

A Christian Confucian: Lu Tseng-tsiang

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Dom Lu Tseng-tsiang¹ published his spiritual autobiography a year before his death, which occurred in 1945 at the Abbey of Saint-André-lez-Bruges in Belgium.² He was born in Shanghai in 1871 in a well-to-do family. His father had been a catechist for the London Missionary Society and gave him a love for the Bible and for “improving literature”. He learnt French at a school for foreign languages in Shanghai and then acquired fluency in that language at *Tongwen guan*, the Peking school for interpreters. In 1892 he was sent as interpreter at the Chinese legation in St. Petersburg, where he served for fourteen years under three departmental heads. The first of these, Shu Kingchen (Xu Wenxiao), became his intellectual guide. This remarkable diplomat wanted to see the renovation of Chinese society but in continuity with its deep-rooted traditions. In contrast to many contemporary Chinese, who were only interested in extracting from the West its scientific and technical expertise, Shu Kingchen tried to discover the secret of the moral strength of Westerners. What he taught Lu Tseng-tsiang during these years was to lead him one day to a

¹ ‘Lu Tseng-tsiang’ is spelled in the same way as in Charbonnier’s book *Christians in China A.D. 600 to 2000*.

² Dom Pierre-Celestin/Lu Tseng-tsiang, *Souvenirs et Pensées* (Paris: Cerf, 1948). English translation: *Ways of Confucius and of Christ* (London: Burns and Oates, 1948), translated by Michael Derrick.

Benedictine monastery. Lu wrote of his mentor's comments on Catholicism:

I remember very clearly the first conversation in which he spoke to me of it, giving to the expression of his thought, as he often liked to do, the form of a fable. He had got me to call at his house and he began thus: "One day the minister of commerce in England noticed the arrival and the entry into the country of a new commodity, previously unknown in Europe—tea; ten chests of tea, coming from China. The following year the number of these cases increased tenfold. Two years later it rose to a thousand. Surprised by the unexpected growth of this import, he called a tree-planter and bade him set out for China and there study the cultivation of tea, instructing him to choose some of its finest seeds and then to betake himself to Ceylon, in order there to introduce this crop, so that England might no longer need to purchase her tea in China."

Mr. Shu went on: "The strength of Europe is not to be found in her armaments; it is not to be found in her science; it is to be found in her religion. In the course of your diplomatic career you will have occasion to study the Christian religion. It comprehends various branches and societies. Take the most ancient branch of that religion, that which goes back most nearly to its origins. Enter into it. Study its doctrine, practice its commandments, closely follow all its works. And later on, when you have ended your career, perhaps you will have the opportunity to go still farther. In this most ancient branch, choose the most ancient society. If you can do so, enter into it also. Make yourself its follower, and study the interior life, which must be the secret of it. When you have understood and won the secret of that life, when you have grasped the heart and strength of the religion of Christ, bring them and give them to China."³

³ Dom Pierre-Célestin/Lu Tseng-tsiang, *Ways of Confucius and of Christ*, pp. 11-12.

In 1899 at St. Petersburg, Lu Tseng-tsiang met Berthe Bovy, who came from a family of Belgian army officers. They were married in St. Catherine's Catholic Church by Fr. Antonin Éveile-Lagrange, O.P. The same priest received Lu Tseng-tsiang into the Catholic Church in 1912; he had meanwhile lived for four years at The Hague as minister plenipotentiary. When the republic was proclaimed in China, Lu Tseng-tsiang undertook to modernize the department of foreign affairs while staying aloof from internal politics, but he was to be gravely disappointed. Yuan Shikai, the head of state, made him responsible for replying to the Japanese Twenty-One Demands on China of 1915. This negotiation was bound to fail and brought upon Lu Tseng-tsiang the contempt of his fellow countrymen. At the Versailles Peace Conference, Lu took it upon himself not to sign the clauses that handed over to Japan the Bay of Kiao-Chow, which Germany had seized in 1897 with most of Shantung Province. He was concerned to avoid another humiliation for his country. Although this won him popular acclamations when he returned to China in 1919, Lu had lost faith in the warlord government of Beijing and resigned from the department of foreign affairs. He took up work for the relief of famine victims, but his wife fell seriously ill, and in 1922 they went to Switzerland for her health. Lu Tseng-tsiang devoted all his time to the care of his sick wife and went on pilgrimage to Rome, where he was received in audience by Pope Pius XI. After his wife's death in 1926, Lu turned to the realization of a project that he had had in mind for a long time; remembering the advice of his departmental chief at St. Petersburg, he decided to become a Benedictine monk and joined the Abbey of St. André-Iez-Bruges in Belgium. This came as a shock to his Chinese friends, who could not see the point of burying oneself in a monastery, so far from one's native land; later, however, they came to understand that what he had done promoted in a mysterious way his ultimate aim in life, which was to contribute to the spiritual strengthening of China.

In fact Dom Lu Tseng-tsiang's writings did have a liberating Gospel message for China; they showed how the Confucian virtue

of filial piety finds its complete fulfilment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is united to his Father by the bond of perfect love. In the midst of the world's disorder, Dom Lu discovered the true "encounter of humanities" (*rencontre des humanités*) by meditating on the Gospel of St. John, as translated into Chinese by his friend John Wu (Wu Jingxiong).

The Logos of the Greeks doubtless corresponds to the Far Eastern *Tao* of the Chinese... In the beginning was the *Tao*, and the *Tao* was with God, and the *Tao* was God. Jesus Christ is the *Tao* made flesh, coming to reveal to us the life of God and to unveil his human heart and the filial piety which he shows to his father.⁴

Dom Lu found true happiness in Catholic worship, centred on the self-offering of the Son to the Father and celebrated with all the beauty of the Benedictine liturgy. There he discovered the fulfilment of the mystery of man's relation to God, a mystery that is foreshadowed in the Confucian ritual of sacrifice to heaven. Ceremonies that carry such a depth of meaning do not become merely formal ritualism. Liturgical prayer is essentially an opening to God and to humanity.

⁴ Translated from Dom Pierre-Celestin/Lu Tseng-tsiang, *La rencontre des humanités et la découverte de l'Évangile* (Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), pp. 58, 67.