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Translation and the Transcultural Dissemination of Chinese Culture

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Abstract

This article explores the intercultural significance and creativity of translation in the global dissemination of Chinese culture. It argues that translation is not merely a linguistic transformation, but a process of cultural transformation. Beginning with the German translation of one of Feng Zhi's sonnets, it illustrates how translation can draw upon philosophical resources within a specific linguistic-cultural context. The article then introduces the theoretical foundations of transculturality (*Transkulturalität*) and *transculturation*, examining how translation fosters literary innovation across cultures. Furthermore, the article argues that translation serves as a mediator between heterogeneous cultures, creating a "third space" that is neither original nor target culture. Concepts such as *ju zhi yi tu* 橘枳易土 are used to explain mechanisms of grafting and transformation in translation. Finally, the article draws upon examples from the Chinese translation of Buddhist texts, family history research, and the cross-cultural adaptation of modern philosophy to propose that translation is a vital means of responding to modernity and shaping future cultural forms – a decentralized pathway for knowledge reproduction and reimagination.

Keywords

translation – intercultural communication – transculturation – transculturality (*Transkulturalität*) – knowledge transfer and creativity

This article discusses a number of preliminary ideas the author developed after shifting his research interest from international sinology to global history, and especially after incorporating specialized histories (*zhuanmen shi* 專門史) into his work. Since the ideas presented below have yet to be developed into a systematic body of thought, the reader should instead consider them as *Ansätze* or “germs” of ideas. This article comprises four main parts: the author’s discussion of a poem by Feng Zhi 馮至 (1905–1993); an introduction to the ideas of transculturality and translation; an overview of the question of creativity in translation; and finally, some concluding remarks.

1 The German Translation of a Poem by Feng Zhi

Feng Zhi’s sonnets (*Shisi hang ji* 十四行集) published in China in 1942, contain 27 poems of great significance in modern Chinese literary history.¹ In 1987, the German sinologist—and the author’s mentor—Wolfgang Kubin translated and published these poems in German, earning Feng Zhi the *Inter Nationes Kunstpreis* (International Award for Art) from the Federal Republic of Germany the same year.² It is interesting to notice the profound difference between the original poems and the German translations. To illustrate this point, we will take a close look at the fifth sonnet in Feng’s collection – *Weinisi* 威尼斯, *Venedig* (Venice) in the German translation – which alludes to the famous water city.

As many may know, between 1930 and 1935 Feng Zhi studied at Heidelberg University and the University of Berlin. The second quatrain and the first tercet of the sonnet *Weinisi* read:

One loneliness is one island,
All are connected as friends.
When you give me your hand,
It is as if a bridge has formed over water.
When you smile at me,
It is as if on the island across the water
There has suddenly opened a window.³

1 Feng Zhi 馮至, *Shisi hang ji* 十四行集 (Guilin: Mingri she, 1942).

2 Feng Zhi, *Die Sonette des Feng Zhi*, trans. Wolfgang Kubin (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1987).

3 Tr. note: The English translation follows Wang Xiaojue 王曉珏, “Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature across the 1949 Divide” (Cambridge,

一個寂寞是一座島，
 一座座都結成朋友。
 當你向我拉一拉手，
 便像一座水上的橋；
 當你向我笑一笑，
 便像是對面島上
 忽然開了一扇樓窗。⁴

Venice consists of 119 separate islands. Only connected, however, do they form the city of Venice as we know it. It is for this reason that the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), whom Feng Zhi admired, repeatedly wrote about Venice as a symbol for the human world and human interaction. The images of individuals holding hands and exchanging smiles like open windows establish the poem's main theme: to overcome human solitude and achieve human connection. In the German translation, however, another underlying theme soon becomes apparent: *Kommunikation* (communication), a pivotal philosophical concept of the twentieth century. One of the most important scholars in this regard is of course Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), the grand master of *Existenzphilosophie* (Philosophy of Existence) and Feng Zhi's professor at Heidelberg. Apart from attending Jaspers's lectures, Feng Zhi had another point of contact with him: I recently looked through Feng Zhi's doctoral oral exam transcript from Heidelberg, and realized that Jaspers was one of the examiners for one of Feng's secondary subjects: philosophy. According to Jaspers, "communication is the universal precondition of humanity (*universelle Bedingung des Menschseins*)"; without communication, social existence becomes impossible. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) similarly declared, "Our humanity (*Menschlichkeit*) calls upon us to become human (*Menschwerdung*)."⁵ According to Buber, it is impossible to become human without dialogue and communication between different individuals. Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who succeeded Karl Jaspers as professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University after 1948, thought that

Mass: Harvard Asia Center, 2013), 219. For a German translation see: Wolfgang Kubin, *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur*, vol. 7, *Die chinesische Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: K. G. Saur, 2005), 231. "Jede Einsamkeit ist eine Insel, | Insel für Insel schließt sie Freundschaft. | Wenn deine Hand nach mir faßt, | sind wir eine Brücke über dem Wasser; | Oder dein Lächeln scheint | ein Fenster, plötzlich aufgestoßen, | von der Insel gegenüber."

