Richard Wilhelm and His Critics: 
A New Evaluation

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Abstract

The great German translator and scholar of ancient Chinese philosophy Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) is still underestimated in German speaking countries. The reasons are manifold. He was a missionary in the beginning, but turned into a Confucian and finally into a Taoist mainly during his stay in Qingdao (1898–1925).

As he was against German nationalists he was not welcome in nationalist Germany. As he was a Christian he is still not tolerated by nowadays sinologues who are without any belief. As a victim of postcolonial theory he is denied the recognition of the internationally most influential sinologue in the twentieth century, but his German translations often rendered into second foreign languages are still “used” as the best possible ones.

Through his translations Richard Wilhelm was of great influence upon German philosophy (Heidegger), psychology (Jung), literature (Brecht), etc. He has to be judged as a giant in the European history of thought.

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The author has been deeply inspired from discussions with Wolfgang Gantke (Frankfurt University) about religion, understanding, and the Sacred. This paper was written in 2008 for an ongoing project initiated with Lauren Pfister at Baptist University, Hong Kong. Some information may therefore not be up to date.
There is a common saying in German: *Viel Feind, viel Ehr* (The more enemies you have, the more honor you will gain). This means that if there is not only one person but many people criticizing you, then you must be very important. Richard Wilhelm (Chinese name: Wei Lixian 魏禮賢 / 衛禮賢, 1873–1930) has been under attack from scholars in Chinese Studies for almost one hundred years now. But is he finally being treated with the same respect in the world of academic sinology that he has long gotten outside of this field? Unfortunately not. Richard Wilhelm is apparently the most hated Chinese Studies scholar, simply because he is the most influential sinologist of all time. As I shall touch on briefly below, he had a deep impact on German philosophy, the development of modern psychology, and German literature. A number of important international trends in the humanities that started during his lifetime still continue today and would have been impossible without his contributions.

Why has Richard Wilhelm not been given the honor he deserves for his huge number of translations of Chinese texts and for his many books on China? There seems to be various reasons behind this, but we will restrict ourselves here to two possibilities. First, sinologists rarely regard translation work as their proper and true work. And if they do so, they are not really trained translators who understand what translation theory actually means, because translation theory is now quite advanced in many fields outside sinology. This is why I often say that the field of Chinese Studies, as far as it concerns the whole range of translation work, is fifty years behind the times, at least compared to German, French, and English Studies. Another reason is the fact that following the impact of postcolonial studies, since the 1980’s, American and Chinese sinologists in particular have started to mistrust anyone who is white, European, or male when dealing with China. Because I have written on this topic quite frequently, I will not go into detail here again. However, I will at least mention a new perspective offered by Mechthild Leutner (Free University of Berlin) who views sinologists

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in a positive way as cultural mediators, aside from any possible involvement in colonialism and imperialism. In the case of Richard Wilhelm, she uses the term reciprocal mediator. This is someone who wants to help both sides, in this case China and Germany, at the same time. For Leutner, the one person who epitomizes a reciprocal mediator is Richard Wilhelm.

I. IN HERMENEUTIC DEFENCE OF RICHARD WILHELM: A FIRST ATTEMPT

Be it as it were, I have to confess that I—one of the few who has defended the numerous and remarkable achievements of Richard Wilhelm for so many years—have much in common with him. Such a confession might seem like a conflict of interest in an academic paper. My way of thinking, however, is in concord with Wilhelm’s attitude towards China, which is similar in some ways to that of French globe-trotter and writer Victor Segalen (1878–1919). In his posthumously published Essai sur l’Éxotisme. Une Esthétique du Divers, Segalen asked all those involved with the East to keep in mind the other side when pondering the meaning of the East, as this would help prevent an only partial understanding. Instead of interpreting Confucius (551–479 BC) from only a Western point of view, for instance, one should also see this “master for all generations” through his eyes or from a Chinese perspective. While it is true that Wilhelm often gave Chinese texts a Christian touch in his translations, it is also true that he, because his academic studies, was able to present Confucius and Lao Zi or translate The Book of Changes in a very Chinese way, following the insights of his spiritual and real teachers in Tsingtao (Qingdao).

To come to the point: Just as Wilhelm frequently regards great Chinese scholars in his writings as his “guides” and tries to come close to them from within, I am choosing a similar way of dealing with Wilhelm as the father of important lines of German thought in twentieth century. And what is it that we have in common? Both of us are dedicated translators, we share nearly the same theological background, we believe in eternal values, we are “in love” with China and Chinese cul-

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ture, we are looking for the meaning of life and both of us feel responsible for mankind or at least for society. Such devotion is, of course, part of an old conservative tradition that is not much asked for these days in a modern world that demands from scholars a kind of attitude known as *sine ira et studio* in Latin and harks back to the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 60–120 AD). This famous saying means that when writing or thinking, a historian should be without anger and without zeal, perhaps one could even say without love. One might wonder, however, if Richard Wilhelm would have ever been able to carry out his work without his special kind of love for China if he knew that he had to face severe illness and early death. Nowadays, when pondering Wilhelm’s life, we are commonly older than him or in much better health. This last remark may seem to lack academic rigor. The problem, however, is that any kind of scholarship that is tied to a specific situation may not be as ideal as is usually imagined.

