

# MEI TENG, THE SILENT LAMP: THOMAS MERTON and CHINA

by Robert E. Daggy

Silent Lamp! Silent Lamp!  
I only see its radiance  
But hear not its voice!  
Spring beyond the world!<sup>1</sup>

Dr. John Chin Hsung Wu, noted Chinese scholar and friend and correspondent of Thomas Merton, wrote this haiku to Merton in 1966, gently chiding him for his silence. Wu, convinced that Merton's unusual perceptions and cultural acuity could potentially help bridge the gaps between East and West, had already given him a Chinese name — *MEI TENG*, the "Silent Lamp."<sup>2</sup> And there was no doubt that Merton was interested in China and in Chinese thought.

He wrote to Paul Cardinal Yu Pin, onetime Archbishop of Nanking, early in 1961: "I am much closer to Confucius and Lao Tzu than I am to my contemporaries in the United States, even, strange to say, many of my Catholic contemporaries."<sup>3</sup> He invited Yu Pin to Gethsemani to aid him in his study of Chinese language, history and philosophy. But Yu Pin never came to Gethsemani and, though Merton read widely in history and philosophy, he did not learn to read, speak or write Chinese. He dealt with Chinese writers in translation and disparaged his attempts at calligraphy as a Westerner's playing with an Eastern art form. Yet there is no doubt that Merton saw this closeness, this empathy which he claimed as something real, not just something imagined or hoped for. It is true that he claimed a similar closeness and empathy, often at the same time, with Latin Americans, with Black Americans, with the Vietnamese and other peoples. But he still perceived an affinity with the Chinese, an affinity — an indefinable, even mystical relationship — which his Chinese correspondents, who found Merton's understanding of Chinese thought rare in a non-Chinese person, also thought they perceived and to which they reacted as positively as many Latin Americans, Blacks and others did.

Merton's interest in Eastern religions and spirituality is well-documented. Though emphasis has been given overwhelmingly to his work on Zen Buddhism, he was interested in *all* Eastern thought. His earliest reading and work, in fact, was on China, one of his first publications being the essay "Classic Chinese Thought," a study of Confucius to whom he claimed unusual closeness. He later examined Lao Tzu, the other figure he mentions in his letter to Cardinal Yu Pin, in "Two Chinese Classics," an essay retitled "Love and Tao." His studies inevitably brought him to Buddhism and to Ch'an, the Chinese form of Zen Buddhism, but his interest in other Chinese ways of thought never abated. His bent toward poetry led him, despite his never learning Chinese, to rendering Chinese parables from English translations in what he called "interpretations." This interpreting of Chinese classics began when *THE OX-MOUNTAIN PARABLE OF MENG TZU* was privately printed in 1960 and reached its fullest expression in *THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU*, published in 1965. His reading of the latter, which he found peculiarly insightful, caused John Wu to write the poem quoted on p. 7 and led him to dub Merton Mei Teng, the Silent Lamp.

This inexplicable quality in Merton, this ability to encounter alien cultures and interpret them almost as though they were his own, was recognized by several Chinese scholars. Wu concluded that Merton may have been Chinese in a past life. Merton noted in *THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU*:

John (Wu) has a theory that in "some former life" I was a Chinese monk. I do not know about that, and of course I hasten to assure everyone that I do not believe in reincarnation (and neither does he). But I have been a Christian monk for nearly twenty-five years, and inevitably one comes in time to see life from a viewpoint that has been common to solitaries and recluses in all ages and all cultures.<sup>4</sup>

(continued on p. 9.)