4 Feng Zhi 馮至, *Shisi hang ji* 十四行集, in *Feng Zhi quanji* 馮至全集, ed. Han Yaocheng 韓耀成 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 1: 220.

5 Cited from Wolfgang Kubin, *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur*, 7: 231.

humans are constituted through dialogue within their “actual being” (*Dasein*).⁶ Lastly, it is worth considering John Donne’s (1572–1631) famous line: “No man is an island.” Many important associations and connections only become obvious, however, once Feng’s poetry is translated into German. It is only in the German context that much of Feng Zhi’s imagery begins to reveal a direct link to the philosophical spirit of the time.

Discussing Feng Zhi’s sonnets, Kubin wrote: “In his sonnets, Feng Zhi masterfully unites simplicity of language with depth of thought, blending Chinese heritage with Western poetic tradition.”⁷ This is an accomplishment that requires profound knowledge of both Chinese and Western culture. Kubin added: “At their core, Feng Zhi’s sonnets are meditations on human existence (*Existenz*) – though he often grounds such reflections, as in this case, in the very process of writing.”⁸ This means that Feng Zhi’s concerns transcended his own interests as a Chinese scholar and individual and extended towards the broader concerns of humanity itself. He thereby followed in the footsteps of scholars such as Jaspers, Buber, and Gadamer who explored the greater philosophical question of human existence. Feng Zhi, however, relied on literary imagery to move the discussion further. Therefore, to fully understand this issue today, it is necessary to take a closer look at the historical context of this philosophical discussion, which is difficult to grasp within the confines of a single linguistic and cultural framework.

A good translation often manages to establish a direct connection to a different culture. Years ago, I read Heidegger’s booklet *Gelassenheit*,⁹ which is based on a lecture he delivered in his hometown on 30 October 1955.¹⁰ Before that, I had translated the German term *Gelassenheit* as *tairan ziruo* 泰然自若 (calmness). Then I came across Koichi Tsujimura’s 辻村公一 (1922–2010) Japanese translation, in which he rendered *Gelassenheit* – originally coined by Eckhart von Hochheim (ca. 1260–ca. 1328) – with the Japanese Buddhist term

6 Ibid., 7: 231. “Für Gadamer konstituiert sich der Mensch durch das Gespräch in seinem Dasein als Person für sich und andere.” Author’s note: Here, I translate *Dasein* as *xianshi cunzai* 現實存在 (actual being), whereas in Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) philosophical context, it is predominantly rendered as *ci zai* 此在 (being-here).

7 Ibid., 7: 231. “Feng Zhi [...] gelingt mit den Sonetten die wundersame Einheit von verbaler Einfachheit und gedanklicher Reife, von chinesischem Erbe und westlicher Tradition.” The English translation is by the translator.

8 Ibid., 7: 233; the English translation is by the translator.

9 Tr. note: *Gelassenheit* can be translated as “release,” “serenity,” or “composure.”

10 Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1959).

hōge (*fang xia* 放下, letting go).¹¹ The advantage of this rendering is that scholars from an East Asian cultural background can compare *Gelassenheit* with the Chan Buddhist concept of *fang xia* (often translated as “release” or “abandonment”), which dates back to the Song dynasty (960–1279).¹²

2 “Transculturality”, “Transculturation”, and Translation

In the 1990s, the German philosopher and aesthetician Wolfgang Iser proposed the concept *Transkulturalität* (transculturality), which can be translated as *kua wenhua xing* 跨文化性 or *chao wenhua xing* 超文化性. How should we understand this concept? Premodern societies were homogeneous and monolithic – there were vast differences between, for example, the Chinese, European, and Islamic cultural spheres. In Germany, the orientalist and diplomat Max von Brandt (1835–1920) advised Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941) that it would be advantageous to colonize China. After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), Wilhelm employed the term *Gelbe Gefahr* (Yellow Peril) to defend the legitimacy and legality of German and European colonial activities in China. Wilhelm commissioned the artist Hermann Knackfuß (1848–1915) to create the famous lithographic work *Völker Europas, wahret Eure heiligsten Güter* (*Peoples of Europe, guard your most sacred goods*), conveying his geopolitical vision to his fellow European monarchs, while positioning Germany as the leading power in Europe.¹³ Politically, Wilhelm firmly believed that the twentieth century was about to witness a racial war that would eventually determine global hegemony. A contemporary of Wilhelm, the German ethnologist and anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) proposed the theory of *Kulturkreise* (cultural spheres, *wenhua juan* 文化圈) in 1898. Based on a particular set of cultural traits, he classified cultures into various culture spheres. Both the Yellow Peril doctrine and the *Kulturkreise* theory, however, are considered outdated by many scholars today. In Iser’s view, if premodern societies are homogeneous and monolithic, contemporary culture is a combination of heterogeneity and hybridity, and translation epitomizes this process.

