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# Laurence G. Thompson: Biographical and Bibliographical Footnotes

Christian Jochim

San Jose State University, christian.jochim@sjsu.edu

Rodney Taylor

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**Christian Jochim and Rodney Taylor**

**LAURENCE G. THOMPSON:  
BIOGRAPHICAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL FOOTNOTES**

Although known to most of us as a scholar of Chinese Studies with a specialization in the field of Chinese religions, Laurence G. Thompson is a person with a rich and broad range of personal and professional interests who has had several remarkably different careers during the course of his life. Larry was born in Ichou-fu, Shantung Province, in 1920. His parents, Kenneth Kilgore and Denise Archer Thompson, had arrived in China as missionaries in 1911, the year the Ch'ing Dynasty fell. Larry lived in Ichou-fu from 1920 to 1927 until the family fled China because of the civil strife associated with the Northern Expedition. Some of Larry's most vivid early memories are associated with the plight of his family trying to leave China under conditions that approached civil war. For Larry the escape meant a three day wheelbarrow ride to a rail head, always under the threat of enemy soldiers. The family travelled from China to Thailand, but Larry soon came down with malaria and was taken back to the United States.

The family returned to China in 1929, staying until 1934 when they returned to the United States with the retirement of Larry's father. During these years in China the family lived in Chinan, Shantung. Larry attended Chinan Foreign School and then boarding school at Shanghai American School. The China years left a lasting love of Asia. Larry's affinity to Asian cultures provided a strong pull to his eventual career in Asian Studies. Those of us who have studied with Larry always remember his strongly felt opinion about the importance of spending time in Asia for anyone studying Asia. Being a scholar of Asia meant more than simply knowing the texts; a lived-experience was critical to understand the inner working of the cultures and such experience was outside the textbook.

After the family returned to the United States in 1934, Larry finished high school in Southern California. He entered UCLA in 1939. Studying history, philosophy and education, he speaks more glowingly of his membership on the UCLA soccer team as the high point of his undergraduate years. Larry graduated from UCLA in June of 1942. With the entry of America into the war, Larry soon volunteered for the Service. He was accepted into the Japanese Language School established at the University of Colorado at Boulder for training U.S. personnel in Japanese. He became a Japanese Language Officer in the U.S. Marine Corps and served in active duty in the Pacific theatre from 1943 to 1945.

Larry began serious study of the violin in his teenage years and always hoped to receive advanced training in music, but his love of Asia nearly always took precedence over his music. Instead of attending the College of Music at the University of Colorado at Boulder, his first choice after his discharge, Larry ended up receiving an M.A. in Asian Studies from Claremont Graduate School. Before going on for his PhD, he served as Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy in Taipei from 1951 to 1953. He then returned to Claremont Graduate School and received his PhD in 1954. Asia drew him back again and he served during 1955 as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer in a variety of locations including Tokyo, Singapore, Manila and Hong Kong. In 1956 he became the Asia Foundation representative to Korea and in 1958 the Asia Foundation representative to Taiwan. The

later position lasted only a year and from 1959 to 1962 Larry began his academic career with a professorship at Taiwan Normal University. His professorship was not in Asian Studies, but rather in music. The years at Taiwan Normal University were Larry's most active period musically, teaching violin, viola, general music and giving frequent concerts.

In 1962 at the encouragement of Chen Shou-yi, Larry came back to the United States, joining the faculty of Pomona College where he taught Asian Studies for three years. In 1965 Larry became a faculty member of the University of Southern California, a position he has continued to hold, now as Professor Emeritus. During the years at U.S.C., Larry has had a truly distinguished career in the field of Chinese Studies. His service to his colleagues and the field itself has been undying. He played a critical role in the establishment and development of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions, serving as president 1974-1976 and 1978-1985. He served as the president of the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, 1979-80. He was both vice-president (1979-81) and president (1981-82) of the Western Branch of the American Oriental Society and he served as president of the China Society, Taipei (1961-62).

Larry is an exemplary citizen of the profession. He is always there to listen, to provide constructive suggestions and to inspire us to the realization of the importance of our work as scholars and teachers of Asian cultures. Much of the work Larry has contributed to the field is of service to all of us. His bibliographic guides in the field of Chinese religions are a major and lasting contribution and his textbooks on Chinese religion have set the model for an introduction to the subject. It is rare to meet someone who has done so much for the field and yet for whom humility is the only reward.

In a videotape made of Larry by his family on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, he is asked about his long and productive academic career. His response, representing his typical humility, was to say that his career was just a "routine academic career." Certainly his life and his contribution to Chinese Studies and Religious Studies is far more than just a "routine academic career!" For those of us who have had the privilege of knowing Larry as teacher and friend, he is a true teacher, a source of wit and wisdom and most frequently his wit and wisdom are combined.

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