

THOMAS MERTON'S IMITATION OF CHUANG TZU

By Cyrus Lee

Dr. Cyrus Lee was born in a Roman Catholic family in Hunan, China. He was educated in National Taiwan University, The University of Ottawa, and The Catholic University of America, where he received his doctorate. He has been a high school Dean in Malaysia, has lectured at several Canadian and American colleges and universities, and for fourteen years has been teaching psychology at Edinboro State University of Pennsylvania. His favorite subject of teaching is psychology of Consciousness, which he started at the same University. He has been a leader in transpersonal studies, founding a Sino-American Institute of Transpersonal Psychology with headquarters in Taipei and Erie, near Edinboro. He has published many articles in the fields of philosophy, psychology and education. He is an expert in the philosophy of Mo Tzu, whose ideas on God and the universal love are very similar to Christianity. Among his seven books he has written two on Mo Tzu, three on Christianity, one on Taoism and one on Thomas Merton. He is a world traveler, including several trips to China, where he met with religious, political and academic leaders many times. He has been a prime mover in arranging exchanges of scholars between Edinboro State University and several Chinese universities in Canton, Wuhan and Taiwan. He continues to participate in many national and international learned societies devoted to comparative studies of East and West in the fields of philosophy, psychology and religion.

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INTRODUCTION

The word "imitation" derives from the Latin verb "imitari", which has three different meanings: first, to mimic, such as to imitate another's intonations; second, to be or appear to be like or resemble someone externally; and third, to copy, strive to copy, or to assume the form or likeness of another person.

In the history of humankind, there have been a lot of imitators, some are great and some are unique. Generally speaking, the reason why people did or still do imitate someone is because they admire that person. This admired person might be a religious leader, a great scholar, a political figure, or even a military dictator. For example, in the East, Venerable Kasyapa imitated Buddha Gautma for his own enlightenment and Yen Yuan imitated Confucius for cultivating his own personality. Both of them were great and unique imitators.¹



Dr. Cyrus Lee

In the West, St. Paul the Apostle was a famous imitator of Jesus Christ. He admired Jesus so much that he not only imitated Christ himself, but he also urged his disciples to do the same by saying: "Imitatores estote, sicut et ego Christi." (Be you imitators of me, just as I am of Christ).² Being a Christian monk and a novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton was certainly familiar with St. Paul's teaching and tried hard to imitate both St. Paul and Jesus Christ. However, being a student of Oriental mysticism and monasticism, Merton had become also very familiar with both Taoist and Buddhist monks and thinkers, such as Chuang Tzu and Hui Neng. Some ten years ago I published a paper on Merton's involvement with Zen Buddhism.³ In this present paper I intend to present Merton's imitation of Chuang Tzu. This paper consists of three brief parts: (1) Merton's imitation of Chuang Tzu in the latter's personality, (2) Merton's imitation of Chuang Tzu in his poetry, and (3) Merton's imitation of Chuang Tzu in his spiritual life. Some personal remarks will be made at the end of the paper.

I. Merton's Imitation of Chuang Tzu in His Personality

When Merton wrote *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, one of his favorite books, he made a special confession to his readers by saying "I simply like Chuang Tzu because he is what he is and I feel no need to justify this liking to myself or to anyone else. He is too great to need any apologies from me. If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averoes (both of them certainly a long way further from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was!), if Teilhard De Chardin could make copious use of Marx and Engels in his synthesis, I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shares the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person."⁴

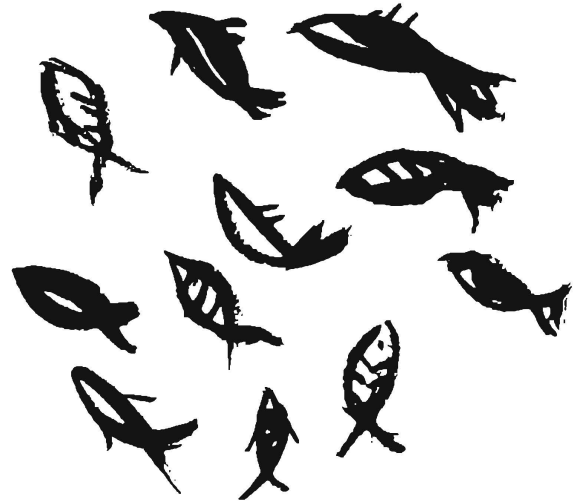
Then one may ask, what kind of persons Chuang Tzu and Thomas Merton really are. Well, let these two funny monks and great thinkers speak for themselves. Once Chuang Tzu described himself as one who "chiefly cared to occupy himself with the spirit-like operation of heaven and earth, and did not try to rise above the myriads of things . . . He did not condemn the arguments and differences of others, so that he might live in peace with the prevalent views . . . Above he seeks delight in the maker; below, he has a friendly regard to those who consider life and death as having neither beginning nor end. As regards his dealing with the Root (origin of all things), he is comprehensive and great, opening up new views, deep, vast, and free."⁵