11 Martin Heidegger, *Hōge* 放下, trans. Tsujimura Kōichi 辻村公一 (Tokyo: Rishosha, 1963).

12 On this topic, see Li Xuetao 李雪濤, “Haidege’er de Gelassenheit yu chanzong de ‘fangxia” 海德格爾的 Gelassenheit 與禪宗的 “放下”, in *Bijiao zhexue yu bijiao wenhua luncong* 比較哲學與比較文化論叢, ed. Wu Genyou 吳根友 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2019), 14: 76–86.

13 On the lithograph itself, the German text was translated in English as follows: Nations of Europe! Join in the defence of your faith and your homes!

How should we understand the term culture? Historically, culture was mostly viewed as a boundary that demarcated one group from another. Today, however, culture is increasingly understood as more dynamic, formed through the constant exchange and fusion of foreign and indigenous elements, perpetually evolving through historical and intercultural shifts. Culture is now considered a bridge or bond of connection rather than a tool of distinction – it is thus no longer helpful to stress the unique nature of any particular culture sphere.

In his short book *Transkulturalität: Realität-Geschichte-Aufgabe* (*Transculturality: Reality, History, and Challenges*), Welsch posits a theoretical basis and methodology for transcultural research.¹⁴ But what does Welsch mean by the term *transculturality*? In the past, trans-culture was often linked to migration. According to Welsch, however, today all of us are a part of trans-culturality. We are no longer defined by a single, uniform culture – we are hybrid. What should we consider the most important factor for interpersonal communication? It should be the similarities between people, expanding constantly through communication. Two different cultures were previously conceptualized as two distinct and separate spheres of influence incapable of communicating with one another. In his famous work *Monadologie* (*Monadology*), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) assigned the very same characteristics to his concept of monads (*danzi* 單子). The actual relationship between people, however, is different from that between monads. The existing connections and areas of overlap between individual entities is exactly what allows people to communicate with one another. It is in this sense that Welsch considered all people to be cultural hybrids. This idea, of course, has never been universally accepted, and it was outright rejected by many, especially in the nineteenth century and in the 1930s, which witnessed one of the largest atrocities in human history.

In 1948, the philosopher Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) published *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*.¹⁵ In his discussion on Buddhism, Feng raises two related but distinct concepts of considerable importance: “Buddhism in China,” on the one hand, and “Chinese Buddhism” on the other. “Buddhism in China” refers to different schools of thought such as the Nirvana (*niepan* 涅槃), Satyasiddhi (*chengshi* 成實), Daśabhūmika (*dilun* 地論) or Mahāyāna-saṃgraha (*shelun* 攝論) schools during the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589) as well as the Yogācāra school of Buddhism (法相唯識宗) that dates

14 Wolfgang Welsch, *Transkulturalität: Realität-Geschichte-Aufgabe* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017).

15 Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948).

back to the Tang dynasty (618–907). These schools had not yet come into close contact with China and only prescribed adherence to the religious and philosophical traditions of India. Buddhist schools such as Chan 禪, Tiantai 天臺, or Huayan 華嚴, on the other hand, were integrated into the framework of Chinese thought and traditions. These schools, therefore, squarely fall under the category of “Chinese Buddhism.” This distinction makes it easier to understand why certain Buddhist schools never possessed much vitality in China. Schools of thought in the former category were mere transplants, while schools in the latter category were actual adaptations to the new cultural environment. After Buddhism had spread to China, and especially during the Wei (220–265) and Jin (265–420) dynasties, there was a time when the two traditions were actively looking for common philosophical ground. In China, Xuanxue 玄學, with its major concept of *wu* 無 (non-being), was a mainstream school of thought at the time. Texts such as the *Dapin borejing* 大品般若經 (The Larger Sūtra on the Perfection of Wisdom) and the *Xiaopin borejing* 小品般若經 (The Smaller Sūtra on the Perfection of Wisdom) were also translated into Chinese during this period and were mainly concerned with the concept of *śūnya* (*kong* 空) or “emptiness.” These similarities established an internal connection between the two different schools of thought. The term *tathā* (*ruxing* 如性) in Buddhism comes from the Upanishads and means “suchness.” It denotes the highest wisdom that can only be experienced and understood intuitively. Interestingly, translators at the time were influenced by the Xuanxue school and translated the concept into Chinese as *ben wu* 本無 or “fundamental non-being.” From this point onwards, Xuanxue and Buddhism have been linked through the intersection and exchange of ideas.

