

Foreword

What, exactly, is “world literature” today? This term never means all literatures produced around the world. Rather, just decades ago, scholars talked about a kind of literature that travels with passports across national and linguistic borders. But in the age of ubiquitous digitality and AI-translation software, does it mean that Harry Potter and its fanfictions, “Instapoetry” like that of Rupi Kaur, *Fifty Shades of Gray* and its likes of shallow, libidinous, and satiating literature, instantly read across the world due to their facile consumability and translatability, are the true “world literature” of our age? What would Goethe say, if he were alive today?

Richard Wilhelm’s translation of Tang Dynasty poetry, which, thanks to the effort of Dorothea Wippermann, is finding a second life among German readers, was made after Germany’s short-lived colonial expansion. Wilhelm played a small role in the imperialist cause as a missionary, whose job was to proselytize and convert the Chinese to good Christians. It took a truly generous and warm soul like Wilhelm’s to turn himself instead from an imperial agent to an ambassador of another culture, representing a nation so trampled and downtrodden like China in the early twentieth century to the European reading public. As Hannah Arendt remarks, “even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination,” coming from “the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth” (“preface” to *Men in Dark Times*). Wilhelm’s life and work embodied such flickering light that succeeded an essential tradition of the German humanities discipline: that of the cosmopolitan spirit of Goethe, who once envisioned a kind of “world literature” not as an institution, but as a path toward linguistic self-realization – toward the realization of the unlimited potential of human interactions. It was not coincidental that Wilhelm deeply admired Goethe, a connection well examined by scholars like Wolfgang Bauer, Adrian Hsia, and Michael Jaeger.

The poems that Wilhelm chose to translate are neither easily consumable nor instantly translatable. Instead, readers must actively engage with the translations to reach the original poems written in an alien language more than a millennium ago in an alien country. In other words, these poems pose challenges to the translators and to the readers alike. Such difficult negotiations rarely achieve perfect results, and Wilhelm’s translations, just like those made by scholars before him and after him, are no exceptions. For instance, Wilhelm typically chooses to gloss over erudite allusions that demand footnotes, a strategy that is no longer adopted by most contemporary Sinologists who struggle to recreate some sense of “au-

thenticity.” Nor does Wilhelm choose to preserve parallelism between couplets, since it often leads to awkward German sentences. The results are elegant poems in the German language. It is perhaps another reason why they deserve a second life among readers: as mellifluous melodies enticing them to wander deeper into the labyrinthine garden of Chinese poetry.

As a naturalized German citizen who sees China, the US, and Germany equally as her homelands, I am pained to observe that we are perhaps entering another era of “dark times.” The ancient specters of rising and colliding empires are on the horizon. It is thus a timely reminder, with this thin volume of poetry, that even in times darker than ours cultural understanding was possible. If powers erect barriers, then may poetry tear them down.

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