One could come to the defense of such an attitude by citing the philosophy of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1903–1991). According to his hermeneutic philosophy, there is not something like an impartial understanding from an independent position. All of us have a certain history behind us, he argued, that we cannot get rid of. Moreover, the kind of understanding he is pleading for has to change our life. This is the so-called friendly understanding. In contrast to a hostile understanding that only tries to confirm one’s own views or even prejudices, a friendly understanding is an open one that finds something new in any given text and that may even call for a revocation of our previous opinions. Bollnow called this kind of hermeneutics a “hermeneutics of confidence,” that is, a hermeneutics that is confident of making “sense” out of a text for one’s own sake. One example would be when a reader says: I am confident that I will find an answer to my question concerning the meaning of life. In this regard, the reader’s hermeneutics of confidence (*Vertrauenshermeneutik*) turns into a hermeneutics of finding the deeper meaning of one’s life (*Sinnhermeneutik*). This includes, of course, religious questions and cosmological issues. This is why Richard Wilhelm was able to read Chinese texts in a way that helped him to overcome his personal crises.

One could argue now that Wilhelm’s occasional interpretation of Confucian and Taoist classics in a Christian way violates Bollnow’s

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idea of the hermeneutics of confidence as a hermeneutics of differences (Differenzhermeneutik). I do not see it this way. In many respects, Richard Wilhelm offers us translations that are true Chinese in its otherness and, in some way, foreign to those who are not insiders. His Book of Changes is a very good example. Its rendering into German is not “Christian” at all, and it makes no concession towards German readership, although it is true that he makes use of European and Christian vocabulary in his translations of certain Confucian and Taoist terms. Still, by doing so, he is quite different from all those who read their own world into a text. There are three points to be discussed here. First, in the Christianization of some key words, he reveals the hidden traces of the Sacred. In modern times, Chinese classics are frequently read not from a religious point of view, but from a secular perspective. But even the Lunyu refers to gods (shen, gui) more than a dozen times, not to mention the concept of heaven (tian) with its numerous connotations. Second, giving basic Chinese concepts a Christian touch should be seen the other way around. Through translation, layout and typography, “Europe and Christianity appear in a fundamentally alienated Chinese-Taoist perspective.”

Thus the “Sermon on the Mount,” when hinted at in his Taoteking, will receive as much of a Chinese “face” as Lao Zi gets a Christian “face.” Third, Richard Wilhelm went as a Christian missionary to China and when he came back, he returned as a Confucian first and as a believer in Yijing second, and in the end, he turned into a Taoist familiar with its secret methods. In any case, he fulfilled what Bollnow called for in his philosophical reflections on the issue of cognition: A true scholar will enrich or even change his former outlook on the world through his encounter with other cultures.

What the critics of Richard Wilhelm rarely take into consideration is the fact that their own academic work will also be open to criticism in the near future. Actually, they should really be asking themselves the following question: Who will judge us one day for what we did and what we did not do? My argument is very simple: My first teacher of Chinese was Hans Stumpfeldt (b. 1943), now Professor Emeritus at Hamburg University. I got him to know at Münster University in the winter of 1967. In and outside of classes, he made fun of all translators, including Günther Debon (1921–2005), who is probably the best translator ever of classical Chinese poetry, and Richard Wilhelm. Has

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Stumpfeldt ever produced any work of translation stylistically greater than those of Debon or Wilhelm? No, unfortunately not.

Why am I being so harsh? It is because whoever thinks he⁶ must criticize those who have gone before him must show one day that he can do better. But this is indeed very hard to do, and in most cases, such a critic will fail miserably. Why? A critic commonly lacks something very important. One can call this tolerance or even love—tolerance towards or love for those who were kind enough to go before us and for those who will follow us one day.

This brings me back to my original question, which does not sound very academic at all. Does a sinologist have to be in love with China? Not necessarily so. But what if he thinks he has a true mission and wants to reach the heart of his readers? Some scholars may argue that he should quit and become a preacher. I myself have been told this quite often.

It is true that Richard Wilhelm’s point of view, as we are going to see next, is very idealistic, and it is also true that I am not far away from him in this aspect.⁷ His and my kind of idealism is, of course, in some ways long passé. This is why I suddenly feel that I have to re-think my point of view and take his critics, who will end up being my critics, too, very seriously for the first time. Perhaps these critics can offer new insights into Richard Wilhelm and into me, his fan?

II. WAS RICHARD WILHELM A CHILD OF HIS TIME?

Richard Wilhelm was not only a great translator, he was also an important scholar and in some respects, a distinguished writer, too.

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⁶ From the German point of view, it is not grammatically correct to change “he” to “he and she.” One would have to include “it,” the personal pronoun for children, for a child such as Mozart would be able to produce culture, too. But the use of “he, she, it” followed by “his, her, its” would make a text unintelligible.

⁷ To my surprise, Lauren Pfister saw a lot of parallels between Richard Wilhelm and me long before I did; see his article: “Brothers in the Spirit,” in Zurück zur Freude: Studien zur chinesischen Literatur und Lebenswelt und ihrer Rezeption in Ost und West, Festschrift für Wolfgang Kubin [Back to Joy: Studies on Chinese Literature and the World of Life and Its Reception in East and West, A Commemorative for Wolfgang Kubin], eds. Marc Hermann and Christian Schwermann, MSMS 57 (St. Augustin: Monumenta Serica, 2007), 55–82.
There is no need to list his numerous translations here, some of which still do not have equivalents in the English language, or new and complete versions in German, even after so many decades. But what can be said about his many articles and books on Confucius (551–479 BC), Lao Zi, and *The Book of Changes*, for example? Nearly all of them have been forgotten by now and can hardly be found in libraries or in second-hand bookshops any more. It is possible that they are more or less only of historical value these days—which I very much doubt in some cases—but at least they should be taken into consideration when evaluating Richard Wilhelm. These works still offer some clues to his way of thinking that made such a deep impact upon his way of translation. And what can be said about Richard Wilhelm as a writer? At the very least, his memories of China published in *The Soul of China* should be treated as a true piece of literature. His German in this book, again under the influence of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), is very beautiful. I do not mention this without a hidden agenda, because good German has turned into a real problem for quite a few German scholars in Chinese Studies. In short, Richard Wilhelm represents a type of scholar who comes closer to a traditional Chinese *literatus* (*wenren*) than to a typical German academician. From the standpoint of the German academic world, however, one can either be a scholar or a translator or a writer, but all three cannot be combined into a single person. The same is said to be true for one’s profession: One is expected to have one career and not to do what Richard Wilhelm did, which was to pursue several different callings. Wilhelm was a minister, a missionary,

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10 Richard Wilhelm deals with the *Yijing* in nearly all his books, especially in his *Chinesische Lebensweisheit* [Chinese Wisdom of Life] (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl, 1922), 65–107. By the way, his insights into the *Yijing* are still unsurpassed in Germany.