Welsch’s concept of transculturality suggests that modern culture is characterized by diverse mutual influences and interdependences and that it can be disseminated via networks. What are the results if culture does indeed spread in this manner? At this point it is instructive to introduce another important scholar on the theory of transculturality. Today, researchers are mostly focused on transcultural theories in the Anglo-American or European tradition. Since few scholars have paid attention to the academic discourse in Latin America, we have unfortunately lost track of many of the theoretical origins of the discussion about transculturality. In 1940, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz Fernández (1899–1986) published the monograph *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar).¹⁶ In this book, Ortiz illustrates the reciprocity and creative potential of cultural contact

16 Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1940).

between Europe and Latin America,¹⁷ and develops the concept of *transculturación* (transculturation) to describe the phenomena of cultural fusion and convergence. Transculturation does not simply refer to the process of one culture transitioning into another culture or the acquisition of another culture by “acculturation” (*hanhua* 涵化/ *wenhua shiying* 文化適應/ *wenhua yiru* 文化移入). Nor does the term just describe the “loss or uprooting of a previous culture” or “deculturation” (*feiwenhua shiying* 非文化適應/ *wenhua weisuo* 文化萎縮). Transculturation is instead a combination of these concepts that also stresses the idea of the “emergence of new cultural phenomena” as a result. It is precisely because Ortiz emphasizes the emergence of new cultural phenomena that his idea of transculturation is often translated as *wenhua hu hua* 文化互化 (cultural mutual transformation). The result of transculturation is considered an entirely new phenomenon that is clearly distinct from both the original culture as well as the culture of the translator.

Over recent years, the author has at times also engaged in research on art history, which offers examples of transculturation. The persimmon, for instance, is a native plant, cultivated in China for more than three thousand years. Since the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (202 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, the “persimmon pattern” (*shidi wen* 柿蒂紋) had been used as a decorative motif on objects of jade, bronze, pottery, porcelain, or silk, until it eventually came to be considered as auspicious. After persimmons were introduced to Japan during the Muromachi period (ca. 1336–ca. 1573) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Japanese artists created the abstract term *shibui* 渋い that originally described the astringent flavor of unripe persimmons. By the early Edo period (1603–1868), in the seventeenth century, *shibui* had already turned into an aesthetic category. In China, on the other hand, people emphasized the sweetness of persimmons and assigned this fruit the symbolic meaning of success and good fortune. Persimmons are therefore often used in auspicious motifs in a Chinese context. Japanese culture, on the other hand, focuses on the “astringency” of persimmons, which refers to the actual flavor of the unripe fruit and symbolizes its imperfect nature. Eventually, the Japanese further developed this idea into an aesthetic of “astringency.” By combining this aesthetic idea with a number of Buddhist concepts, the Japanese then arrived at the aesthetic principle of *wabi-sabi* 侘び寂び.¹⁸ From the astringent flavor of persimmons, Japan developed a true appreciation for life itself and turned the

17 Compare also Zhang Yuchen 張宇晨, “Chun yu za: Guba de wenhua huixiang” 純與雜：古巴的文化迴響, *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中華讀書報, November 16, 2022, 18.

18 Tr. note: *wabi-sabi* 侘寂 is rooted in Zen Buddhism’s Three Marks of Existence (*sanbōin* 三法印): impermanence (*mujō* 無常), suffering (*ku* 苦), and emptiness/non-self (*kū* 空).

concept into an aesthetic of life. The idea of *shibui* eventually developed into an aesthetic concept with global influence and contemporary significance.¹⁹ It is almost impossible to predict which new cultural phenomena will emerge from the fusion of different cultures. This is exactly what makes the process of transculturation so inherently interesting and fascinating. Ortiz also uses *ajiacó*, a South American soup, as a metaphor for the phenomenon of transculturation. The creamy chicken soup from Columbia is sometimes translated as *lawei duntang* 辣味燉湯 and consists of a variety of potatoes and sweet corn. Having simmered for an extended period, the ingredients eventually turn into an indistinguishable part of the soup. If an observer is unfamiliar with the local cuisine, it is almost impossible to determine the raw ingredients. Unlike a salad, where ingredients remain identifiable, the process of cooking the *ajiacó* transforms the potatoes, sweet corn, and chicken into a completely new delicacy.

