

4-2016

Beyond the Dusty World: Daoism and the Epistolary Dialectics of Thomas Merton and John Wu

Anthony E. Clark

Whitworth University, aclark@whitworth.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Intellectual History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, Anthony E. , "Beyond the Dusty World: Daoism and the Epistolary Dialectics of Thomas Merton and John Wu" Whitworth University (2016). *History Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 56.

<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty/56>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

**CATHOLICISM AND EAST-WEST DIALOGUE:
A SYMPOSIUM IN MEMORY OF SETON HALL UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR
JOHN CHING-HSIUNG WU**

Paper Title: “Beyond the Dusty World: Daoism and the Epistolary Dialectics of Thomas Merton and John Wu”

Presenter: Anthony E. Clark
Edward B. Lindaman Endowed Chair (Whitworth University)

Date/Time of Paper: Friday, 22 April 2016 (9:30-11:30 am)

Location: Seton Hall University (Beck Rooms, 1st Floor, Walsh Library)

Abstract:

In 1961, two great thinkers and spiritual masters inaugurated an epistolary exchange that transpired into a rich dialectic between East and West. Professor John H. Wu (Wu Jingxiong 吳經熊 1899-1986) and Father Thomas Louis Merton, OCSO, (1915-1968) largely centered their interchange upon the topic of the Dao 道, or “Way,” as it was articulated in the Daoist tradition in China’s Zhou (1045-221 BC) and Han (206 BC-AD 220) eras. With due respect to the abiding intellects and spiritual insight of these two interlocutors, this paper considers the possible disparities between what Wu and Merton understood to be the “Dao” of China’s early philosophical period and the “Dao” actually discussed in the texts of the Daoist progenitors, Laozi 老子 (figurative person) and Zhuangzi 莊子 (Also Zhuang Zhou 莊周 ca. 369-ca. 286 BC). When Wu compares the Dao of Laozi and Zhuangzi to the “Logos of God” (Wu to Merton, 20 March 1961), is this “Dao” the same “Dao” envisaged in the opening line of the *Daodejing* 《道德經》, in which it is described as, “*Dao ke Dao feichang Dao; ming ke ming feichang ming* 道可道非常道。名可名非常名”? The primary concern of this paper, then, is to ask whether Wu and Merton’s “Way” is indeed, when placed under scholarly scrutiny, similar to the “Way” of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and furthermore, is the Way of Laozi and Zhuangzi, in the end, comparable to the Logos, who is the divine Christ of Christianity?

Paper:

Sometime in 1937, John Wu (Wu Jingxiong 吳經熊 1899-1986) visited a small Carmelite monastery at Chongqing, in Sichuan province, to find a few moments of respite and spiritual contemplation. One of the sisters there, Mère Élizabeth, OCD, (née Marie Roussel, 1903-1996) remembered his “hesitant French,” but also recalled a remarkable encounter the sisters had with Wu after Mass. In her memoir she writes: “. . . the Holy Sacrifice was just coming to a close when there echoed the air raid alarm, long and lugubrious like a death knell.”¹ The area was being attacked by Japanese planes, and Wu was ushered into the private enclosure of the nuns for safety. Once in their small bomb shelter, the sisters asked Doctor Wu about his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and he replied: “It was Confucius who brought me to Christianity, and Thérèse of the Child Jesus to Catholicism.”² John Wu’s understanding of Confucius helped him better appreciate Christianity, and he became a Methodist; his encounter with St. Thérèse of Lisieux (né Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin, 1873-1897) helped usher his soul into the Catholic Church.³ John Wu was not the only Chinese intellectual to recognize how the thought of Confucius resonates with the teachings of Christianity; the Chinese diplomat who later became a Benedictine abbot in Bruges, Belgium, Dom Pierre-Célestin Lu Zhengxiang, OSB, (1871-1949) wrote in his memoir: “I am a Confucianist because that moral philosophy . . . profoundly penetrates the nature of man and traces clearly his line of conduct towards his Creator.”⁴