11 There is only one reprint of his academic writings still available: *Chinesische Philosophie* [Chinese Philosophy] (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1925) has now been republished by Marix: Wiesbaden, 2007. Though cheap, it is a beautiful edition. The publisher praises it as one of the most concise and readable histories of Chinese philosophy!

a teacher, a translator, and a scholar. Who among the scholars in Chinese Studies today could, would or dare to claim the same thing?

The critics of Richard Wilhelm are not only critical of him as an individual, at the same time, they also disprove of a certain, even typical kind of (German) sinology, and in this sense, of me, too. In this respect, their opinions represent the status quo and should not be too quickly brushed away, as I have done in the past, but cherished as they prompt us to reflect on the issues of translation, understanding, and representation. In short, they help to sharpen our view of our own profession insofar as we feel engaged in transmitting knowledge about China. This, however, would include rethinking our own position and background, something that the livings rarely do. Critics would have to tell the reader what kind of education they had, what their religious beliefs are, what political creed they espouse. For quite obvious reasons, they rather prefer to avoid any personal statement, as if only they were not bound to any time and space, but always had an eternally true point of view at their disposal.

Richard Wilhelm is commonly called a child of his times by his critics, but they do not draw the full consequences from this conclusion. It is true that Richard Wilhelm was a child of his times, just as his critics also are children of their times, but this is something that they will not willingly concede! But if we were to look at Richard Wilhelm as a child of his times, he would have to be placed within the context of the history of his upbringing. For instance, as a student of theology, he was trained from 1891 to 1895 at the famous Tübingen Seminary, which was founded in 1536 and had educated great German philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). Here Richard Wilhelm went through a deep personal crisis similar to that of many German intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. Or, for instance, as a vicar, he received spiritual enlightenment in Bad Boll (1897–1898) where many people went to resolve their personal problems, including Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) with whom Richard

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13 For instance, Mechthild Leutner, Ursula Ballin.
Wilhelm was personally acquainted and exchanged letters.\textsuperscript{15} I cannot go into more detail here but I will deal with the history of German thought during this time in another article. In brief, it is not possible to pay tribute to Richard Wilhelm without understanding German philosophy and literature before and after the First World War. But this would mean that his critics must not only be educated in Chinese Studies, but also in German literature, philosophy, and theology. But are they? The problem with many scholars in Chinese Studies is not only their lack of knowledge of many languages, but also the lack of a sound knowledge of European history. Richard Wilhelm grew up with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew just as I did. It is quite natural that his and my world outlook is quite different from those who know none of these languages. This is why sometimes (North American) sinology that relies on translations from Greek, Latin or German is often pure ideology rather than grounded history.

III. WHAT IS RICHARD WILHELM BEING CRITICIZED FOR?

What were and often still are the objections against Richard Wilhelm? There are at least five points that are commonly mentioned.\textsuperscript{16}

First, Richard Wilhelm was accused by some of his contemporaries of not being German enough, that is, he was not a nationalist in the sense of deutchnational. Indeed, he was against both Western imperialism and German nationalism. He was actually an advocate of the Chinese Revolution (1911) and its aftermath. This, of course, does him credit today so that we do not have to deal with this type of stubborn criticism at all any more.

Nevertheless, there have been voices of doubts raised over the years that seem to spoil the pure image of Richard Wilhelm. For instance, Thomas Zimmer believes that through his acquaintance with publisher

\textsuperscript{15} Albrecht Esche, ed., \textit{Hermann Hesse und Bad Boll: Die Krise als Chance} [Hermann Hesse and Bad Boll: The Crisis as an Opportunity] (Bad Boll: Evangelische Akademie, 2001). As for the influence of Wilhelm upon Hesse, see esp. 35–57.

Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930), our German friend became influenced by völkische Jargon (national jargon). However, one must keep in mind that some words that sound nationalistic today do not necessarily have a nationalistic origin. One example is the term Führer (leader) which was commonly used in National Socialism. When applied outside of its historical context, one should not draw conclusions too fast. “Leader” is not only a title still used in the Chinese (lingxiu) and Cuban (maximo líder) revolutions, it is and was also a common word for all those who are looking for spiritual or even social salvation through an exemplary personality. There are many examples of this: poet Stefan George (1868–1933), comparatist Max Kommerell (1902–1944), even nowadays a professor of communication science in Berlin, Norbert Bolz. From a political perspective, Richard Wilhelm does not have a “broken personality,” as Ursula Ballin tries to show in other words and in a different context. However, he does have a “broken identity,” as Mechthild Leutner claims, insofar as he wavered between two cultures instead of representing both Chinese and German

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17 Though there were some points of contact, for instance, “deutsche Volkheit,” Eugen Diederichs was not anti-Semitic or a nationalist in the sense of later National Socialism. For his world view, see Justus H. Ulbricht and Meike G. Werner, eds., Roman tik, Revolution and Reform: Der Eugen Diederichs Verlag im Epochenkontext 1900–1949 [Romance, Revolution and Reform: The Eugen Diederichs Publishing House in the Epoch Context 1900–1949] (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999), see the articles by Stefan Breuer and Florian Achthaler; Irmgard Heidler, Der Verleger Eugen Diederichs und seine Welt, Mainzer Studien zur Buchwissenschaft 8 [The Publisher Eugen Diederichs and His World, Mainz’s Studies on Book Sciences] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 103–108.