What needs to be emphasized is that the process of translation is the fusion of heterogeneous cultures and not the development of one homogeneous civilization. In earlier works on international sinology, the author has already argued that this particular field of academic research is by no means a natural extension of Chinese culture overseas. Precisely because the translation of Chinese materials is amongst the most important tasks for any sinologist, international sinology is essentially engaged in a process of transformation. Translation is not just a conversion in terms of language but instead the creation of an entirely new culture. The translation into Chinese of Buddhist classics such as the Lotus Sutra (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經), the Amitābha Sutra (*Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經), the Vimalakirti Sutra (*Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經), or the Diamond Sutra (*Jingang jing* 金剛經) may serve as an example here. In the history of Sanskrit literature, none of these texts are considered classic literary pieces. Once translated into Chinese, however, these Buddhist texts not only became classics of Chinese Buddhism but also classics of Chinese culture more generally. Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 701–761), the famous Tang poet, adopted the courtesy name (*zi* 字) Mojie 摩詰 and the pen name (*hao* 號) Mojie Jushi 摩詰居士. He apparently chose this courtesy name to form the name Wang

It unifies two principles: *wabi* 侘 (subdued) and *sabi* 寂 (rustic patina). Together, they express an appreciation for transience and natural flaws.

19 See also Li Xuetao 李雪濤, “Mu Xi ‘Liushi tu’ yanjiu” 牧溪 “六柿圖” 研究, *Meishu yanjiu* 美術研究, no. 4 (2022): 54–65; Li Xuetao 李雪濤, “Shi shi ru yi’ yu ‘sewei’ zhi bie: Zhong-Ri youguan shizi de butong yishu shenmei qujing” “柿柿如意” 與 “澀味” 之別—中日有關柿子的不同藝術審美取徑, in *Ribenxue yanjiu* 日本學研究, ed. Guo Lianyou 郭連友 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2023), 33: 48–59.

Mojie, the Chinese transliteration for Vimalakirti.²⁰ This is an example of the immense influence of Buddhist classics in Chinese history.

When Chinese literary works were translated into German, they equally became part of an existing body of German literature. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) created the concept of *Weltliteratur* (world literature) after reading the German translation of “Haoqiu zhuan” 好逑傳,²¹ the English translation of “Huajian ji” 花箋記, and the French translation of “Yu Jiao Li” 玉嬌梨.²² Chinese scholars of literary history might argue that Goethe only read a few unimpressive *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 (scholar-beauty) novels. Had he read *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義, or *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 instead, it might have led him to develop even more impressive theoretical concepts. However, this argument is difficult to sustain due to the underlying asymmetry in comparative literature studies. Literary works that are highly acclaimed in their original cultural contexts are by no means always well received in translation.

This characteristic of translations corresponds well to the broader trends in historical research today. In the twenty-first century, Michael Werner and the French historian Bénédicte Zimmermann proposed the idea of *histoire croisée* (entangled history).²³ They suggested that a transfer of knowledge does not necessarily follow the fixed pattern “from a sender to a receiver,” since the process is also influenced by questions of hierarchy and power. Whether knowledge is accepted or rejected is deeply rooted in the social and cultural background of the receiver. It therefore becomes an urgent task to develop more suitable methods of understanding and constructing patterns of knowledge formation. One suggestion in this regard is to put the focus on the role of translators. They participate in the transfer and transformation of knowledge and form the nodes of the networks for knowledge dissemination. It is within this framework that we can hope to move beyond static definitions of knowledge and instead improve our understanding of the dynamic patterns of knowledge formation and methods of dissemination.

20 Tr. note: A central figure in the Mahayana Buddhist text *Vimalakirti Sutra*.

21 The book was published in German translation with the title *Haoh Kjöeh Tschwen*.

22 The book was published in French translation with the title *Ju-Kiao-Li, Les deux cousins*.

23 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.