In 1966, just after he had finished his book on *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton wrote about himself in a reply to the Catholic theologian, Rosemary R. Ruether, that "I have the usual Agonia with my vocation but now after twenty-five years I am in a position where I am practically laicized and deinstitutionalized, and living like all the other old bats who live alone in the hills in this part of the country and I feel like a human being again. My hermit life is expressly a lay life . . . I cannot say where and when my life is eschatological, because as far as I can see I am a tramp and not much else. But this kind of tramp is what I am supposed to be. This kind of place is where I am finally reduced to my nothingness."⁶

CHUANG TZU

The Joy of Fishes

Interpreted by Thomas Merton



Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu
Were crossing Hao river
By the dam.

Chuang said:
"See how free
The Fishes leap and dart:
That is their happiness."

Hui replied:
"Since you are not a fish
How do you know
What makes fishes happy?"

Chuang said:
“Since you are not I
How can you possibly know
That I do not know
What makes fishes happy?”

Hui argued:
“If I, not being you,
Cannot know what you know
It follows that you
Not being a fish
Cannot know what they know.”

Chuang said:
“Wait a minute!
Let us get back
To the original question.
What you asked me was
*‘How do you know
What makes fishes happy?’*
From the terms of your question
You evidently know I know
What makes fishes happy.

“I know the joy of fishes
In the river
Through my own joy, as I go walking
Along the same river.”

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“Fishes”: a drawing by Thomas Merton,
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II. Merton's Imitation of Chuang Tzu in His Poetry

In “A Note to the Reader,” Merton writes very frankly: “Since I know only a few Chinese characters, I obviously am not a translator. These ‘readings’ are then not attempts at faithful reproduction but ventures in personal and spiritual interpretation . . . I believe that a certain type of reader will enjoy my intuitive approach to a thinker who is subtle, funny, provocative, and not easy to get at.”⁷

In my humble opinion, the great thinkers are born to this world but do not belong to this world. So is Chuang Tzu and so is Thomas Merton. Both of them are “subtle, funny, provocative, and not easy to get at.” For Chuang Tzu, as reported and interpreted by Merton, “to lose one’s life is to save it. . . . In any event, the ‘way’ of Chuang Tzu is mysterious because it is so simple that it can get along without being a way at all. Least of all it is a ‘way out.’ Chuang Tzu would have agreed with St. John of the Cross, that you leave all ways and, in some sense, get lost.”⁸

For Thomas Merton, as reported and interpreted by Edward Rice, one of Merton’s close friends, “The possibility of death was not absent from his mind. We spoke of this before he set out — first jokingly, then seriously. He was ready for it. He even saw a certain fittingness in dying over there amidst those Asian monks who symbolized for him man’s ancient and perennial desire for the deep things of God At the Bangkok meeting, where he delivered a talk entitled ‘Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,’ the day of his death . . . he also made some strong statements about celibacy He was interested, he said, in the Buddhist custom of having married monks. (He once remarked to me that ‘If I ever get married, it would be to an Indian woman.’)”⁹

It is my belief that, even if Merton had married an Indian woman, he would have imitated the way of Chuang Tzu and treated his wife in a similar attitude of non-attachment. Let us recall the famous and interesting story about the death of Chuang Tzu’s wife. When Chuang Tzu’s wife died, Hui Tzu went to condole with him and found him squatted on the ground, drumming on the basin, and singing. Hui Tzu felt that Chuang Tzu was

behaving very strangely. After giving an eloquent philosophical and metaphysical explanation of his “justified” behavior to Hui Tzu, the great Taoist philosopher said: “If I were to fall sobbing and going on to wail for her, I should think that I did not understand what was appointed for all. I, therefore, restrained myself.”¹⁰ As poets, both Chuang Tzu and Merton exposed their feelings and attachments to a certain extent; however, as Taoists thinkers, they surely restrained themselves with both reason and non-attachments.

