

# TEACHING THOMAS MERTON IN CHINA

by **Cyrus Lee**

## Introduction

In mid-May 1987, I received a touching letter from a former student, Kuo-mei Lee, written in China where I had taught for one semester in the fall of 1986. Her letter said:

Dear Professor Lee,

How are you? I've been thinking of you.

When I feel bad, I like to find someone to talk with. But these days there is no one with whom I can really talk, or whom I can really trust. This is why I am writing to you, my favorite teacher, hoping you will listen to me. I am thinking much of God at this moment.

You taught us to abandon our ignorance, to differentiate between superstition and genuine religious experience, and to investigate the existence of supreme power. It was too bad that you returned to America after so short a time before we cleared up many of our questions.

Originally, I wanted to see you off, but, then, I thought, I was only a "small potato" and I should not go, so I didn't. I remember it was a Sunday morning. I decided not to go and went to our dining hall where I fainted and fell to the floor. I told myself later: "It might well be God's punishment for not saying farewell to my teacher."

My parents were divorced because of political differences when I was still quite young. I have lived with my mother since then so I have only a vague memory of my father. I remember that, in your last class, you quoted an ancient Chinese saying: "Yijih wei Shih, Chungsheng wei Fu." [A teacher for a day, a father forever.] I was so moved when I heard your farewell message that I cried, my tears running all down my face.

Professor Lee, I would like to be your student forever and to follow your teachings forever, but I know that is pure illusion on my part. Perhaps, though, your teaching will help me to finish my life's journey.

When will you come back to see us again? I sincerely hope there is a chance that you will return.

Your student,

Kuo-mei Lee

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□ **Cyrus Lee** is Senior Professor of Psychology at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. He has translated several Merton works into Chinese, most notably his "A Study of Chuang Tzu," and is the author of "Life, Death and Reincarnation: a Comparative Study of Hanshan Tzu and Thomas Merton," *Chinese Culture* 22:4 (December 1981); "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism," *Chinese Culture* 13:1 (March 1972); and "Thomas Merton's Imitation of Chuang Tzu," *Merton Seasonal* 8:1 (Winter-Spring 1983).

After reading this letter, one might think that I had been teaching religion or philosophy in China. No, not at all. What I taught, actually, was “Thomas Merton.” Let me tell you the story in three different sections: I. Why Did I Teach Merton in China?; II. How Did I Teach Merton?; and III. After I Taught Merton, So What?

## I. Why Did I Teach Merton in China?

I knew that Thomas Merton had been interested in China and Chinese culture before his death in 1968, but I did not know whether the Chinese would be interested in Merton and his writings in the 1980s.

Two years ago, at the 4th International Conference on Chinese Philosophy held at the State University of New York-Stoney Brook, I delivered a paper entitled “The Joy of Fish, of Chuang Tzu, of Thomas Merton and of Me: A Transpersonal Analysis.” Some of the Chinese participants were impressed by the paper and asked me how they could learn more about, as they put it, “this Marxist monk.” Thanks to the help and hospitality of Dr. Robert E. Daggy, Director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center, and Brother Patrick Hart, former secretary to Merton, I successfully arranged a short visit for Professors Tang Yi-jie and Jin Chun-fung of Peking University to the Merton Center and the Abbey of Gethsemani. After this pleasant and impressive trip, both professors became interested in Merton and his writings. Since neither read English well, they encouraged me to write about Merton in Chinese or to translate some of his works into Chinese, or, better still they felt, to teach Merton to the Chinese in China.

I was on sabbatical leave in 1986. Several Chinese academic friends urged me to spend that time in China. Having been away from my motherland for more than 35 years, I happily accepted the offer. During the summer I lectured at six different Chinese universities: two in Peking, two in Hunan, and two in Hubei. My lectures concentrated on comparative culture in general, and philosophy and psychology in particular. However, I found the most attractive subjects to the



**DR. CYRUS LEE**

With a Group of Graduate Students after Lecturing on Thomas Merton  
Wuhan, China, 1986

[Dr. Lee is seated at center with tie]

Chinese were English translations in general and Merton's translations of Chuang Tzu in particular. Some teachers of English were so excited by works in translation that they petitioned their department chairmen to have me teach a course in American Literature. I had never taught such a course at the college level so I told them honestly that I was not qualified to do so. When they said it would satisfy them if I simply agreed to try, I thought it might be a good chance for me (and for them) to learn so, finally, I agreed.

## II. How Did I Teach Thomas Merton?

I accepted an offer to teach from the Central China University of Sciences and Technology in the city of Wuhan. This well-known university has been considered a Chinese M. I. T. by some American academicians. I was quite impressed by the beautiful campus, so well designed and so well cared for. The Foreign Language Department is rather new but also rather large with more than one hundred staff members and four concentrations of study.

After several meetings with departmental officials, I was asked to teach two courses, namely, "Educational Psychology" and "Contemporary American Literature." Though I could have taught the courses in Chinese, the administration insisted that I teach them in English. For the psychology class I used an American text which most of the students found very difficult. For the literature class they asked me to use a recently published anthology which I found unsatisfactory and insufficient both in content and arrangement. As a compromise, I used the text but, in addition, I also used my own syllabus and supplementary readings, including four works by Thomas Merton.

I realized that Thomas Merton is not universally known even in the United States so, naturally, I did not expect my Chinese students immediately to recognize and appreciate him and his works. I therefore designed my presentation of him and his works in a progressive and comparative way.

