

## Opinion Forum

### Culture as Encounter: A Polemic against the Trend of Ideological Thinking in the Field of Chinese Studies

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#### I. Introduction

In recent years I have repeatedly tried to draw the attention of my colleagues to the fact that in comparison with other fields such as philosophy, history, or English literature, the subject area of Sinology (traditional China) or Chinese studies (modern China) seem to be behind the times by at least fifty years. But probably I have issued my warning in vain. We still fight battles of the past that take us nowhere. In the following I shall try to show that the idea of an autochthonous culture is no longer up-to-date and that it leads us in the wrong direction.

For my difficult undertaking I prefer the form of the essay, as it enables me to speak out and to go without footnotes. I am afraid footnotes might offend some readers as names and titles would have to be dropped, or might disturb them as almost all books that would be quoted are in German.

The crisis in our field deepened when the Chinese side at the end of the 1990s announced the politics of *zouchuqu* (走出去), the politics of “going abroad,” or that of translating and introducing Chinese culture for the “West” on its own. China would no further rely upon any scholars from foreign countries, who in its eyes misunderstand Chinese masterpieces, and distort the “sound” image of China according to their own biases. In the process, China has turned itself into a victim of the “West.”

We meet here with a kind of hostile hermeneutics, a claim to truth and a view of the Chinese people as the best messengers of China past and present. It is easy to understand that any nation would feel entitled to such an attitude towards the outside world, including the Japanese as well as the Americans—only Japanese understand Japan, only Americans understand America the right way. But there is no true image of China, Japan, or the United States. There can be only different views that different people nurture and change all the

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time. This is even the case when someone talks about his own country. I also have never maintained a static picture of Germany. I see my motherland and myself as always changing.

To believe in a certain understanding of China as fixed forever and obligatory for everyone is not so much an expression of chauvinism or resentment, but the result of a lack of knowledge of the character of civilization. Our opinions offer only possible perspectives that we need to discuss, nothing more. They do not amount to historical “truth.” All they need to be is logical, new, and of interest, not a boring copy of prejudices always repeated in the same way.

Nowadays, in very advanced translation theory, the obviously strange phrase “translated modernity” is quite common. It means that no society attains its modern existence from itself, but that its modernity is derived from something else, from something outside. The simplest example in our case is the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883) in Chinese. It is no exaggeration to say that if Marx’s theory had not been translated, there would be no “New China.” Something similar can be found in the role loanwords play in East Asian languages. Through the impact of translation or of phonetic assimilation, “classical” Chinese changes to modern Chinese, etc. The German idea of “Fortschritt” (progress), for instance, probably becomes in Japanese (進歩 *shimpō*), and in Chinese, *jinbu* (进步). The English word for “cake” turns into the Japanese word, “kēki,” etc. Many words we use today only seem on the surface to be true words of our mother tongue. In fact, many Chinese or Japanese binomials have a foreign origin, but by bringing loan words home they soon lose their original flavor in our mother tongue.

It is not only in China that purists demand a return to their own traditions. In contemporary France, for instance, the government decided many years ago to protect the French language by law; otherwise, it was expected to quickly become a victim of American English. The French now speak and write poor English. This is quite different from Germany after the Second World War. Being liberated by American and English forces we learnt the language of our former “enemies” quite well.

All those who now advocate for a kind of *guocui* (国粹), a national essence to ward off foreign infiltration (Überfremdung), do not take into account that very often even in traditional societies culture or civilization were only possible through encounter with others. China before the arrival of Buddhism (65 A.D.) was quite different from China after its arrival. No one would deny that the Buddhist Chinese Middle Ages (220–907) opened a splendid chapter of great civilization in China. Similarly, the Renaissance (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) came into being in certain parts of Europe when ancient Greek and old Roman civilizations, both heathen, were finally rediscovered by Christian

thinkers. In the end Germany is today more Greek, Roman, French, and English, perhaps even more American, than German. Only the rightists in our country ask us Germans for more blue eyes and blond hair.