3 Creativity in Translation

The third part of this article will discuss the question of creativity in the process of translation. In *Zhongguo foxue yuanliu luejiang* 中國佛學源流略講, Lü Cheng 呂澂 (1896–1989), a renowned scholar of Buddhism, argued that Chinese Buddhism was distinct from Indian Buddhism from which it had originated. As he noted, “we should use the development of Indian Buddhism as a yardstick to judge the current stage of development in Chinese Buddhism. Doing so will allow us to discern the similarities and differences between the two and discover the essence of Chinese Buddhism.”²⁴ According to Lü, “we should not regard Chinese Buddhism as a mere ‘transplant’ of Indian Buddhism but consider it an adaptation instead.”²⁵ Chinese Buddhism is therefore not a mere “replica” of Indian Buddhism. By transforming the Indian Buddhist classics on which it is based, Chinese Buddhism has followed a different trajectory of development than Indian Buddhism. This is an example of what Ortiz called transculturation, and the creation of an entirely new phenomenon. Zanning 贊寧 (917–1001), a monk from the Song dynasty, described this process as *ju zhi zhi bian* 橘枳之變 (the sweet orange tree turning into a bitter orange tree). He wrote: “To translate means to exchange something that exists for something that does not exist. Depending on its location, an orange tree might be called *ju* 橘 or *zhi* 枳. While different in name, they still share the same taste, smell, trunk, and leaves.”²⁶ There is obviously a difference between the *ju* and the *zhi* and it is exactly the variation and new terminology that allows the orange tree to survive in a new environment.²⁷ The same applies to translation. A text that has been translated into another language must undergo a process of change before it can be accepted into a different cultural tradition. It is for this reason that the Japanese monk Eko 慧晃 (1656–1737) compiled a Sanskrit-Chinese dictionary of Buddhism with the title *Zhi ju yi tu ji* 枳橘易土集 (Collection of

24 Lü Cheng 呂澂, *Zhongguo foxue yuanliu luejiang* 中國佛學源流略講 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1979), 13.

25 Ibid., 4.

26 Zanning 贊寧, *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, in vol. 50 of *Dazheng zang* 大正藏, 1.711a.

27 Tr. note: *Ju* 橘 is the mandarin orange tree, which produces sweet, edible fruit. *Zhi* 枳 is the hardy orange or trifoliate orange tree, with small, bitter, inedible fruit. The phrase *ju zhi zhi bian* 橘枳之變 originally referred to how environment can alter (corrupt) a fruit's nature. When transplanted north, mandarin orange trees become bitter trifoliate orange trees. Their trunk and leaves appear identical, but their fruits are completely different. Zanning subverts the negative connotation of the metaphor to imply that translations, like grafted trees, preserve essential truths (the trunk) while adapting their form (fruit) to new soil.

[Flowering] Trees [that Bloom Differently when] Transplanted to Different Lands) in twenty-six volumes.²⁸ The title hints at the necessary changes that were involved in translating between Sanskrit and Chinese.

In the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, Zanning also included a biography of Hanguang 含光 (dates unknown). Here, he referred to ideas of the “Wise Master” Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), the founder of the *Tiantai* school, as well as of Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). Unlike the Indian schools of Buddhism that were focused on *nianxing* 念性 (mindfulness), Chinese Buddhism was especially interested in the idea of *jiexing* 解性 (liberatedness). Zanning figuratively used the dialectical relationship between the “root and trunk” and the “branches and leaves” to further argue that, when planted in soil, branches and leaves will eventually grow fresh roots. In this way, when Indian Buddhism (the root and trunk) spread to China (the branches and leaves), it was gradually transformed by the Chinese people into a Sinicized version of Buddhism.

Moreover, the concept of “entangled history” discussed above deconstructs the hierarchical relationship between the sender and the receiver of knowledge. This type of research also abstains from automatically classifying knowledge that has undergone transmission and transformation as inauthentic. As a result, research on the history of translation and knowledge transfer can no longer take the form of a hierarchical tree structure. A few years ago, Heiner Fangerau, professor at the Institute for the History, Theory, and Ethics of Medicine at the University of Düsseldorf, edited a book on the study of networks and the migration of knowledge: *The Internet: A General Theory of Science or a Universal Metaphor? An Interdisciplinary Overview*.²⁹ In his introduction to the edited volume, Fangerau sheds light on the meaning of the German word *Netz* [net]: In its basic sense, a net is an object used to catch something, a structure in which one becomes entangled, a structure that might be full of knots, or even a pattern that holds things together, connects, orders, and structures. In a scientific context, the aspect of structure is of particular importance and reflected in the use of the term “Netzwerk” [network].³⁰ In this type of network there is consequently no need to discuss the question whether cultural phenomena should be considered orthodox or unorthodox. The persimmon, for example, turned, as we saw, into the aesthetics of “astringency” in Japan,

28 Eko 慧晃, ed., *Bongo jiten: honmyō Kikitsu yakudo shū* 梵語字典・枳橘易土集 (Tokyo: Tetsugakkan, 1905). The latest available version is a reprint from 1979.

29 Heiner Fangerau and Thorsten Hailing, eds., *Netzwerke. Allgemeine Theorie oder Universalmetapher in den Wissenschaften? Ein transdisziplinärer Überblick* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009).

30 Ibid.

and later developed into the concept of *wabi-sabi*. This would already qualify as unorthodox, but at the same time, it is this unorthodoxy that allows for an entirely new concept to develop.

