deeply that he can unite, and [who is] united so deeply that he can divide."[87] There is a mystical quality about Merton's mental processing, which Wu terms "catholicity." He likens Merton's intelligence to a dancer who somehow dances while suspended over a cliff and dances on flat ground at one and the same moment. Like St. Thomas Aquinas, Merton in his writing stretches the Mystical Body of Christ to the ultimate limit, yet does no more "than register the necessary growth toward the full stature of Christ." Merton's mind and writing have "the beauty of the Golden Mean," and "the spontaneity of the inevitable."[88]

Wu's general theory reflects and illuminates his specific perceptions of Merton as a perfect blend of East and West, and his concrete encounters with a mind that is simultaneously Asian yet centrally Christian in spirituality. In his first letter to Merton,[89] Wu immediately cites particular examples which reveal that Merton is "Asian" in disposition or background, or that he is a gifted interpreter of Asian matter, particularly Chinese. The monk-writer has a natural gift for "seeing the essential in everything," a capacity which is complemented by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Studying Chinese material, Merton's mind becomes transparent

"like a fire burning white-hot," and he grasps Chinese ways of thinking with penetrating insight. In certain ways Merton is both Confucian and Taoist. The practice of monastic obedience enables Merton, says Wu, to recognize that Confucian rites are an external expression of what is internal. Faithfully carrying out daily tasks in the monastery means that Merton has "*lived* Confucianism" [Wu emphasis], and knows rites not as something imposed externally, but rising from within.[90] Certain works by Merton on Western subjects sound Asian to Wu. A book like *Seeds of Contemplation* reveals a similarity between Merton's mode of thinking and the Taoist patriarchs, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. When Merton writes in *Seeds*, "The Holy Spirit is sent from moment to moment into my soul," Wu proclaims the sentiment is exactly what Chuang Tzu would have written were he a Christian. Merton's phrase, "selflessness is my true self," declares Wu, "sums up Lao Tzu and Buddha and the best of Hinduism." *Seeds of Contemplation* is a remarkable book from an Asian perspective, and "may be called a bridge between East and West."[91]

In yet higher praise, Wu terms Merton's *The New Man* a "perfect synthesis of East and West," which echoes the non-dualistic thinking of the Chinese sages. He believes this parallel is due to Merton's habit of reading contemplatively, absorbing whatever he reads in terms of personal experience and understanding. Reading *The New Man* Wu finds echoes of the "Oriental Sages" and gains a new understanding of their insights. "You are so deeply Christian that you can't help touching the vital springs of the other religions—Hinduism or Buddhism." Calling Merton a major prophet of the age, he tells him, "You need not bother about improving your knowledge of Chinese. You *are* Chinese, because you are universal."[92] When Merton remarks in his "Mystics and Zen Masters" article that for Hui Neng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch of the Chinese Zen sect of Buddhism, "*all life was Zen*,"[93] Wu writes, "It couldn't be better put. Did I not say that my Father Louis was a Chinese?"[94] Merton's remarks in that article so move Wu that he experiences non-duality in a union of minds. He ticks off Merton's achievement as follows: Merton's "explanation of 'Mind' as 'Spirit' and of Prajna as *Light*, the Light that illumines all," his "discernment of the empirical self from the *Real Man* in the Chuangtzean sense," his concept of "pure affirmation," his differentiation "between *is* and *has*," his "awareness of full spiritual reality," his "speaking of the 'true face' as 'a discovery of *genuine identity* in

and with the One,' his "repeated insistence on all-embracing catholicity as the earmark of a true Catholic," and his reservations on a Buddhist metaphor for enlightenment, "The mirror has no stand." The cumulative effect of encountering Merton's acuity of vision, says Wu, is it "wrought in me the transcending of the subject-object relationship. There is no longer Father Louis or John Wu, but the Vagabond Spirit, the Divine Rascal Who comes and goes like the Wind."[95]

Merton's "Buddhism," or rather, his understanding of Buddhism, is something which particularly strikes Wu, sometimes leaving him "speechless," as when he re-reads *Mystics and Zen Masters* years after he read it the first time, and finds Merton's interpretation of "Zen enlightenment" as "an insight into pure being in all its actual presence and immediacy." Wu exclaims that Merton's perception is the very point of his own work on Buddhism he is currently writing and now he no longer cares if it gets published.[96] Wu's discovery of what might be termed "Merton's Buddhism" is important, because what is striking is not Merton's contribution to knowledge of Buddhism *per* se, nor the question of his being a Buddhist scholar or Buddhologist—which he most decidedly is not. What is significant is Merton's existential grasp of Buddhism as a Christian contemplative. In effect, Wu, the Buddhist scholar, is saying that Merton, monk and poet, understands Buddhism better than he does. Equally important today is the fact that Buddhologists and Asian specialists who are not steeped in the Gospels of Jesus and the Christian contemplative traditions like Merton, miss Merton's contribution entirely.