III. Merton's Imitation of Chuang Tzu in His Spiritual Life

Once John Howard Griffin made the comment on Merton's spiritual life that he “was a mystic and poet, with an ability to see many facets of the same object and to combine within himself seeming opposites. He was simultaneously a man of profound discipline and astonishing freedom; a man who expressed himself eloquently concerning the spiritual life but who kept his own secret prayer private . . . a man whose interior life was not for display and who was not going to act out anyone else's version of what a contemplative should be.”¹¹

In the strictly religious sense Thomas Merton might have been more influenced by Zen Buddhism; in the broadly spiritual sense, however, I do believe, he was much more influenced by Taoism, in general, and by Chuang Tzu, in particular. According to my own impression, before Vatican II Merton was very orthodox in his religious writings; however, after he had met with D. T. Suzuki of Japan and C. H. John Wu of China, Merton became much more liberal in his religious thinking and also in his own spiritual life.



Dr. Cyrus Lee lectures to the Chinese Senators
on “Thomas Merton and Han Shan Tzu”
Taipei, Taiwan, February 1982

In July of 1966, Merton wrote a long “Introduction” to John Wu’s new book, *The Golden Age of Zen*. He stated at the end of his introduction: “Zen has much to teach to the West . . . It is quite possible for Zen to be adapted and used to clear the air of ascetic irrelevancies and help us to regain a healthy natural balance in our understanding of the spiritual life.”¹²

In dealing with Zen Buddhism, Merton was certainly and clearly aware that the Zen Masters had been very much influenced by the Taoist thinkers, particularly by Chuang Tzu. After reading the works of Chuang Tzu and Merton, we find that these two monks of ancient and modern, in time, and Chinese and American by nationality, are really akin. Both of them are the “true men,” as so well described by Chuang Tzu and so spiritually translated by Merton: “What is meant by a ‘True Man?’/The true men of old/were not afraid/when they stood alone in their views . . . The true men of old/slept without dreams/woke without worries . . . The true men of old/knew no lust for life/no dread of death . . . They had no mind to fight Tao/They did not try/by their own contriving/To help Tao along/These are the ones we call True Men.”¹³

A Final Remark

During his life time, I never met Thomas Merton. One may naturally and logically ask, “How do you know then that Merton had really imitated Chuang Tzu?” Well, let me quote the dialogue between Hui Tzu and Chuang Tzu about the joy of fishes. I borrow the old master’s answer: “I know the joy of fishes in the river, through my own joy, as I go walking, along the same river.”¹⁴ I am sure that you understand what I mean, but if you don’t, then let us take a walk along the river of Gethsemani.

Reading Father Merton’s The Way of Chuang Tzu

By John Chin Hsung Wu

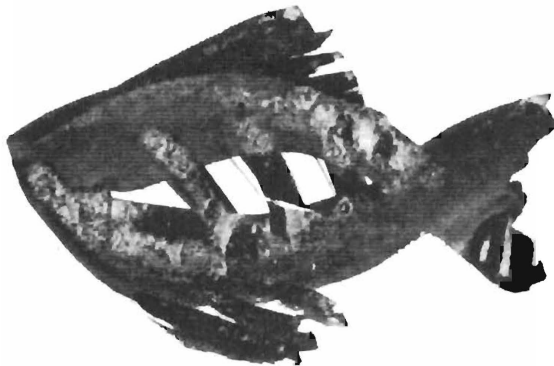
Your pen has the magical power of portraying the spirit, —
A testimony to your Heaven-bred genius!
From the fountain of your own mind have sprung
The profound insights of Lao and Chuang!

At midnight, all alone, I am still wrapped up
In enjoying your new version, so simple and natural,
That I feel as though I were having
A tete-a-tete with Chuang Tzu incarnate!

Dr. John Chin Hsung Wu
December 1965

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