19 Though he regarded himself a poetical leader and pleaded for a “new Reich,” he did not side with the Nazis at all. See Thomas Karlauf, Stefan George: Die Entdeckung des Charisma [Stefan George: The Discovery of Charisma] (Munich: Blessing, 2007).


culture on equal terms at the same time after his final return to Germany in 1925. This is what the great psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), with whom he was friends, saw very clearly. Nevertheless, the issue is whether it is possible to be Chinese and German at the same time? Was anyone hitherto able to combine two different traditions within the same person? In other words, can a human being living in and between two worlds have something else other than a “broken identity”?

Second, Richard Wilhelm was blamed for not having been trained as an academic scholar in Chinese Studies. It is true that he had only a degree in theology and not in sinology. But one has to realize that the first Chair for Sinology was not founded before 1909 (in Hamburg) and that the only place where he could have studied the Chinese language before he left for Qingdao was the Seminar of Oriental Languages in Berlin which was established in 1887. Nevertheless, although he did not take courses in Chinese at a university, he did receive academic training thanks to his Chinese teachers who belonged to the elite of late Imperial China. This training was of a private nature. Unfortunately, being the pupil of a Chinese master and working together with Chinese scholars were totally despised back then. It was the prevailing opinion of the times that a true German scholar should never see China through the eyes of a Chinese. Of course, we cannot understand such an attitude today, which sounds very pro domo, because we sinologists of the third and fourth generation cannot do without the help of Chinese teachers, but we can still consider the arguments of the past, which may be of philosophical interest for us. Seeing China from a Chinese point of view was regarded as a subjective view. Only a view from the outside (Aussenblick) would offer an unbiased position. I have to confess that it is not easy to refute this argument. In the past, when talking about the importance of (mis)understanding between Europe and China, I have often put the emphasis on the necessity to see things from the outside. But there is a small and important difference between the opinion of German scholars back then and my point of view in recent years when I have said that Chinese writers and scholars who should gain a new understanding of themselves through the help of foreign languages or foreign cultures. This is what François Jullien (b. 1951) does when he reconsiders Greek philosophy from the perspective of ancient Chinese

thought: this is his so-called detour through China.\textsuperscript{24} Richard Wilhelm’s focus, however, is not Germany, but China. What he wants to discover is the essence of the Chinese mind. In his opinion, this is only possible from within, that is, from within China. To do so, he still makes use of the language of Goethe and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Should we not therefore say instead that although it was from within, Richard Wilhelm still approached China from without, from the standpoint of the German language and German thought? At any rate, we are now again coming across the issue of love. To look at China through China does not necessarily allow a critical stance, just as those Chinese obsessed with China do not see anything but China. Richard Wilhelm, nevertheless, kept also Europe and her problems on his mind, as we shall see in a moment. Thus there was more in his world view than just the transfiguration of China.

Third, under the influence of postcolonial studies, Richard Wilhelm is accused of having created the image of an eternal China. We will deal with this issue from an ideological perspective later on, but I would like to make two points here: Richard Wilhelm lived in China for about 25 years. He was commonly involved in political and practical matters. Only think of him making peace at Gaomi (Shandong) in 1900 when Chinese people and German soldiers confronted one another! Or think of his radical new approach to indirect missionary work: He did not want to convert Chinese people to Christianity through baptism, instead he wanted to lead the exemplary life of a Christian before them. Besides this, he ran a school and edited textbooks. In this respect, Wilhelm was a man of practice, not only of pure theory. The best proof of this is his diary of 1914 in which he reports on the Japanese occupation of Tsingtao.\textsuperscript{25} We witness here a man who selflessly takes care of the wounded during a war and helps the Chinese to leave the colony.

Another matter is that he met many different kinds of people in China: thieves, prostitutes, as well as the most conservative scholars. His view of an eternal China was not based only on books. Can we imagine today what Shandong was like at the turn of the last century? When I first got to Peking in 1974, it was more or less a village. As soon as I left the school building after class, I immediately found myself among farmers who led a life as though not much had happened

\textsuperscript{24} As introduction to the oeuvre of Jullien, see Kontroverse über China, Sino-Philosophie [Controversy over China, Sino Philosophy] (Berlin: Merve, 2008).

and changed in the past hundreds of years. These times are gone now, of course, and nowadays it is politics that wants to reconstruct a China that was destroyed in a more or less very systematic way by the Chinese themselves starting in 1949. But what politicians are going to reconstruct now is a pseudo-China, although it pretends to be eternal.

Fourth, Richard Wilhelm is accused of not having behaved up to the moral standards of his times. He is said to have engaged in affairs and to have been mean in matters whenever different opinions were involved. All I can say here is that it is not our job to judge someone from a moral point of view if we are not God. Someone without any faults and makes no mistakes is not human, but the Deity. We should therefore not treat Richard Wilhelm as a sage as many Chinese do, but we should instead understand him as a man of action. In this respect, he was typical for his time and may be even considered normal today.