Wu's reasoning is partly playful. Early in their correspondence, while commenting on Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* as a text Buddhists of the Rinzai school would prefer, Wu jokes that he suspects Merton must have been a Zen Master in a previous life, and that in the present one he will attain Buddhahood[97] Merton knocks the Buddhahood ball back to Wu's court, saying: "If I once reached Buddhahood and redescended to my present state, all I can say is that I made a really heroic sacrifice." Continuing the joke and admitting his attraction to the hermit life and things Chinese, Merton adds: "Whatever I may have been in previous lives, I think more than half of them were Chinese and eremitical."[98] Furthering the banter about identity in later letters, Wu refers to some sketch Merton makes of himself and declares: "The 'Old Rice Bag' [Merton's nickname for himself] looks very much like Hui Neng."[99]

While Wu loves to tease Merton, there is no doubt he profoundly esteems Merton's Buddhism. Merton's "fundamental insights" are likened to rivulets forming a sea of understanding.[100] Indeed, notes Wu, as other Asian specialists such as Father William Johnston S. J. have observed, many of Merton's works are "full of Zen," even those not dealing directly with Zen,[101] including ones such as *Seeds of Contemplation* written when Merton was young and may not have heard of Zen.[102]

Speaking only partly in jest, Wu says whether Merton is among his Gethsemani monks or goes one day to visit Zen monks in Japan, he might "serve as the occasion for their awakening to the Logos." Merton is the answer to the famous Zen *koan*, "What is your Original Face before you were born." "For you, Father, you are already *yourself*, the 'Original Face;' who is everywhere, including Japan, and nowhere, not even in Gethsemani."[103] Sometimes Merton's observations serve to confirm Wu's views—e.g. the Zen masters are the heirs of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu,[104] or clarify passages that were formerly obscure,[105] or make connections between Buddha's teachings and Zen that Chinese masters overlook.[106] While collaborating with Merton on his project translating Chuang Tzu, Wu is also writing chapters on various Zen masters for his *The Golden Age of Zen*. Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* "opened my eyes to many things," says Wu, and "helped me to understand these monks of towering stature."[107] He believes *The Way of Chuang Tzu* reveals "the original affinities between Zen and Chuang Tzu."[108] After reading Merton's "The Zen Koan" in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Wu concludes: "it can no longer be doubted that you have a clearer understanding of the whole damned thing than any of the modern Zennists, so far as I know."[109]

Conclusion

After exploring the unpublished letters between Thomas Merton and John C.H. Wu, we can readily agree with Wu's statement with which we began this essay: "Between true friends the Lord Himself serves as the postman." The encounter is providential for both. They need one another professionally for writing *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and *The Golden Age of Zen*, and each relies on the friendship, trust and encouragement of the other. They share a spiritual affinity for solitude and an attraction to that which is offbeat or original in poetic temperaments and spiritual masters East-West. Merton understands Asian spiritualities as contemplative monk

and poet. Wu finds Christ in ancient Chinese Taoism and Buddhism. Both agree that Western Christianity needs the East, and that a reawakening to the Gospel can occur through an encounter with Asian traditions. In Merton, Wu discovers a mind of transparent clarity, a mystical intelligence able to hold both ends of a paradox in one hand. The monk is a synthesis of East and West, who like Wu sees the West in the East and the East in the West. Wu discovers Merton's Buddhism, his "Asian" or "Chinese" self, and helps him to see Asia more clearly. Merton names Wu's playfully profound *samadhi* and conspires with the Holy Spirit to bring Wu to enlightenment. In the last analysis, the encounter and interaction between Thomas Merton and John C.H. Wu uncovers what is latent in each. Merton becomes Father Void and Wu discovers the Logos in the East.

Notes

1. Letter dated 11/16/65.Thomas Merton, John C.H. Wu, "The Thomas Merton—John C.H. Wu Correspondence," unpublished manuscript. I wish to thank John Wu, Jr. and Jonathan Montaldo for generously providing access to this manuscript and for encouraging research and writing on this project.

2. Merton wrote thirty-seven letters, Wu fifty-three. Thirty-one of Merton's letters to Wu are published in whole or in part in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), pp. 611-35.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948). John C.H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (Sheed and Ward, 1951).

4. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967). *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968). John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of* Zen (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1996, (Orig. 1967).

5. Zhuangzi. 莊 子. Merton and Wu's collaborative translation project culminated in Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965). For a study of the project and Merton's book, see Lucien Miller, "Merton's *Chuang Tzu*," available through the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

6. 3/14/61.

7. 3/20/61.

8. 3/14/61; 12/12/61.

9. 12/27/62.

10. 3/14/61.

11. 4/15/61. Wu's study was published as an essay, "St. Thérèse and Lao Tzu: a Study in Comparative Mysticism," in *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality: Essays of John C.H. Wu*, ed. Paul K. T. Sih (Jamaica, NY: St. John's University Press, 1965).

12. 12/7/65.

13. 12/12/61.

14. 6/9/65.

15. 8/4/61.

16. 1/31/65; 2/5/65.

17. 5/25/61; 3/9/62.

18. 12/27/62.

19. See *The Golden Age of Zen*, pp. 214-15.

20. 12/28/65.

21. 1/1/66.

22. 1/10/66.

23. 3/26/66.