Let us consider another example to illustrate creativity in translation – a recent research project by the author with Meng Fanzhi 孟繁之 from Peking University on the history of the Zhou 周 family from Dongzhi 東至. As expected, this project also included research on the historian Zhou Yiliang 周一良 (1913–2001).³¹ Zhou Yiliang's doctoral dissertation, written at Harvard University in 1944 and published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 1945, had the English title "Tantrism in China." The publication mostly focused on the "Three Great Masters of Kaiyuan" (*Kaiyuan san dashi* 開元三大士), the three Indian masters of esoteric Buddhism who came to China during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) of the Tang dynasty, namely Shanwuwei 善無畏 (Śubhakarasiṃha, 637–735), Jin'gangzhi 金剛智 (Vajrabodhi, 669–741), and Bukongjingang 不空金剛 (Amoghavajra, 705–774).³² In the fourth year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era (713–741) of Emperor Xuanzong, Shanwuwei followed orders by his teacher to travel to Chang'an 長安 via central Asia. Eventually, he was appointed state preceptor (*guoshi* 國師) by Emperor Xuanzong. In the eighth year of the Kaiyuan era (720), Jin'gangzhi led Bukongjingang to the capital, where he resided at the Ci'en Temple 慈恩寺 by order of the emperor and preached the mystic teachings of the Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva. Zhou Yiliang's dissertation is basically an English translation of the biographies of the three Indian mystic monks in the *Song gaoseng zhuan*, to which he added an exhaustive commentary. From a purely intellectual point of view, the translation of the text itself may not have been of any particular value. At the time, however, there were only a small number of English publications on the religious and cultural exchange between India and China in the first half of the eighth century. From the perspective of "transculturation," Zhou Yiliang's translation contributed important historical materials for further research on Indo-Chinese relations during this period. It is therefore important not to comment on or judge a transcultural text from the perspective of just one of the languages or cultural traditions involved.

Over the years, the author has also studied the history of Chinese students overseas. Hong Qian 洪謙 (1909–1992), a philosopher who studied at the

31 See Li Xuetao 李雪濤 and Meng Fanzhi 孟繁之, "Wei Lixian yu Jiande Zhoushi sidai jiaoyi kao" 衛禮賢與建德周氏四代交誼考, *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化, no. 8 (2023): 168–91.

32 Chou Yi-liang, "Tantrism in China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 3/4 (1945): 241–332.

University of Vienna, may serve as an example here. In his early years, Hong Qian mostly studied the philosophy of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) under the guidance of Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929). In Germany and Austria, he began to study philosophy, mathematics, and physics and eventually turned towards philosophical research on logical positivism. From 1931 onwards, Hong studied at the University of Vienna where he was invited to participate in the meetings of the Vienna Circle (*Wiener Kreis*), where he had the opportunity to meet some of the university's most influential professors. Members of the Vienna Circle included some of the most famous philosophers and physicists of their time. Hong eventually became a philosopher of logical positivism himself and personally experienced the scholarly activities of the Vienna Circle in its heyday. Even though the Vienna Circle proved to be short-lived, it was nevertheless a philosophical school of worldwide significance during Hong Qian's years in Austria. All this information, however, only becomes available if researchers are aware of the alternative transliteration of Hong Qian's name, namely, Tscha Hung.³³ Any comprehensive research would therefore need to include a literature search for "Hong Qian" in the Chinese context and for "Tscha Hung" in the German or English context. Some cultural phenomena appear commonplace to those who have been immersed in the same culture for an extended period. Readers from another cultural background, however, might have original thoughts about the same people, events, or ideas. In 1927, the Japanese scholar Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966) published the English book *Essays in Zen Buddhism*.³⁴ For Chinese and Japanese readers, this book contained no particularly new or surprising information. The American historian Lynn White Jr. (1907–1987) argued, however, that Suzuki's book would eventually be considered a major academic event of the same magnitude as Willem van Moerbeke's (1215–1286) translation of Aristotle's writings into Latin in the thirteenth century or Marsilio Ficino's (1433–1499) translation of Plato's writings into Latin in the fifteenth century.³⁵ This shows that it is advantageous to approach the issue of translation from a transcultural perspective, to break down any form of essentialism and to avoid rigid, closed or arbitrary ways of thinking about knowledge production in a particular culture. Translation can also serve as a powerful tool to uncover an

33 Yi Jiang, "The Vienna Circle in China: The Story of Tscha Hung," in *The Vienna Circle and Religion*, ed. E. Ramharter (Berlin: Springer, 2022).

34 Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Luzac & Company, 1927).

35 Lynn Townsend White, Jr., "Conclusion: The Challenging Canons of Our Culture," in *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*, ed. Lynn Townsend White, Jr. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 304–5.

overly self-centered research outlook, and can help scholars avoid the trap of employing a western-centric approach in their own work.