Fifth, just like Franz Kuhn (1884–1961), the great translator of Chinese novels, Richard Wilhelm is also said to have distorted Chinese classics through his translations. We will come back to this argument later, but will express doubts now on the ideal of what is commonly called “the holy original” against which Richard Wilhelm has been measured by German sinologists for so many decades. Even scholars may still say or think that there can be only one original work, but that there will certainly be many different translations of it. The meaning hidden behind such an assumption is that any author presents the readership with a piece of work which is perfect in itself, namely, that it lacks mistakes and contradictions but is self-contained and clear. But whoever does the translation work, one who has edited works of the past or who is trained in the philosophy of language and in translation theory, knows that there is nothing like a holy original at all. Speaking only of China, one must recognize that anything classical that we are holding in our hands, such as *Lunyu*, *Zhuangzi*, *Liji* or *Mengzi*, are never firsthand editions, but reconstructions from a later age. Even in the twentieth century we must confess that any edition called *quanji* 全集 or *wenji* 文集 is neither complete (*quan*) nor an authentic collection. It is not only politics that decides how modern or contemporary authors are to be edited; it is also the author himself who is constantly revising his work. Ba Jin (巴金, 1905–2005), for instance, rewrote his oeuvre all lifelong out of fear of offending the authorities. His most famous novel *Family* (家, 1931) has nine different editions! Which one then, please, is the original? If you answer that the first edition must be regarded as the original version, what would you say if the author will not recognize it himself because of political, aesthetic or other
reasons? Would Confucius, if he were given the chance, agree to the edition of *Lunyu* that we are reading today?

According to the modern philosophy of language, there is no such thing as an unambiguous word or sentence.\(^{26}\) Every word has a long history and every sentence contains a whole set of different hidden significance behind its obvious meaning. That is why a so-called “literal translation,” which is so strongly insisted upon by all those who do not translate or lack a thorough understanding of translation theory, is never possible. It is not only the translator who creates a different text through translation, it is also the reader who creates a text—that is, the meaning of a text through his understanding, an understanding that may or even must differ from epoch to epoch, from person to person or even within a single person’s lifetime. The same person may also see the same text in a different light when confronted with it after the passage of time. This means that any reader or translator can only read and translate any piece of work according to his understanding and his language to him at any one moment in time. This holds true for the person who does the writing: All he can do is translate himself using the language of his times. For instance, Goethe could have never expressed himself in the language of Franz Kafka (1883–1924).

What can we learn from this? As a “child of his time,” Richard Wilhelm could not have created a universal translation that would be valid at any place and any time, in a language that we could understand and accept, not only today but forever. Thus, we must find out from his translations what he was aiming for and then decide if we can accept the goals of his undertaking or not. Our own burden will increase the more we discredit his achievements, because those who criticize him will have to be able to do it better, something that not only the critics of Richard Wilhelm never take into account! This may be the deeper reason why up to now, even after nearly one hundred years, we still do not have another or a complete translation of *Mengzi, Zhuangzi, Liji*, or *Yijing* in German, English or another language.

We can also put it another way. If Richard Wilhelm had not been a “child of his time,” he would never have translated and written so much up to the end of his life. Instead, he should have—facing an early death—preferred an easier departure, as we probably all hope for ourselves. But even though he knew he had limited time left on Earth, he

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was on a mission, a kind of mission that scholars and translators today do not dare to wish for. This is one of the reasons why Chinese Studies can be very boring: it is sometimes very hard to know or even to guess why someone is doing this and not that, and for what reason. But in the case of Richard Wilhelm, whatever he translated, wrote or commented upon, you always get the feeling it is his and your case that is at stake. Many sinologists do not like this intensity of engagement; some may even abhor it. The reason behind this disdain is quite simple. It is because scholars often maintain that scholarship should or must be neutral in the sense that it should not take one side or the other. In my eyes, such strict scholarship that does not dare to speak out is destined to perish. Max Weber (1864–1920) once insisted that a true scholar understand and accept that after thirty years his work will be outdated. We can add the following clause: Whether engaged or not, the work will become outdated. The strange thing is that on one hand, Weber is right: One must sacrifice oneself when dealing with something that someone has set one’s heart on, but on the other hand, Richard Wilhelm—even after one hundred years—is not out of fashion at all. In fact, it is just the opposite—he is a hot issue for all scholars not in Chinese Studies. What does this mean? To examine this issue, I must turn to the first of the two critics that I have selected for further discussion as a point in case—Michael Lackner. 27

IV. THE CRITICISM OF MICHAEL LACKNER

Michael Lackner, professor of sinology at Erlangen University, regards Richard Wilhelm as a “Chinese turned” (“sinisized”) German translator. He does not tell the reader in a straightforward way what he means by this exactly, but one can draw the conclusion from his deliberations that in his opinion, Richard Wilhelm as a translator was too much committed to the Chinese case. While I wonder if it is possible to speak of any person translating from German to Chinese as a “German turned” Chinese translator, I still respect his argument as it seems to

refute the postcolonial theory that accuses Western sinologists of not being imbued with the lessons of any Chinese teachers.28 Although it is very hard nowadays to satisfy the expectations of the two different approaches—one being philological, the other ideological—it seems that in the very end, it is thought that Richard Wilhelm either did not meet academic standards or that he overdid his engagement. This seems to mean that he was a philologist but not enough, and that he stood up for China but much too much. Still, I like what Michael Lackner points out:

Wilhelm’s translations did not modestly attempt to enrich Western knowledge about China; they were meant to solve the world’s (or, more specifically, Germany’s) problems: they constituted an ideological and philosophical program in themselves.

Why do I cherish this interpretation? It is because it offers a new perspective on the effect of translation work. If Michael Lackner is right, and I believe that he was, then translating means more than just rendering one language into another language, from the source language into the target language, as translation theory tells us. It means that through translation one can exert a certain influence upon people, upon an epoch, upon a nation and society. In this respect, translating becomes a means of educating and changing the world.29 We can discover the lasting influence of Wilhelm’s translation work in many ways. One needs only to mention his version of The Book of Changes (Yijing), which has had a deep effect on many people. I have friends who start every morning by consulting his Yijing to find out how to organize the new day. Although I am very skeptical of this practice, which was carried out by Richard Wilhelm, too, by the way, I still have to acknowledge that The Book of Changes may serve as a source of security for all those searching for the meaning of their existence. We can also think of philosopher Hermann Graf Keyserling (1880–1946) who, under the spiritual influence of Richard Wilhelm, established his “School of Wisdom” in Darmstadt (1920) and who was still influential


up to at least the 1960’s in German speaking countries. More importantly and of greater depth are, of course, the two people mentioned previously, writer Hermann Hesse and psychologist C. G. Jung. As both of them are of epochal importance, I will discuss them separately and in detail later.

