

Kin to an Extended Family Beyond All Counting

William Theodore de Bary

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I suppose I am no different from many others asked to join in this tribute to Father Thomas, others who feel the inadequacy of words to express what his inspiring presence has meant in our lives. It is not that I am too finicky about using the familiar clichés in such a situation—most of them would in fact be true in his case, which would actually give them life and new meaning. But even at that the clichés would fall short of conveying all that he has meant to us—to me personally, my family, and the many close friends we have shared him with.

I shall not even try, but count on the fact that others will express that shared experience for me, while I limit myself here to a few reminiscences that are more particular to me.

One is our meeting first on a slow boat to China in the summer of 1948, when I was setting out to do doctoral research in Beijing and he was setting out expectantly on a missionary career in China. With my own background in East Asian history and thought, and his in the European tradition, our interests complemented each other, but even more than that our sensibilities matched as kindred souls. Later, as each of us proceeded with our respective tasks in Beijing, we managed to get together on weekends and sustain a conversation that was to survive even the sudden intervention of Communist armies and our forced exits from Beijing. I was able to continue my own research in South China, but for Father Thomas it brought an abrupt end to the missionary career he had envisioned.

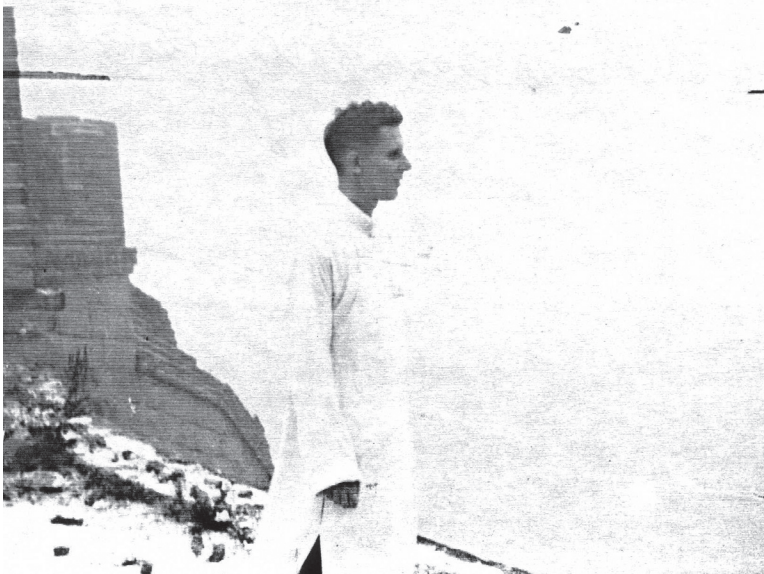
But what then seemed a sharp reversal of our expectations in the end proved providential. Instead of Father Thomas getting sent deep into central China and getting lost in practical missionary work, he turned up in the New York area, making use of his scholarly talents at Seton Hall and St. John's Universities. We were able to resume our fruitful friendship and I could give him access to scholarly resources at Columbia which enabled him to resume his Chinese interests and even to extend them to other areas of Asian studies. He quickly showed that the depth of his knowledge of the Western tradition enabled him to make contributions to Asian studies beyond what specialists in Asia, without a similar depth of understanding, could match.

Time limits me to just two examples. One is his contribution to the university seminars in Asian Religion and Confucianism, of which he and I along with Wing-tsit Chan were co-founders in the early 'sixties. At one such meeting, Thomas presented a paper on "Affectivity in Early Confucianism," opening up a subject which had been neglected by specialists in the field who tended to deal with Confucianism mainly in terms of rational and moral values, or simply as a conservative political and social ideology repressive of human emotions. Father Thomas's depth of historical knowledge and range of cultural evolution—especially as it grew out

of his studies of Vico and other world historians enabled him to transcend the narrow ideological and theoretical presuppositions of the time. (I trust this paper will be included in his collected works and will not attempt here to deal with it further.)

The other occasion was at a seminar meeting in which Father Thomas presented some of his views on Buddhism that later appeared in his book on Buddhism (*Buddhism*, published 1968). This was not so much a report on, or exercise in, original research, as a broad and deeply sympathetic appreciation of fundamental aspects of Buddhism. Again, I leave the specific content to one's reading of the published work, but on that occasion, among the specialists on Buddhism present, was Professor Yoshito Hakeda of Columbia's Religion Department. Hakeda was an ordained monk of the Shingon school. As Father Thomas concluded his presentation, I noticed that Professor Hakeda had tears in his eyes. Later he told me how deeply he was moved by Father Thomas's words. "I thought I was listening to my old teacher at the Shingon seminary."

But this was only at the start of things. Father Thomas went on to even wider horizons of knowledge, of which others can speak better than I. To others also I leave the story of how, as "Uncle Brother," he was kin to an extended family beyond all counting.



Thomas at the Great Wall of China, 1948.