Friendships: Thomas Merton, John Wu, and the Beginning of the Dialectic

That Confucius and Christ are well-matched is quite apparent to those who have studied the Confucian classics, but when John Wu and Thomas Merton, OCSO, (1915-1968)

began their seven-year epistolary exchange in 1961, Merton asked Wu to help him understand the *Daoist* writings of Zhuangzi (莊子, also Zhuang Zhou 莊周, ca. 369- ca. 286 BC). It did not take long, however, before they discovered their mutual interest in another topic, Chan (禪), or Zen, *Buddhism*. Our question is, then, how are scholars now, fifty years later, to assess their Christian interest in the Lao-Zhuang 老莊 (Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子) strand of Daoist philosophy? That Confucianism harmonizes well with the Catholic faith is not difficult to recognize, but where did Wu and Merton stand in their conviction that Daoism and Buddhism likewise compliment each other? I am especially interested in how Wu and Merton understood the implications and applications of the Daoist “Way,” or Dao, 道 in their dialectical exchange of letters. As a university professor trained in classical Sinology I view the greatest compliment an intellectual can pay to the ideas and publications of an important thinker is engagement and analysis. So, my paper today is intended to be more of a compliment than a criticism, and my remarks are intended to add to the important discussion that Wu and Merton inaugurated fifty-five years ago.

By way of an opening salvo, let’s begin with an examination of what is implied in the *Daodejing* 《道德經》 by the term, Dao, and how this early Chinese text’s usage of the term compares to the usage employed by Merton and Wu. In Thomas Merton’s first letter to John Wu, in which he seeks Wu’s assistance in preparing a book on the writings of Zhuangzi, the Trappist expresses his desire to immerse himself in “the mysticism of the early Taoists.”⁵ This statement entreats us who have read the early Daoist texts in Chinese to ponder what Merton means by Daoist mysticism, and even what he means by this mysticism as a Christian. The theologian Louis Bouyer (1913-2004) describes mysticism as “God’s uniting himself directly with us,”⁶ and Heribert Fischer, who provided the entry on mysticism in

Karl Rahner's (1904-1984) *Encyclopedia of Theology*, suggests that it is "the experience of uncreated grace as revelation and self-communication of the triune God."⁷ In other words, Mysticism is the experience of unsolicited union with the Triune God. In John Wu's lengthy response to Merton's first letter, Wu appears to confirm Merton's inclination that philosophical Daoism, or the early disputations on the Way expressed in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, is compatible with the Christian understanding of mysticism. Wu wrote, "Only when we are united with the Word incarnate can we be full-fledged Confucianists and thoroughgoing Taoists at the same time."⁸ Merton sees in early Daoism an alternative model for Christian mysticism and Wu submits that only in being united with God can one be a "thoroughgoing Taoist." And even more provocative is Wu's suggestion that the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi were, "pointing at . . . [t]he *Logos* of God who enlightens everyone coming into this world."⁹ I'll consider these points in sequence after a brief excursus regarding what the Dao meant to the "early Taoists" who Merton refers to.

Perhaps the most prominent definition of the Dao in early Chinese texts derives from the first line of the most-famous version of the *Daodejing*, the Wangbi (王弼, AD 226-249) edition – a previous recension has the order reversed, placing the *De* 德 section before the *Dao* 道 section.¹⁰ The text reads: "*Dao ke Dao feichang Dao – ming ke ming feichang ming* 道可道非常道。名可名非常名."¹¹ John Wu translates this passage as: "Tao that can be talked about, but not the eternal Tao."¹² Wu indulges here what almost all experienced translators disparage as bad translation; he dodges the question of what the Dao is by refusing to translate it. He uses neither "Way" to render the character, which is the most-common translation, nor does he attempt an explanation of its implication. Wu simply prefers to leave the term ambiguous, perhaps because the text itself is asserting the

ineffability of the term. But this is avoidance, and does not help the English reader arrive at even the slightest apprehension of what the author is getting at.