One could ask what made Richard Wilhelm a “believer” (in Chinese wisdom) as Michael Lackner puts it, why did he choose to have “a religious attitude towards the objects of his translation” and how come he wanted to transmit to his contemporaries the “eternal values” that he found in the Chinese classics? To answer these difficult questions, we have to take into consideration the deep crisis mentioned before that German intellectuals went through in about 1900. This crisis followed Nietzsche’s dictum that “God is dead,” that is to say that Europe is dead, and what it had been standing for since Ancient Greece had come to an end. This meant that scholars, artists, and authors could no longer make any sense out of what they had once held as truth during their childhood and youth.

Richard Wilhelm is not the only and not the first to rescue himself through an encounter with China. Another excellent example is the Viennese author Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929) who wanted to commit suicide as a young man, but was rescued by reading classical works from India and China. Nowadays, asking or searching for the meaning of life and finally becoming “a believer” will meet disapproval from sinologists who would never raise issues like these in public and feel embarrassed if others do so. Thus, in this respect, calling Richard Wilhelm who did question the meaning of life “a believer” also implies some kind of insult.

32 Martin Heidegger, _Holzwege_ (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1963), 193–247, Nietzsche’s words “Gott ist tot” [Nietzsche’s words “God is dead”].
33 I dealt with the author’s new, path-breaking understanding of China and Europe in my article: “Schlanke Flamme oder schmale Leier” [Slim Flame or Narrow Lyre], _Minima Sinica_ (2/2001): 118–130.
One of the characteristics of modernity is the realization of reality as fragmentary. Since the French Revolution, mankind has gradually lost what it once had believed in—the idea of a holistic world.\textsuperscript{35} Instead of accepting this new world view, German intellectuals rebelled against the concept of the cosmos and society as totally separated entities. Chinese wisdom, as an “invisible church,”\textsuperscript{36} allowed Richard Wilhelm to stick to his traditional world view and to start a new mission, that is, the mission of rescuing Europe which he once characterized as a “murky pond.”\textsuperscript{37} In this characterization, he was and is not alone. More and more German intellectuals (including myself, too) see modernity with its strong emphasis on the individual as the wrong path of mankind.\textsuperscript{38} Their solution is, of course, different from Richard Wilhelm’s as they lack his theological background, but they do share one aspect, which is the insight that in order to feel true happiness, man must acknowledge that there must be something that transcends him, something that is higher than himself. In short, man needs devotion. In this respect, every critical German intellectual is a believer, possesses a mildly religious attitude, even if secularized, and regards values as lasting (to avoid the adjective “eternal”). In this way, Richard Wilhelm is nothing special. What makes him unique, however, is his choice of means for his mission.

Michael Lackner is not wrong when he characterizes Richard Wilhelm’s method of translation as making Chinese texts more human by demystifying and dehistorizing them, and filling in a new content by making use of the Bible, as well as Goethe’s and Kant’s language and ideas, thus creating a common philosophy for mankind where the spirit of the East and that of the West and “the pillars of his universe” are integrated as partners. In this context, Lackner argues that Richard Wilhelm did not reflect upon his translation work. This is true for the most part, but one might ask, would he have been able to do so?

\textsuperscript{35} As I have written about this aspect several times, I cannot go into detail here again, but would like to draw the reader’s attention to Robert Spaemann, \textit{Das unsterbliche Gerücht: Die Frage nach Gott und die Täuschung der Moderne} [The Immortal Rumor: The Question of God and the Deception of Modernity] (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2007), who deals with this question in a new way.

\textsuperscript{36} As for “\textit{unsichtbare Kirche},” see Salome Wilhelm, \textit{Richard Wilhelm}, 215.

\textsuperscript{37} This quotation is used by Michael Lackner, 92, but the source he cites does not say so! Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that this characterization of Europe is Wilhelm’s.

Translation theory is a very late development among academic disciplines. It did not come into existence before the 1960’s, and it did not become a hot issue before the 1980’s, at least not outside the field of Chinese Studies. By then, Richard Wilhelm was long dead, and most of those who translate from Chinese these days rarely pay attention to the historical and theoretical context of their work anyway.

Be it as it were, Michael Lackner’s criticism must be taken seriously. When doing so, however, we run into even broader problems. For instance, in an essay written in 1934, Ezra Pound (1885–1972) demanded from translators “to make it [the text under translation] new.” 39 And from the hermeneutic point of view, a text from a time gone by must speak to us; if it does not, it is dead. 40 This is why a translator or reader must carry out a conversation with a text to discover something that has meaning for his present life. In this sense, translating or reading a text always means constructing a text. This is called “excavating” the meaning of a text, according to hermeneutic theory. But we can only excavate something that corresponds to our understanding of past and present because the scope of our understanding is restricted. A full understanding, as theologians see it, is only possible for God, and we are not God. By this, I mean that any kind of translation is nothing more than a proposal we can accept or reject. Richard Wilhelm’s proposal was based on “the alliance of losers,” as Michael Lackner characterizes the refugees of Chinese revolution (1911) in Qingdao, among them Lao Naixuan (1843–1921) 41 and Gu Hongming (1857–1928), 42 who were very conservative representatives of Chinese eternal values. Moreover, it was based on a new understanding of Protestantism and missionary work by his father-in-law Christoph Blumhardt (1842–

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This aspect is summed up by the idea of an “invisible church,” which we will have to deal with later in a separate article.