Unfortunately, we can still hear elsewhere voices that call for a pure culture of their own. The movement for *guocui*, for Chineseness through the help of *guoxue* (国学; national studies), in modern and contemporary China is but one example among many. In its darkest times, Germany strove for “Deutschtum” (Germaneness). The result was a total disaster. No need to repeat what everyone knows. The case of the still eminent German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is awful and shameful enough. But until now no one has obviously paid any attention to the following fact: When China under the influence of the Occident produced the best of modern world literature between 1912 and 1949, about nine fascist countries in Europe had no modern literature to offer the public at all. In 1930 German writers without outside pressure were already demanding to avoid modernity just as Chinese writers did before and after 1942. Modernity means internationalism. Internationalism prohibits “Germaneness” or “Chineseness.” Between 1933 and 1945 Berlin prohibited the translation of all modern literary works from abroad. Even in the 1950s, German-speaking countries had not yet recovered from the loss of understanding of the essence of literature in modern times and had therefore to (re)learn through the help of foreign authors what the writing of the day should be, eventually including even Chinese writers such as Lu Xun (1881–1936).

The same is true for China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). What was demanded was *zili gengsheng* (自力更生; do it yourself): Do not learn from foreigners, only face yourself; do not translate anything from abroad, only translate yourself into the language of the Party. The result is well known. Morally, Germany became the most backward country in the world in those years, while China became the most backward economically.

Now both countries are back in the international community. Why? They are open—open to foreign views and they are translating nearly everything. This leads us to a serious question. If one is open and absorbs the “Other,” is one still oneself? The Self and the Other now play an important role in the discussion of postcolonial theory. The problem is that eager representatives of post-colonialism in the field of Chinese studies do not seem to understand sufficiently the complexity of history and philosophy; they are not even yet willing to comprehend it because any kind of deeper knowledge would make the learning of many old and new languages necessary. Neither Chinese-speaking nor English-speaking scholars are prepared to do so. They often regard anything they read or write in Chinese or English as true, as the only truth. Thus they do harm to the research of China. Chinese history is bigger

than the current issues of the so-called clash of friend and enemy, self and other, man and woman, local and foreigner. Besides, philosophy is now much more complex than to be inclined to answer the question of any identity in a simple manner.

## II. Encounters and Identity

When we talk about encounters, what are we talking about? Are encounters possible? And if so, can we, must we save our “self” during an encounter with the Other and not become part of the Other just as the Other also becomes part of our Self? Has any scholar in our field clarified what “encounter” means? Any kind of encounter means change; if not, it is not an encounter. It is small talk or even worse, it is only a means to reassure oneself. To come to terms with this issue, allow me first to be a little bit vulgar. So often when confronted with our food in Germany Chinese tourists run into so-called Chinese restaurants between Cologne and Berlin just to eat so-called Chinese food and nod to one another to indicate that Chinese food is the best in the world. But at the same time, they expect us Germans when in Guangdong Province to cherish chicken feet and the ears of pigs. On the streets of Bonn, where every day hundreds of Chinese visit the home of Beethoven, we sometimes can hear Chinese voices saying, “Our old Chinese culture.” But Bonn is much older than Beijing!

When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) went into the deepest crisis of his life during the liberation wars in Europe (1813–1815) he turned to China. He wrote a famous poem about a tree that went from the Middle Kingdom during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) to Japan and from Japan around 1735 to the Netherlands, and finally to the Weimar Republic around 1800, where our poet lived. The tree I talk of is the ginkgo (Japn. *ginkyō*; Chin. *yinxing* 银杏), which is now quite common as a word and as a tree in the German language and in German parks.

To clarify the problem of identity, let me first ask some silly questions. Has any ginkgo tree in the Botanical garden of Bonn University lost its “self” and does it really want to go back through a Japanese port to Chinese soil? Or is it possible that this magnificent tree is able to strengthen itself even in a country not its own? Goethe answers this question indirectly by reflecting upon the character of the ginkgo. He asks if its essence (Wesen) is made of one or more potential. We all know that this Chinese tree is very special, as it is both male and female. It is one tree with two genders. Thus, Goethe, when reflecting upon a ginkgo that he probably saw in Heidelberg in 1815, finished his poem by asking, “do my songs not give the feeling / that I am one and two?”