The third-century BC philosopher, Han Feizi 韓非子 (d. 233 BC), explains the Dao in this way: “Dao zhe, wanwu zhi suo ran ye 道者萬物之所然也,” or “The Dao is the thusness of all things.”¹³ Said another way, the Dao is defined as the existential reality, or state, of all that exists; it is the pattern and meaning of everything. Embedded in the grammar of this opening line of the *Daodejing* is an intimation of its larger meaning. The first Dao in the sentence is nominal – it is a noun, “the Way” – and the second appearance is verbal – it is the action of Way-ing. I would thus translate this line as Angus Graham rendered it in his great work, *The Disputers of the Tao*: “The Way that can be ‘Way’-ed is not the constant Way.”¹⁴ Implied in this assertion is that the Dao, or Way, includes all dualities, all apparent opposites, in a unified monad; all dyads are in fact only a unified monad. In other words, the Dao encompasses all binaries; if we use the provisional term, “truth,” to translate the Dao, then this “truth” would comprise of both truth and non-truth, since one cannot exist without the other. The Dao would thus contain both “good” and “bad” since one cannot endure without its opposite. The Dao, then, has less to do with a mystical encounter with the Triune God as it is a functional term to describe the ontological state of all being . . . or non-being. It is ineffable because no term can accurately define what defies definition; the Dao is meta-linguistic. This is perhaps what the *Daodejing* is insisting when it states that, “*Dao chang wu ming* 道常無名,” or “The eternal Way has no name.”¹⁵ John Wu expressed his understanding of this idea when he corrected Merton’s use of “philosophic monism,” recommending the more accurate term “non-dualism.”¹⁶ In any case, the early Daoist writers who used the term Dao to express non-dualism were chasms away from any notion of

communing with God; the expression was, I suggest, merely a provisional term to help readers better apprehend Daoist ontology.

What is in my view even more intriguing than Merton's sense that early Daoism involves some form of mysticism is Wu's suggestion that the Daoist "Way" may be used as an analogue for the Logos, which appears in the gospel of St. John. The Gospel's famous assertion states simply that, "In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*]." ¹⁷ The Greek usage of this term early on was related to mathematics, and by the authorship of the gospel it had acquired a more philosophical implication. As B. K. Gamel has suggested, "Since logos means an account (explanation) of something, some philosophers began to refer to the explanation for order and balance in the universe as a cosmic logos. According to these philosophers, humans can explain things through language because they share in this cosmic logos or rationality." ¹⁸ Logos is the illustrative principle of the cosmos, or all being. This is indeed quite close to what is intimated in the Daoist writers' meaning of the Dao. The first Western philosopher to apply a metaphysical meaning to the Greek word, Logos (Λόγος), was Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 540-480 BC), a meaning that was carried in to the canonical writings of the first Christians. Reginald E. Allen succinctly summarized Heraclitus' use of Logos:

[Logos] is the first principle of knowledge: understanding of the world involves understanding of the structure or pattern of the world, a pattern concealed from the eyes of ordinary men. The Logos is also the first principle of existence, that unity of the world process which sustains it as a process. This unity lies beneath the surface, for it is a unity of diverse and conflicting opposites, in whose strife the Logos

maintains a continual balance. . . . The Logos maintains the equilibrium of the universe at every moment.¹⁹

Allen's description of Heraclitus' Logos accurately represents the early Daoist explanation of the Dao, especially his remark that the Logos can be viewed as "a unity of diverse and conflicting opposites."

Still, the early Daoist usage of the character Dao was not intended to describe the nature of God, but was rather hoped to better denote the nature of reality and to disengage the reader from her or his impulse to define reality in dichotomies. This is perhaps why the *Daodejing* asserts: "*Ren fa di, di fa tian, tian fa Dao, Dao fa ziran* 人法地。地法天。天法道。道法自然," or "Humans are modeled from earth, earth is modeled from heaven, heaven is modelled from the Dao, and the Dao is modelled from what is self-so."²⁰ Put more simply, the Dao is not modelled upon anything other than itself, which is a self-derived self without opposites or origins. I don't wish to be overly pedantic, or weary you with plodding philological and exegetical digressions, but it is important to note that whereas the Daoist Dao, or Way, includes both aspects of all dichotomies in a unified monad, the God of the bible is ineffable but not non-dualistic. In Sacred Scripture God is described as complete goodness, complete perfection, and complete justice; he is not good *and* bad, perfect *and* flawed, or just *and* unjust.²¹

The complications related to adopting the term, Dao, as an analogue to the Greek word, Logos, has led to a conscious reconsideration of how Logos is rendered by Chinese bible translators today. The first complete Roman Catholic translation of the bible, the so-called Studium Biblicum Version (思高本) accomplished by the Italian Franciscan scholar,