In order to do justice in some part to Richard Wilhelm, I have to return to an argument that Michael Lackner made when discussing Wilhelm’s non-historical way of translation. Lackner even goes so far in his criticism to call Wilhelm a figurist, namely, someone who purifies a saying from its magic elements to fill in a new Christian or Kantian content. With respect to Richard Wilhelm’s work, for instance, the character ming 命 is translated as “God’s will,” instead of—as Michael Lackner demands—“decree.” Lydia Gerber is of a similar, even harsher, opinion. She writes:

Through many footnotes pointing to parallels in Western philosophy and religion, through his translation partly alienating the original text, and through suppressing likeable passages that are not necessarily accessible to a Western readership, Wilhelm created for this purpose an easily digestible version of the Confucian doctrine. For this aim he had to undo essential principles such as the necessity of filial piety which did not seem to be transferable.

Because even Confucius (551–479 BC) secularized once religious notions such as li 禮 (from “taboo” to “rite”) or xiu 修 (from “purify” to “educate oneself”), that is, changed their original meaning for his own purposes of education, one can draw the conclusion that any kind

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43 As for his life and thought, see Walter Nigg, Rebellen eigener Art. Eine Blumhards-Deutung [Rebels of Their Own Kind: A Blumhardt Interpretation] (Stuttgart: Quell, 1988).


46 Durch zahlreiche Fußnoten, die auf Parallelen zu westlicher Philosophie und Religion hinweisen, durch eine den Originaltext in Teilen sehr verfremdende Übersetzung und durch die Unterdrückung einem westlichen Publikum nicht ohne weiteres zugänglicher oder sympathischer Textstellen kreierte Wilhelm zu diesem Zweck eine leichtverdauliche Version der konfuzianischen Lehre, die so wesentliche Prinzipien, wie die Unbedingtheit kindlicher Pietät als nicht vermittelbar unterdrücken musste.
of understanding is a process of change. Only within such a process is culture possible. This implies, of course, what Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) had demonstrated so convincingly in his important article on translation work, which is that the task of the translator to contribute to setting something free that is hidden in a text which is still waiting for its redemption in the written word. This, of course, allows a translator to interpret any text in his own way. Such a dictum does not mean, however, that a translation can be done any way one wants to. A living translator can be asked to justify why he did it this way and not that way. Unfortunately, we no longer put these questions to Richard Wilhelm. But we could at least try to answer all the questions that Michael Lackner has fortunately brought up and try to do this in the sense of Richard Wilhelm.

One point that has been neglected in all critiques on Wilhelm’s Christian way of translation is the historical dimension. Richard Wilhelm is not the first to see Chinese classics in a Christian light. Rather, he is one of the last of a long line of theologians who translated the Taoteking in a Jewish and Greek, and not only Christian, context without a sufficient knowledge of Chinese. This started with Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), France’s first official sinologist (Chair since 1814) in 1823 and included prominent figures such as the father of Hermann Hesse and Johannes Hesse (1847–1916). Even if from today’s standpoint one might sneer at their attempts to make Laotse the representative of “theosophy in China,” one should at least criticize Wilhelm within the framework of this history, a history that finally has even Gu Hongming with his Christian translation of Lunyu as its witness. With the knowledge of this history, one would discover that Richard Wilhelm had to meet certain expectations of his potential readership, including his publisher who suffered from deep depressions, which was looking for new religions as a means of solving the crisis of their times, and that Wilhelm, in comparison to his predecessors, was still a very cautious translator.

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49 Heidler, Der Verleger Eugen Diederichs, 33ff. (Depression and crisis are the favorite words in this biographical chapter!); 312ff. (World religions).
Michael Lackner is not the only one who has criticized Richard Wilhelm for having created the image of an eternal China. His Chinese disciple Fang Weigui, who now teaches comparative literature at Normal University of Peking, did something similar.\(^50\) Following Wolfgang Bauer (1930–1997) who discovered the specific role of the present tense in Richard Wilhelm’s recollections *Die Seele Chinas* (1926),\(^51\) he draws conclusions from Wilhelm’s removal of all dates and from his narrative style of presenting events as if they were currently happening: The author of *The Soul of China* wanted not only to create a timeless, that is, a timelessly valid China, but at the same time he aimed at laying down the collective idea of a country, that of China, and by doing so he was finally able to express from his point of view the Chinese people’s character for a broad readership. Here we are confronted again with the approach of reducing a complex history into a single string of representations. Before we ask if Richard Wilhelm in doing so was unique or not, we have to follow Fang Weigui’s arguments. He admits that Richard Wilhelm, as “the messenger of a spiritual China,” was able to invoke a new fascination of China with his fresh views on the Chinese people. The Chinese, in Wilhelm’s view, have a soul, and this soul is one of harmony, peace, tranquility, etc.