How to understand here “one and two”? Does it mean that man and woman

are one? That China/Japan and Germany/Europe are one? Or do we have to see the two lines in the sense of modernity? Modern man is divided into two persons? Tradition asked for one personality, the personality of obedience. Everyone had a certain place in society; (wo)man had never to move and had to follow the rules of the church or aristocracy. But bourgeois modernity created the individual who no longer allowed any priest or duke to decide his fate; this individual tried to find a new position in or outside society. After that he was split into two personalities: into the person he was and into the person he wanted to be. G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) called this “the unfortunate consciousness.”

Since then the quest for identity has become an important issue. Marx and his followers tried to solve it through revolution. Did they succeed? Their ideals ended up misapplied in the Soviet Union and as despotism in North Korea. Meanwhile, all societies have so many identity problems that suicide is a common cause of death for people under 35.

Goethe speaks of a double identity: his own identity and an identity probably made up of Chinese and German elements. But he stands at the beginning of modernity, not at the end, as we might stand. After him people thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century just as now in China that nationalism, the nation state, etc. would lead to personal identity. Nowadays, where all nationalism more or less has failed in Europe, one might think of soccer, which seems to be a uniting force for people in Great Britain and on the European continent. But all of this nourishes only illusions about the possibility of finding or creating identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Contemporary German philosophy has long declared we are not one person, we are many persons. Forerunners of this philosophy can be seen in the Chinese Middle Ages when the literati were Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian at the same time. This is partly even true for the Song dynasty.

Multiple identities were perhaps the rule even before modernity; single identity is an illusion after modernity. But scholars in Chinese studies still demand or dream of an autochthonous China. A so-called pure China, however, has not existed since the Later Han dynasty (25–220 A.D.), if at all. Even worse, its remnants were destroyed before and after the May 4<sup>th</sup> (1919) Movement and in the years after 1949 by the Chinese themselves. The revolutionaries permanently destroyed what their ancestors had built up over three thousand years, and they did this nearly completely, all in the name of revolution or reform after 1911.

Despite this fact, American and Chinese scholars in Chinese studies now ask “us Europeans” to respect “Chineseness,” or anything in China with so called Chinese characteristics—in short, Chinese identity. But there is none. Marx is a foreigner on the mainland and the idolized W.I. Lenin (1870–

1924), is, too. On Taiwan, in Hong Kong, and in Macau, America is the model. And if there has been any identity in the Chinese-speaking world during the last one-hundred years, it is the identity of the destructive urge and a feeling of inferiority. Both phenomena are of course problematic.

Besides, more important is the fact that postmodernity does not allow one or two identities anymore as was traditionally possible or as Goethe made an appeal for. I repeat: Everybody has many identities now, unfortunately, even including comic figures (*manga*). So why in Chinese studies are academics still talking about the “Self” and the “Other”? “You and me” are not different entities anymore. We are the same under the rubric of “lost identity.” This is true for any culture. Goethe at the end of his life was as “Chinese” as he was “German.”

Even if there is still the phenomenon of “self and other,” no one asks where the “self” comes from and what the “other” really is or means. When we are born are we self or other? Some stupid German literati like to declare in public that they were never asked if they wanted to be born or not. Thus, they differentiate themselves before and after birth, or between their “self” and their “other.” I asked many German philosophers where our “self” (Ich) stems from, and they had no answer. It seems that only Chinese and American scholars have a reply. Their problem is that they do not read much in the original language except in Chinese or English. Rather, they read translations, i.e. they read interpretations, and they read them in their languages and in their frame of understanding. Thus, bias comes in. Bias as reflected by contemporary German philosophy is actually a good thing so long as it allows us to ponder upon the possibility of our understanding. Bias then might turn from prejudice (Vorurteil) to “judgement” (Urteil). This is called the hermeneutic circle. Its precondition is the knowledge of history and of languages.