Gabriele Allegra, OFM, (1907-1976) translates the opening of John's gospel as, "*Yuanshi zhi chu jiu you Dao* 元始之初就有‘道’," or "At the origin of the beginning there was the 'Dao'."²² And the character Dao, or Way, is cautiously placed in quotation marks in most current editions of the Studium Biblicum Version, highlighting the ambiguous and borrowed nature of the term. Recognizing the various problems with translating the Logos as "Dao," modern Chinese translators have translated Logos in an entirely different manner: "*Zai qichu yi you Shengyan* 在起初已有聖言," or "In the beginning was already the Divine Word."²³ The term "Dao" – "Way" – and "Shengyan" – "Divine Word" – are quite different, and this new translation carefully distances the Christian understanding of Logos from the Daoist understanding of the Dao. Current Chinese scholars are reassessing previous attempts under the direction of foreign missionaries to adopt, or arrogate, extant Chinese religious and philosophical terms into the Christian lexicon. There is a suspicion that Christians, especially Christians from the West, sought confirmation of their own Christian ideas within China's existing traditions, and thus somewhat haphazardly employed terms, such as the Dao, into their own vocabulary without first apprehending the nuances already present in the terms they borrowed.

The Eastern Orthodox writer, Hieromonk Damascene (Née John Christensen, b. 1961), who wrote an insightful book comparing the Dao of Daoism to the Logos of Christianity, shares Wu and Merton's admiration for the *Daodejing*. He argues that, "while Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* represents the highest that a person can know through intuition, St. John's Gospel represents the highest that a person can know through revelation, that is, through God making Himself known and experienced in the most tangible way."²⁴ Like Wu and Merton, Hieromonk Damascene believes that the Dao can function as a substitute for

the Christian Logos, but he limits the insights of the early Chinese Daoists to human intuition; and nowhere does he suggest that Daoism contributes to or facilitates what Christians understand to be mysticism. The traditional Chinese figure, Laozi, was, according to this Orthodox view, less of an example of mysticism than, as Hieromonk Damascene puts it, “a pre-Christian witness of Christ the Logos.”²⁵

One other aspect of the *Daodejing* that must be addressed is its patent political message, which is interwoven almost furtively throughout the text; in fact, the earliest version of the text we know of, the Guodian recension, was discovered in the tomb of the private tutor of the heir-apparent of Chu.²⁶ The inherent political significance of the *Daodejing* can be seen in several passages, including the statement that, “*Shiyi shengren zhi zhi, xu qi xin, shi qi fu, ruo qi zhi, qiang qi gu; chang shi min wu zhi wu yu, shi fu zhi zhe bug an wei ye* 是以聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨；常使民無知無欲，是夫智者不敢為也，” or “The rule of a sagely man empties their minds, fills their stomachs, weakens their will, and strengthens their bodies; and by doing so he causes the people to be always stupid and without desires, so he can, as a wise [ruler, rule] without effort.”²⁷ In other words, stupid and well-fed people are easy pawns in the art of skillful governance; this is a strong and persistent message in the ancient Daoist classic. This is not the Dao underscored in the writings of Wu and Merton, but is a very pragmatic Dao expressed in the *Daodejing*. One who carefully reads the text wonders if, in the end, the entire work is foremost a political strategy for keeping subjects dumb and manageable, that the Daoism of the *Daodejing* is actually less the “mystical” philosophy admired by Wu and Merton than a guide for how to retain political supremacy. But what of their discussion on the Dao of Zhuangzi?

Beyond the Dusty World: Zhuangzi, Zen, and the Departure from the World

In one of Merton's letters to Wu he praises Zhuangzi as, "one of the *great* wise men," and adds the provocative assertion that, "The wisdom of Chuang Tzu demands the resurrection, for the resurrection goes beyond all moralities and moral theories, it is a totally new life in the spirit."²⁸ Again, is this idea even close to what Zhuangzi intended in his essays on how to live according to the Dao? Sadly, John Wu's response to this letter drifts away from this point, and their future letters increasingly touch upon Buddhism and the more mundane matters of securing publishers for their works and arranging for meetings with like-minded intellectuals. In the end, the musings on the Way found in the epistolary exchange between John Wu and Thomas Merton leave us with more questions than answers, which is perhaps precisely the kind of mysticism that both men would have hoped future readers of their writings would dwell upon.

I have challenged how, and perhaps even why, Professor John Wu and Father Thomas Merton have fastened upon the Daoist idea of "the Way," but I do so only because these two Christian men have bequeathed to us a legacy of rigorous and spiritually discerning interrogations into the graspings of the mind toward better understanding the meaning of human existence. Scholars today can wander freely through the room of East-West comparison and dialogue only because the likes of Wu and Merton have opened the door for us. In the conclusion of Wu's memoir, *Beyond East and West*, he quotes from the collected poetry of the Daoist scholar, Lu Yun 陸雲 (262-303), who wrote:

Beyond the dusty world,
I enjoy solitude and peace.
I shut my door,

I close my window.