4 Conclusion

In his book *Wuyong de shenxue* 無用的神學, Xia Kejun 夏可君 of Renmin University of China argues that the naturalization of the Messiah and the Daoist influences on Jewish thought are reflected in the transformation of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and Berthold Brecht (1898–1956) during their time in exile.³⁶ When Brecht was in exile in 1938, he wrote a poem that has since been considered one of his key works, namely *Die Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Lao-tse in die Emigration* (Legend of the Origin of the Book *Tao-te-ching* on Lao-tsu's Road into Exile). In his interpretation of the poem, Xia Kejun particularly emphasizes Laozi's idea of *yi rou ke gang* 以柔克剛 or “overcoming hardness with softness.” Benjamin also commented on the attitude of friendliness he observed in Daoist thought, which he considered comparable to the messianic spirit of Judaism: for Benjamin, the idea of friendliness could be employed so that “the hard thing gives way.” Xia Kejun argues that in this case Daoist ideas had already become intertwined with messianic thinking and vice versa:

Coincidentally, both Benjamin and Brecht reimagined themselves fleeing for their lives as embarking on a voluntary exile in Laozi's manner. This was their way of trying to reinterpret their response to the unbearable historical catastrophe they were facing. Or it was an attempt to simply disappear into the imagery of Laozi exiting the Hangu Pass – leaving the world behind him and disappearing into the sayings he left behind. (During the bitter revolutionary period, Lu Xun also wrote a short story with the title “Exiting the Pass.”) Maybe the lingering image of Laozi is what held the fascination for both Bertolt Brecht and Benjamin.³⁷

Xia Kejun's interpretation goes to the very heart of the matter. Brecht was forced into exile because of his political opposition to the Nazis, while Benjamin had to flee due to his Jewish identity. As German intellectuals, this

36 Xia Kejun 夏可君, *Wuyong de shenxue: Benyaming, Haidege'er yu Delida* 無用的神學：本雅明、海德格爾與德里達 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2022).

37 Ibid., 249.

was an unbearable catastrophe for both. The image of Laozi exiting the pass provided them with an alternative interpretation of their exile as a voluntary and spiritual escape. This might have allowed them to better endure the catastrophic circumstances they faced (statistics show that during the Nazi era half a million persecuted and disenfranchised individuals were forced to leave Germany). During this period, many individuals had to live in exile for fear of imprisonment, concentration camps, or brutal murder. These extraordinary circumstances might be the reason why the legend of Laozi held such a fascination for many. Xia Kejun's book shows that Benjamin, Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) successfully transformed Chinese philosophy into a tool for confronting challenges in Western modernity. It is with the help of Chinese and especially Daoist thought that modern continental European philosophers began to ponder a number of problems in European culture in an open and critical manner. They hereby formed a “useless theology” based on mutual influence between Eastern and Western philosophy.

Where then is the way forward for China's culture? Xia Kejun takes the Chinese philosophical “view of nature” (*ziran guan* 自然觀) as an example. He argues that a new view of nature can only be developed by facing the challenges of modern technology and biopolitics. This mirrors Heidegger's process of thinking during his “second turn.” Any new view of nature will need to be linked to the idea of messianic redemption in order to avoid another catastrophe of ecological destruction. That is to say that only a view of nature transformed by modernity can truly offer a new perspective.

The German philosopher and sinologist Heiner Roetz has suggested that many philosophers and even a number of sinologists engage with Chinese philosophy with a comparatively low level of expectation. It is through the reconstruction and rediscovery by philosophers such as Benjamin and Heidegger that the great potential of Chinese culture was truly revealed and entirely new philosophical thought was created. Xia Kejun's interpretations meet that higher level of expectations that is needed today.

Finally, I would like to quote the Japanese historian Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉 (1873–1961), who said in 1937, prior to the Marco Polo Bridge incident (*Lugouqiao shibian* 盧溝橋事變):

The Japanese culture of the future will not be a unique culture in the sense of being fundamentally opposed to the culture of other nations. Unlike in the past, it will no longer be a culture that is based on Japanizing foreign cultural influences. Instead, it will be the unique manifestation of a global culture in Japan. ... Any modern Japanese person who intends to

create Japan's cultural future must first reject the notion that Japanese culture has already been completely formed in the past and abandon the idea of stubbornly wanting to preserve it in its current form.³⁸

If Tsuda believes that contemporary Japanese culture is dynamic and in a constant process of change, then a future Chinese culture cannot simply be created by holding on to Chinese cultural traditions. To generate an entirely new culture it is necessary to engage in a truly international dialogue, which, in turn, is only possible by way of translation.

Translated by Anja Bihler

38 Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉, *Shina shisō to Nihon* 支那思想と日本 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1938).