Let me ask again: Do we really belong to “us” and not at the same time to the “other”? When we believe in God we are his, not us, as we are often told by certain hymns in church or by poets before modernity. When we fall in love we often say, “I am yours.” We give up ourselves and become another person.

Most problematic in humanities is the demand of Chinese, be they politicians, scholars, or writers, for a national literature even today. Since Goethe in 1827 spoke of world literature, he pronounced the end of any national literature. Not only was Mao Zedong (1893–1976) totally behind the times when he asked for a return of modern Chinese literature, which was then of international character, to autochthonous forms in 1942, even contemporary poets of Chinese origin now living abroad, like Yang Lian (b.1955), oppose Chinese literature as international literature in the first place. All are

of the same opinion: Literary works in the Chinese language have to be Chinese before anything else. Why are they so backward and lacking Goethe's deep insight into the essence of writing in modern times? No need to answer this question because any sincere answer would hardly be accepted by American or Chinese scholars, who often lack a thorough understanding of the complexity of European history. Prejudice in the bad sense and ideology in its worst are sometimes too much their business. When talking about Goethe and the term "world literature," not a few of them still try out of context to show that behind this giant of German literature and his ingenious idea of a modern literature for the world lurk some kind of nationalism and Eurocentrism. Nationalism in today's sense, however, is a late notion and phenomenon. The same is true for Eurocentrism. Goethe and his times were open to cultures from outside of Europe. This is little known because of the language barrier.

Besides, Germany was quite a different country after 1949 as opposed to 1989. What do I mean by this? These days [May 2015] we commemorate the end of World War II. Not only does our German chancellor Angela Merkel (b. 1954) go to Dachau, the German concentration camp for German Jews, but Simon Rattle (b.1955), the British conductor of the Berlin Symphony, asks his violinists to play the best German music by using violins rescued from concentration camps and restored by Jewish friends. Would something like that be possible in Japan for Chinese victims of World War II, or in China for the Chinese victims of the Cultural Revolution? I am afraid probably not. Not to mention other occurrences in recent Chinese history we are silenced from talking about.

### **III. Problems in American and Chinese Scholarship**

Again, prejudice from the prospective of contemporary German philosophy actually should not be a great problem. So long as one knows that one has to go on from one's prejudice to another step of recognition that might be less prejudiced, such a circle would be of no harm for creation of a less biased view. But since the victory of the theory of post-colonialism, Chinese studies are less a matter of scholarship than a tendency towards ideology. Whatever we Europeans, male and white, did when researching and translating China, according to the American intellectual Edward W. Said (1935–2003) and his followers in Chinese studies, is regarded as a crime. From our European standpoint our critics are of course wrong because they do not understand our language, our history, our viewpoint. And most important, they are quite reluctant to understand!

The history of understanding itself is so complicated that it needs the knowledge of many languages and of many historical facts. But the theory of

post-colonialism is not really open to unbiased thinking. This is the reason why it is so successful. American and Chinese scholarship is textbook scholarship. American and Chinese scholars more or less can only read translations of European thinkers and thus imagine they understand what they would hardly understand in the original works.

Just to give a simple example: The German Jew Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is always quoted by English- and Chinese-speaking scholars in Chinese studies, but rarely by German colleagues. The reason is that only American and Chinese academics seem to understand him because they read him in translation, but we Germans do not really understand his difficult German in the original, so we barely quote him. Besides, without deep knowledge of his Judaism one gets only a small glimpse of his ideas.

American textbook scholarship is so-called scholarship, a scholarship without sufficient knowledge of Latin, Greek, German, Hebrew, or French. What do scholars on the basis of one language (Chinese) or of two languages (English and Chinese) create? First of all they formulate misconceptions because they cannot check the originals. And most problematic is that they do not seem to be eager to comprehend any important work in the original language other than in Chinese and/or English. But they are always quoting the most difficult French contemporary philosophers whom only specialists in German-speaking countries are able to follow.