Dr. John Chin Hsung Wu's  
Calligraphy for MEI TENG  
(Silent Lamp), his name  
for THOMAS MERTON

Dr. Paul K. T. Sih, then Director of the Institute of Asian Studies at St. John's University, shared this opinion of Merton's acumen in dealing with the East and wrote to him after reading "Classic Chinese Thought":

Your profound, yet lucid, description of Confucian and Taoist traditions is both inspiring and thought-provoking. It reveals that in this twentieth century we can also see a St. Thomas in the effective use of a Chinese Aristotle. As a Chinese, I feel particularly grateful for your presenting the Oriental culture to the West in such a forceful way.<sup>5</sup>

Some years later Dr. Richard Chi (whose pseudonym is Ernest Moncrieff), then at Indiana University, praised Merton just as highly when thanking him for writing an Introduction for his *THE LAST OF THE PATRIARCHS: THE RECORDED SAYINGS OF SHEN-HUI*:

Your Introduction is really a masterpiece. It will be a classic in its own right, as soon as it is published. This is the first time I have seen anything written by a non-Chinese with such a deep understanding of Ch'an. It will be immortal, and the work of Shen-hui will also be immortalized by your Introduction.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Cyrus Lee, whose study of Merton and Chuang Tzu is featured in this *SEASONAL* was informed of Merton's death on December 11, 1968, right after having delivered a lecture on Merton in his contemporary philosophy class. In the lecture he said: "There have been only a few, however, American students who went to the East for Oriental studies. Among these very few Americans, Father Thomas Merton is the most diligent I have ever known." When told of Merton's death by one of his students, Dr. Lee says that he wept, in part, because "China had lost one of her most Chinese-minded American scholars."<sup>7</sup>

Merton continued his reading and study of Eastern materials until his death in 1968 and he continued to write. In *DAY OF A STRANGER*, his account of a day in his life in 1965, he wrote that he was surrounded in his hermitage by many voices, including "Chuang Tzu whose climate is perhaps most the climate of this silent corner of woods. A climate in which there is no need for explanation. Here is the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzu's and Fu's; Kung Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu. And Hui Neng. And Chao Chu."<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that Chinese thought had a great impact on Merton and no doubt that he was accepted as a unique voice by many Chinese scholars. The extent of his influence in China, unlike some other areas, was necessarily limited by political circumstances. Only three of his major works — *CISTERCIAN LIFE*, *SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION* and *THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE* — and a few essays have been translated into Chinese. Slowly, however, Chinese readers in Hong Kong and Taiwan have become acquainted with Merton. Rev. Edward Khong, Director of the Catholic Truth Society in Hong Kong, wrote to Dr. Robert Daggy in January, 1983, that the Chinese translation of *THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE* was sold out. Rev. Khong hopes to reprint the book, as he put it, "for the benefit of our Chinese community."<sup>9</sup>

The extent of Merton's influence in helping East and West to better understanding is difficult, indeed impossible, to gauge. It is probably futile at this point even to try. Dr. Lee has perhaps summed it up best: "Merton had enriched himself by studying and experiencing the Oriental traditions . . . he had revitalized these traditions and tried to transplant them in the soil of Christianity."<sup>10</sup> In the end he left us with a record of one man's attempt to grasp and understand the cultures of the East and, through that attempt, to understand all men and women better. Whether he did spring beyond the world, Mei Teng tried, in his encounter with the East, to make the jump which his friend, John Wu admonished him to make.

#### NOTES

1. John Chin Hsung Wu. Letter to Thomas Merton, South Orange, New Jersey, January 10, 1966.
2. John Chin Hsung Wu. Letter to Thomas Merton, South Orange, New Jersey, December 17, 1965.
3. Thomas Merton. Letter to Paul Cardinal Yu Pin, Trappist, Kentucky, February 11, 1961.
4. Thomas Merton. *THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU* (New York, New Directions, 1965): p. 10.
5. Paul K. T. Sih. Letter to Thomas Merton, Jamaica, New York, April 10, 1961.
6. Richard Hu See-yee Chi. Letter to Thomas Merton, Bloomington, Indiana, April 23, 1968.
7. Cyrus Lee. "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism," *CHINESE CULTURE* 13 (June 1972): no. 2, p. 35.
8. Thomas Merton. *DAY OF A STRANGER* (Salt Lake City, Peregrine Smith, 1981): p. 35.
9. Edward Khong. Letter to Robert E. Daggy, Hong Kong, January 27, 1983.
10. Cyrus Lee. "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism," *CHINESE CULTURE* 13 (June 1972): no. 2, p. 44.