

# “I SPEAK AS YOUR OWN SELF”

Review of

Thomas Merton

*CHI CHUNG SHAN: MU-DUEN TZE CHUAN*

Chinese Abridged Version of *The Seven Storey Mountain*

Translated into Chinese by Lian Wei-teh [i.e. Peter Leung]

Taipei, Taiwan: Kuang Chi Press, 1983

254 pages      Paperback

Reviewed by **Cyrus Lee**

Most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self.

Thomas Merton, Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*

Thomas Merton wrote the statement above some twenty-five years ago. Here — and now — I am writing this review of the Chinese edition of the same book, writing, I hope, in the same spirit as Merton. *Chi Chung Shan*, the Chinese title for *The Seven Storey Mountain*, has been translated by Peter Leung (whose Chinese name is Liang Wei-teh) of Hong Kong and published by Kuang Chi Press in Taiwan. It is not a complete translation, and the translator gives us a kind of explanation of the reasons for abridgement in his postscript:

The original text has more than four hundred pages. It is not lacking in interest and humor and even in some theological as well as philosophical insights. However, due to limited space and the difficulty of some of the philosophical ideas for the general reader, I have omitted many passages with regret, hoping that at some later day I would have opportunity to complete the whole work. (p. 253)

It is not easy to write a successful autobiography. According to Leung, Thomas Merton did it very well because: “Being a poet, a novelist, a professor, a literary critic, a thinker, and a monk, Merton describes his own life with such an elegant style, so that we can even feel his presence” (p. 252). What Leung says about Merton may be true of the autobiography in English which has sold so well through the years. But the Chinese translation, now available for some five years, still has most of the copies of the original printing of three thousand unsold. I believe the reason is the translation, a similar situation to that of the translations into other Eastern languages: the Japanese and Korean editions.

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There is no lack of interest in Merton. For example, Merton published his “interpretations” of Chuang Tzu in 1965 under the title *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. It was a most creative version and even Chinese readers were much interested in it. A pirated edition was published in Taiwan which did very well. Merton could neither speak nor read Chinese, as we know, but he successfully “interpreted” Chuang Tzu’s most difficult work. Dr. John C. H. Wu, a close friend of Merton’s, wrote to him about *The Way of Chuang Tzu*: “You have taken him by the forelocks not by the tail. I swear that I am not flattering when I say that this is exactly what Chuang Tzu would write had he learned English” (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 623).

I know with certainty that Leung has been educated in both Chinese and English. In fact, he has lived in the United States for several years. Had he imitated Merton’s example — as “a poet, a novelist, a professor, a literary critic” — he might have produced a better translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Unfortunately, he translated Merton literally so that Chinese readers are unable to follow Merton’s thought clearly and cannot appreciate his literary elegance. As an example, Merton wrote the touching and beautiful poem, “For My Brother,” with warmth and love and feeling. Yet Leung chose to translate it into the not yet accepted and somewhat stilted “modern style” of Chinese poetry (which allows perhaps for less poetic license and initiative) rather than into the more lyrical classic style in which Western nuances would more likely be retained. Any translation is but an interpretation and re-creation of the original. I can only hope that Leung will serve Merton better when, and if, he translates the complete work.

Forty years have passed since *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in English. As Merton said in his preface to the Japanese edition, he would have written the book differently had he attempted it later. Two ways in which he would have made it different were: 1) he would have emphasized less the “Roman Catholic” mentality (in the Japanese preface he used “Christian” instead of “Catholic”); and 2) he would have included more Oriental — Taoist as well as Buddhist — expressions (“I too must be no-thing,” “I have to be no-one,” etc.).

As a writer, Thomas Merton sought to speak to his readers. Leung’s translation falters because he has not captured Merton and *Chi Chung Shan* ultimately fails to speak to the reader at all.



Jacket Cover for  
*Chi Chung Shan*