Why do I stress the ideological factor in American scholarship so much? Many books or articles in the United States tell two different stories. The first story might be a story about China, for instance. The second story, however, is the fight against Europe, against Old Europe that many of their ancestors escaped from for religious, political, or economic reasons. Now one can read in English-language writings any kind of nonsense. To give you only one example: American scholars recently invented the term, “European imperialism.” But there was never a European imperialism; there was, for instance, only Turkish, British, Russian or French imperialism. Iceland or Switzerland or Finland or Slovakia never conquered China. It is also not true that the “West” invaded the Middle Kingdom. It was the British, then the French, then the Americans, and finally the Russians and the Japanese. There was no Finland, no Slovenia, as these countries that are considered the “West” did not exist then.

American scholarship is collective scholarship. Everyone quotes the same books, the same authors, the same ideas. The prayer wheel calls for the similarity of thinking: You think what I think, I think what you think. Just as in China, scholars only reflect what others repeat. In Beijing it is the Party that stipulates the rules; at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton it is the institution of refereed journals and the reader who works for these journals who helps



publishing houses to do the editing. Both decide in Chinese studies what can be produced and what cannot. New or radical thought has not much chance. Figures such as Karl Marx or Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), if they were still among us, would never be allowed to get published in English-language refereed journals or in an English-language university press by readers nowadays. They are politically incorrect. Their English would not be up to American standards, and most of all, they might be critical of the United States. For Europeans it is a strange phenomenon that scholars in the United States barely endure any criticism of their country or they almost prefer to avoid being critical of their motherland.

#### IV. The “Other” and the “Self”

The “other” is not an enemy of the “self;” it is rather, a friend. It helps one to overcome weaknesses and to find one’s way. The most familiar examples are Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and Bertholt Brecht (1898–1956). As both have already many times been introduced to a greater readership, including by myself, I do not want to go too much into detail here. It will be sufficient to remind you of the fact that the American poet in 1914 successfully started to rejuvenate literature in English-speaking countries through Chinese Classical aesthetics and poetry, whereas the German found (1920) his language, his style, and his world views through the reading of Laozi’s *Daode Jing* in German. The most influential translation (1911) was done by Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), who, as a pastor, preferred the language of the New Testament for his rendering. Choosing the way of Taoist philosophy did not mean getting lost in the “other” for Brecht, just the opposite. Not only he, but many other German writers and artists in his time and long after him grew an awareness of how to create great art.

On the Chinese side we discover something similar. Feng Zhi (1905–1993), for instance, wrote his 27 great sonnets (1942) under the influence of Goethe, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). The same is true for Lu Xun, who, under the impact of European intellectual history, invented the modern Chinese short story or the Chinese prose-poem.

In both cases, be it Germany or China, it is the “other” that is expanding someone’s “self.” One might of course ask, if the process of translation if acquisition and the treating of the “other” does not lose its uniqueness. Yes, perhaps so, but this is not something that only happens when one culture encounters another. This also happens in one and the same culture. The philosophers of the Song and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties saw *The Four Books* (*Sishu*) of Confucianism in a totally different light than the way they were outlined in antiquity, namely as four single scriptures by Confucius (551

-479) and others. The concept of the *junzi* (君子) changed from monarch to gentleman, thus totally distorting the historical aspect.

In this respect, it is unfair to accuse such translators as the German missionary Richard Wilhelm of simply reading Christian elements into the Chinese classics when rendering them into highly readable German. Even the Chinese do not have an understanding of their heritage that is bound to one direction of interpretation for all. A good text is always open; it allows any reader to follow his predilections, so long as one is able to give good reasons for one's choice of words. There is not something like absolute loyalty to a piece of paper as is often blindly demanded for in Sinology or in Chinese studies. We do not translate the meaning of something written because we can never know what the author really had in mind. What we translate is our understanding of a given text. Here we have the choice to be true to our point of view and to our faculty of language, or true to the author, who might tell us about his former writing ambitions but can err, or not remember everything and sometimes also betray us by keeping silent or not telling the real story. Finally, we can be true to the work itself, which when finished, has not much to do with the author anymore. The work becomes independent and all we do is follow certain traits that are of great importance for us.