Harmony is my Spring,

Purity my Autumn.

Thus I embody the rhythms of life,

And my cottage becomes a Universe.²⁹

In Chinese traditional writings, especially Daoist and Buddhist, “dust” is a euphemism for the polluting and harmful trap of the world. Perhaps more than anything else, John Wu and Thomas Merton turned toward the Dao as a possible Way to move “beyond the dusty world,” and find an alternative place, one better equipped to provide the “solitude and peace” of the God of Christianity.

Notes:

¹ Mère Élizabeth (Marie Roussel), OCD, *Leaving for, Living in, & Farewell to China: The Life Experiences of a Carmelite Nun, Mère Élizabeth* (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2010), 93.

² Mère Élizabeth, *Leaving for, Living in, & Farewell to China*, 94.

³ For John Wu's account of his conversion see his memoir, John C. H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951). Also see his work, *The Interior Carmel: The Threelfold Way of Love* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953).

⁴ Pierre-Célestin Lou Tseng-tsiang, *Ways of Confucius and Christ*, transl. Michael Derrick (London: Burns & Oats, 1948), 64.

⁵ Thomas Merton to John Wu, 14 March 1961, in Crisóbal Serrán-Pagán, Ed., *Merton & the Tao: Dialogues with John Wu and the Ancient Sages* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013), 174.

⁶ Louis Bouyer, *Dictionary of Theology*, Trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (Tournai, Belgium: Desclé2, 1965), 316.

⁷ Heribert Fischer, "Mysticism," in Karl Rahner, SJ, Ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 1004.

⁸ John Wu to Thomas Merton, 20 March 1961, in Serrán-Pagán, *Merton & the Tao*, 180.

⁹ John Wu to Thomas Merton, 20 March 1961, in Serrán-Pagán, *Merton & the Tao*, 178.

¹⁰ This is the so-called Mawangdui Silk Edition, 馬王堆帛書 which dates to approximately 168 BC. An even earlier version is the Guodian Edition, 郭店 which dates before 300 BC.

The versions used by Thomas Merton and John Wu was the much later version, which includes the organization – first *Dao* 道 and the *De* 德 sections – and commentary of Wang Bi.

¹¹ *Laozi yizhu* 老子譯注 [Modern Chinese Translation and Commentary of the Laozi], Trans. and Commentary Feng Dafu 馮達甫 (Taipei : Shulin chubanshe , 1995), 1.

¹² *Tao The Ching*, Trans. John C. H. Wu (Boston: Shambala, 1989, originally published by St. John's University Press, 1961), 3.

¹³ Quoted in *Laozi yizhu*, 1.

-
- ¹⁴ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), 219.
- ¹⁵ *Laozi yizhu*, 85.
- ¹⁶ John Wu to Thomas Merton 19 January 1966, in Serrán-Pagán, *Merton & the Tao*, 319.
- ¹⁷ John 1: 1, NAB.
- ¹⁸ B. K. Gamel, “Logos, Greek Background,” in J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, et al, Eds., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015)
- ¹⁹ Reginald E. Allen, Ed., *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 9-10.
- ²⁰ *Laozi yizhu*, 60.
- ²¹ See for example Psalm 12 6, 18: 30, 145: 17; and Revelation 15: 3.
- ²² John 1: 1, Studium Biblicum Version (思高本).
- ²³ John 1: 1, NRV, The Church Affairs Commission of the Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church of China (中國天主教主教團教務委員會), 2008. This version is identified as the “Chinese: Studium Biblicum Version” in the front matter, but the Chinese translators have revised Allegra’s translation to better match what they consider to be more appropriate Chinese characters for terms such as Logos.
- ²⁴ Hiermonk (Igumen) Damascene, *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Platina, CA: Valaam Books, 1999), 35.
- ²⁵ Hiermonk Damascene, *Christ the Eternal Tao*, 44.
- ²⁶ See Robert G. Henricks, *Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 4-5.
- ²⁷ *Laozi yizhu*, 7-8.
- ²⁸ Thomas Merton to John Wu, 1 April 1961, in Serrán-Pagán, *Merton & the Tao*, 185.
- ²⁹ Wu, *Beyond East and West*, 355.