24. John C.H. Wu, Preface, *The Golden Age of* Zen.

25. 4/1/61.

26. 6/7/62.

27. 7/10/62.

28. 6/9/65.

29. 7/11/66.

30. 9/12/67.

31. 8/5/66.

32. See *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 6, 1966-1967; (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997). pp. 150-51.

33. John Wu, Jr., "Footnotes to Merton-Wu Letters," unpublished manuscript. Footnote dated 9/6/66.

34. 9/6/66.

35. *Learning to Love*, p. 122.

36. Thomas Merton, "With the World in my Bloodstream," in Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (NY: New Directions, 1977), pp. 617.

37. 9/6/66.

38. 12/19/61

39. Undated card, December 1964.

40. Mei Teng 昧 燈. 12/17/65.

41. 12/28/65. Later on, Merton mocks himself with the epithet "Old cracked Mei-Teng" (2/7/66).

42. 1/26/68.

43. Published as "Mystics and Zen Masters" in Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 3-44.

44. 3/31/63.

45. 3/9/62. [**Unidentified Merton work**: Wu's reference to Merton's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism.*] For Wu's writing on St. Thérèse of Lisieux see "St. Therese & Lao Tzu," in Wu's *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*. St. John's U Press, 1965, and his book, *The Interior Carmel*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1952.

46. 12/26/62.

47. 12/27/62.

48. 11/16/65.

49. 12/20/62.

50. "Bottoms up." *gan bei* 乾杯.

51. 12/27/62.

52. 2/5/65.

53. 3/9/62.

54. 6/30/62.

55. 7/17/62.

56. 12/26/62.

57. 11/16/65.

58. 11/16/65.

59. 12/7/65

60. 1/1/66.

61. 1/21/66.

62. 1/24/66.

63. 5/19/61.

64. John 14:9.

65. "Word-Event" is a term coined by the late Japanese Dominican and master of Christian-Buddhist encounter, Shigeto Oshida, O.P., of the Takamori Community, Japan, for an experiential reading of Sciptures. See "The Mystery of the Word and Reality" (1981: Unpublished essay).

66. 3/21/61.

67. Dated "First Friday," 4/61.

68. 12/17/64.

69. 4/1/61.

70. 1/31/65.

71. 2/5/65.

72. A further East-West insight Merton and Wu share is an understanding of Zen and Tao. Both detest Western popular Buddhism's tendency to reduce Zen to *zazen* or sitting meditation and the solving of *koan*. Merton terms such simplifications a "stinking skeleton" (6/23/63). Wu and Merton find a fundamental likeness between Tao and Zen

and a oneness in modality that, says Wu, traditional devout Buddhists do not acknowledge (12/2/65).

73. See my "Merton's *Chuang Tzu*" for Wu's role in the creation of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* is published in 1965. Wu's *The Golden Age of Zen* is published in 1967.

74. 6/13/65; 8/6/65.

75. 8/14/65.

76. 7/11/65.

77. 12/28/65.

78. 12/31/65.

79. A review of the 1996 reissue of *The Golden Age of Zen* (originally published in 1967) praises Wu's book for its detailed characterizations of Tang dynasty era Zen, wealth of background information, and contextualizations of famous sayings of ancestral teachers. See Frank J. Hoffman, "*Zen Keys; The Golden Age of Zen*," *Philosophy East and West*. Vol. 48, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), pp. 165-67. Another finds it prophetic. See John A. Lindblom, "John C.H. Wu and the Evangelization of China," in *Logos*, Vol. 8, Number 2 (Spring 2005), pp. 130-64. Wu's decidedly Christian perspective links Buddhism, Taoism and Christian contemplative or mystical traditions. Wu and Merton, both pioneers in Christian-Asian religious encounter, offer alternative visions largely ignored in scholarly secular studies. For Buddhist scholarship illuminating the field Wu introduces, see Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Steven Heine, *The Koan: Text and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

80. 9/12/65. The book was rejected several times by various publishers before eventually being published by the College of Chinese Culture Press and the National War College in Taiwan, in co-operation with the Committee on the Compilation of the Chinese Library, Yang Ming Shan, 1967.

81. 8/12/65; 12/2/65.

82. 11/19/65.

83. 9/6/66.

84. 9/19/67. Merton's Introduction in *The Golden Age of Zen* is republished as "A Christian Looks at Zen" in Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, pp. 33-58.

85. John C.H. Wu, Preface, *The Golden Age of Zen*.

86. 12/16/62.

87. 3/31/63.

88. 8/14/65.

89. 3/20/61.
90. 3/20/61.
91. "First Friday," April 1961.
92. 11/28/61.
93. See "Mystics and Zen Masters" in *Mystics and Zen* Masters, p. 21, [Merton emphasis].
94. 3/31/63.
95. 3/31/63.
96. 3/26/66.
97. 5/25/61.
98. 5/29/61.
99. 12/27/64.
100. 8/14/65.
101. 8/3/65.
102. 12/7/65.
103. 12/27/64.
104. 2/5/65.
105. 5/11/65.
106. 8/14/65.
107. 2/2/65.
108. 11/16/65.
109. 1/19/66.