If we want to judge the possibility or the possible depth of an encounter between Europe and China, we sometimes have to go deep into history. Brecht was an atheist; he was a member of the Communist Party. But his favorite book was the Bible. That is the reason why he was so excited when reading Wilhelm's *Daode Jing*. He found there Martin Luther's German.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), through translation of the Bible, created our mother tongue (German). One has to know that the most common languages of scholars before Goethe and sometimes even after him were Latin and French in Germanic "countries." What we today call German used to be the language of the street that literati tried to avoid. Luther nevertheless was not afraid of forming it into powerful speech. He did this five-hundred years ago. And we still read his version of the Bible, which of course, was revised several times. We are often told by publishers and by demanding readers that any translation becomes antiquated after thirty years. Nevertheless, besides the Luther Bible there are other translation works done in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that have not yet lost their German appeal after more than two-hundred years. Finally, Richard Wilhelm's renderings of ancient Chinese philosophy are often reprinted, sold, and read even after one-hundred years. Why? The German of Richard Wilhelm was not only influenced by Luther, but by Goethe and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as well. It is very beautiful German, full of rhythm and witty expressions. When Brecht in 1938 wrote his famous poem about Laozi he also made use of Biblical language as he found it in

Wilhelm's *Daode Jing*.

It sounds like a contradiction that an atheist should become fascinated by religiously-tinged language. But many announcements of Communist parties, including the Communist Party of China, have roots in the Christian way of speaking. Thus it does not make much sense to go on treating Christianity as the total "other" in regards to socialism. Both understand themselves as having a "holy mission." This fact allows us also to reproach Richard Wilhelm less for his Christianization of certain aspects of Chinese thought. He found there something sacred, something holy that demands us to face history in a stricter manner.

All early translations of the *Daode Jing* done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were by theologians. Actually, early Sinology was a kind of theology. Sometimes even now it seems as if Sinology and theology are inseparable. Lauren Pfister (b. 1956) of Baptist University (Hong Kong), one of the most important scholars of Confucian studies in the world, is a pastor. I myself turned once from theology to Sinology, but have been teaching religion on the mainland when asked to. What do I mean? Lauren Pfister and I do not see our daily encounters with China in the framework of the self and other. I am Chinese enough not to look at my Chinese friends as "the other" and they are open enough to define themselves from a European context. This has nothing to do with "foreign infiltration" (*Überfremdung*) or with self-colonization, as we are sometimes told by American or Chinese colleagues. Giving room to the "other" is only a question of developing into a complete person who needs more than just the elements of his own culture.

The idea of *zouchuqu*, of being one's own interpreter for the "West," is always accompanied by the complaint of Chinese that the "West" does not sufficiently understand or it misunderstands China, does not translate enough or introduce the country's culture to others. But whenever, for instance, the *China Daily* mentions the "West," all its news is only about America or England or the English-speaking world. The rest of Europe, the rest of the "Western" world, is not mentioned at all, just as if we were part of North America and shared the same characteristics. Whatever we Europeans do for China goes more or less unnoticed overseas; it is not much taken into consideration by American or Chinese scholars. This is not only because our mother languages are German or French, but because we think in a different way. In this respect we share the fate of our German colleagues in the field of English literature, for instance. They publish in English, too, but they tell me they are not read by scholars between New York and San Francisco either.

## V. Conclusion

As the encounter between Europe and China has been taking place for

five-hundred years already in a very fruitful way, European Sinology and Chinese studies should not be viewed in China via America. Their scholars make all kinds of groundless imputations about Europe. Thus, China must learn more of our languages and more of our history, especially scholars in Sinology and Chinese studies. They would recognize that we are not only unique in our way of doing research, but also for the quantity and quality of our translations of Chinese literature, philosophy, and history. One language, one prejudice, one direction: It is time that this kind of international Sinology and Chinese studies comes to an end. Otherwise, it does not make much sense to discuss encounters between Beijing, Paris, and Berlin anymore.

**Author's note:** The word "man" in this essay reflects the inclusive German meaning of man, woman, and child.