It is possible that Richard Wilhelm was the first to concede the Chinese a soul, something that is said to be very German and in this sense atypical for China. But does this justify the denial of human soul in modern Chinese history? One has only to think of Lu Xun (1881–1936) who was called the soul of China when he was buried. In this case, Lu Xun helps us to even deepen the discussion, because through his creation of the character of A Q, the Chinese everyman, and his narrative

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\(^51\) In his preface for the reprint of Richard Wilhelm, *Die Seele Chinas: Mit einem Vorwort von Wolfgang Bauer* [The Soul of China, with a Foreword by Wolfgang Bauer] (Frankfurt: Insel, 1980), 18–19.
with the same name in 1921, this Chinese writer attempted to depict the
typical character of a typical Chinese. And if we bring in Lin Yutang
(1895–1976) into the discussion, who also presented his version of the
Chinese through his bestseller My Country and My People (1936), we
discover as well that Richard Wilhelm was not alone during this time in
trying to come to terms with the essence of Chinese culture. Wilhelm
may not have asked who the Chinese are, but Lu Xun and Lin Yutang
certainly did. In fact, Lu Xun draws a very grim picture of the Chinese
people, while Lin Yutang does not. The reason behind this is quite ob-
vious: Lu Xun is said to have hated China, but it is obvious that Lin
Yutang did not. The latter’s book My Country and My People is full of
humor and warmth. I do not know if he ever confesses that he loves
China, but when reading him, at least one gets the feeling that he was
on the side of the Chinese people. What is my point? The China of Lu
Xun and that of Lin Yutang are not depicted as less eternal than Rich-
ard Wilhelm’s. Are all of them wrong then? All of these men were en-
gaged writers: Lu Xun and Lin Yutang fought for a better China; Rich-
ard Wilhelm for a better Germany and for a better Europe. All of them
needed a counter protagonist: For Lu Xun, the China of the warlords
and of the Guomindang was the enemy; for Lin Yutang, it was first the
China of the warlords, then of the Communists; for Richard Wilhelm, it
was a materialistic Germany and Europe before and after World War I.

Fang Weigui is right in arguing that any positive image of another
country or culture in the works of sinophile literati is insofar a con-
struct as it has one’s own culture and country as its contrast and coun-
terpart. So whenever Richard Wilhelm speaks of the Chinese as truly
human, he will be condemning the European as purely specialist, when
he understands Chinese culture as the “civilization of being” (“Seinskultur”), he will regard European culture as the “civilization
capable of doing something” (“Könnenskultur”) etc.52 One must, nev-
ertheless, keep in mind that Richard Wilhelm’s China was not based on
bookish knowledge and that his relationship to the Chinese was not one
based on texts. He lived among and with the Chinese nearly half of his
lifetime. So when he says that respect (“Ehrfurcht”)53 is the basic atti-
dude of the Chinese people, he may have thought less about what he
read in the Liji and thought more of what he had experienced in real

52 Actually, these terms were coined by Hermann Keyserling, Schöpferische Erkenntnis
[Creative Knowledge] (Darmstadt: Otto Reiche, 1922), 221, but they totally fit into
the spirit of Wilhelm’s writings.

53 See for instance, Richard Wilhelm, Chinesische Lebensweisheit, 47–64.
life. Why am I focusing on the virtue of respect in the face of so many other possible virtues? German critics of modern thinking believe that one of the problems that modern man has to face is the problem of the lack of respect. After the so-called death of God, man became his own one and only point of reference. He can solely respect himself now and no longer acknowledges his limits. But as German philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini (1885–1968) has pointed out, man is a man of bounds. Only when he is able and willing to live within his limits can he become happy. Respect for others, be they elders or heavenly creatures, plays an important part here. Should Chinese wisdom, which Richard Wilhelm saw as the remedy and rescue for Europe, really be belittled so much, as critics of traditional Chinese culture and of Richard Wilhelm seem to do? Fang Weigui goes even so far as to accuse Richard Wilhelm of producing an image of China that is pure ideology, thus espousing a false consciousness (“falsches Bewusstsein”), a favorite expression of the new Left in Germany after 1968!

What makes Richard Wilhelm so open to attack is his courage to judge. A scholar is commonly asked to abstain from opinion. But Richard Wilhelm did not do this. The reason why is quite obvious: He felt responsible for Germany and Europe, both as a translator and a scholar; he wanted to change “his country and his people” for the better. We do not know how successful he was in this respect, but we definitely cannot say that he was without merit in all his undertakings. He certainly represented a different, if not better, Germany, as we can see by the fact that the Nazis shut down the “School of Wisdom” in 1933 in which he had played a very important part. By doing so, they ended a project of the German intellectuals to provide Germany and Europe with eternal values from the East. Eternity in this case meant something quite different from what Fascist Germany was preparing for, and it was also different from what modernity stood and still stands

56 As for the historical background of this closure and for Keyserling’s fight against Nazi Germany, see Gahlings, Hermann Graf Keyserling, 236–271.
for. It meant the equality of East and West, the precedence of man over machine, and spiritual unity in a continuously dissolving world.

What I have offered here is only a brief look back. I could not really go that deeply into the details of the effect that Richard Wilhelm had on his times and on the present-day. The more one deals with German literature and philosophy in twentieth century, the more one discovers his immense influence. Martin Heidegger, for instance, developed important parts of his philosophy after reading Wilhelm’s translations of *Zhuang Zi* and *Lao Zi*. In a similar way, Martin Buber (1878–1965), whose philosophy owes much to Taoism, had been creative for many years under the influence of Wilhelm. The most astonishing discoveries, however, can be made when dealing with modern German authors. For Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), the encounter with Wilhelm’s *Taoteking* in 1920 was a turning point in his writing career: Lao Zi became his lifelong companion in his world outlook and aesthetics. And novelist Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) created the modern style of German narrative based on Wilhelm’s *Lie Zi* after its publication in 1912. Finally, the Nobel laureate of 1981, Elias Canetti (1905–1994), to complete our list of eminent examples, called Wilhelm’s Meng Zi and Confucius his life-long teachers. In this respect, Richard Wilhelm was the teacher of many German intellectuals. Even today, outside the field of Chinese Studies, his German and translation work are praised by philosophers and literary critics. The most beautiful praise, however, is from Hermann Hesse who, in 1956, called Richard Wil-

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59 Lü Dsi, *Das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund* [The True Book of the Swelling Primal Ground] (Jena: Diederichs, 1912).


helm a European of the Future (Zukunftseuropäer) and in this respect, a role model and a man before his time.\textsuperscript{62}