First, I presented more famous American writers, such as Henry James, Jack London, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. Then I selected several essays from *A Thomas Merton Reader* and had them mimeographed and distributed to the students. After the students had read all the materials, I discussed with them the similarities and differences among the authors in background, writing skills, and philosophies of life. In our text the first short story was Henry James's "The Pace." In it, the author describes subtly and sarcastically a lady's death and the hypocrisies of her relatives. I contrasted this with Merton's "In the Face of Death," where the author describes his own imaginative and impressionistic feelings about death. I indicated to the students the ways in which the two American writers approached the subject differently.

Many, the Chinese especially, feel that Jack London was a pro-communistic writer. The Chinese editor of our text seemed particularly conscious of that and he had selected London's story "The Mexican" for its apparent revolutionary thrust. To show a different view of Communism, I selected Merton's last lecture, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives." Since the contrast was so sharp and the comparison so telling, one student said: "It's obvious that, in constructing his story, London was deeply influenced by the Biblical story of David and Goliath." Another student said: "I think London's grasp of Marxist ideology was rather shallow and shaky, whereas Merton's seems to be more profound and realistic."

Ernest Hemingway is well known among Chinese teachers and students. Some of his works, including *The Old Man and The Sea*, have been translated and published in China. In our text, however, the editor chose "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." In it, it is commonly believed, Hemingway describes, not only the tragic death of an old man, but also predicts his own death.

I selected two Merton poems to present with the Hemingway story: "For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action" and "An Elegy for Ernest Hemingway." After reciting these poems in the original English, I asked some of the students to read their own translations into classic Chinese. I remember vividly one young man named Wu Xinge who proudly recited his translation and then sharply criticized mine. I was happily surprised, moved, and pleased.

### III. After I Did It, So What?

When I came back from my sabbatical leave, my friends and colleagues asked me about the teaching experience in China. I generally said to them: "It was fabulous and fantastic!" In my official report, I described the experience thusly:

There are two fruitful experiences that I want to mention here in particular. First of all, the Chinese students were not familiar with our teaching methods. At the beginning of the semester they were reluctant to accept my way of teaching, but by and by, they became more open to me, and at the end of the semester, they appreciated my methodology completely. The other experience was that in my Contemporary American Literature class, though I never taught them any "religion" or "American democracy," yet when I was asked questions about them, I simply told them what I knew and understood of them, as if I were teaching in an American classroom. The Chinese students liked this attitude and thus they kept asking me more and more questions.

Concerning the impact of my teaching Thomas Merton in China, I found some unusual results. In order to help a local private university to explore possibilities for exchange programs with some Chinese universities, I went to China again at the end of May 1987. When I visited Wuhan, several of my former students came to see me for an informal chat. Our conversation went like this:

*Student:* Professor Lee, it's really good to see you here again. But why didn't you tell us in advance so that we could have arranged a party for you?

*Teacher:* It was decided in such a hurry that I didn't have time to write to you. Anyway, I am here now and you are here too.

*Student:* We miss you a lot. You know, your way of teaching was very different from our other teachers. You taught us how to think and you taught us how to live.

*Teacher:* I taught you to be yourselves. That's all.

*Student:* That's not easy to do. But now, at least, I dare to be myself which I did not dare to do before.

*Teacher:* By the way, have you read Thomas Merton lately? I'll tell you some good news: someone has asked me to write on teaching Merton in China.

*Student:* About your naughty students too?

*Teacher:* Yes, particularly you, Lee Kuo-mei. Do you really think that you have learned something from me and from Merton?

*Student:* Of course, from both you and Merton.

*Teacher:* Can you be more specific?

*Student:* We think you made a revolution among us and within us.

*Teacher:* *Revolution?* What do you mean? Be very carefull!



*Student:* Of course, in the good sense. For example, in our other classes we dared not ask any questions, but in your class you *made* us ask questions.

*Teacher:* That's quite common in the United States. How can you consider that "revolutionary?"

*Student:* Listen, Dr. Lee, let me tell you of another revolutionary change that has been taking place among us girls. Before you came to our campus, the boys used to date me quite often, because I was a "sweet docile girl." But now I stand up for myself and the boys don't like me to be that way.

*Teacher:* Then, perhaps your parents and your teachers hate to see such changes too.

*Student:* So what? We would like you to teach us more!

*Teacher:* I have told you that I am not a professor of English or American literature. My specialization is psychology. If you want to learn more about American literature, I suggest you come to the United States for your advanced degree or that you read more works. And I urge you to read more Thomas Merton. You know he wrote more than 40 books. If you come to America, be sure to come to see me at Edinboro University. Now, let us have "a wild party" and a long chat . . .

Some twenty years ago, one of John Dewey's disciples edited a book entitled *John Dewey on Education*. Jerome Bruner contributed the last article, which was entitled "After John Dewey, What?" May I now ask a similar question after my experience teaching in China: "After Thomas Merton, What?"

Here is only a hint of the answer. As a result of my last trip to China, one of the prestigious universities of China has agreed to sponsor a Sino-American conference (and dialogue) on "Chinese Humanism and Western Spirituality." It is up to us in the West now. Merton died in Thailand without ever visiting China. Shall we carry his message to the Chinese?



"My happy audience in Hunan, 1986."

--- Dr. Cyrus Lee