Richard Wilhelm and Alfred Döblin Transread the Chinese Tradition

Peter C. PERDUE*

Huiwen Helen ZHANG**

Abstract
This article compares the transreading of Chinese texts in German by Sinologist Richard Wilhelm and novelist Alfred Döblin. Wilhelm, a spiritual intermediary between China and Europe, worked with eminent Chinese scholars to write accessible translations for German readers of Confucian and Daoist classics. Döblin relied on Wilhelm’s translation of the Liezi for his artistic breakthrough, The Three Leaps of Wang-lun: Chinese Novel. Over two decades later, while exiled in France, he crafted an idiosyncratic presentation of Confucius. Although he used excerpts from James Legge’s English translation, Döblin’s perspective on Confucius is grounded in his exposure to Chinese texts in Wilhelm’s German translation. Both Wilhelm and Döblin reinterpreted Chinese philosophy to provide lessons for 20th-century Western readers.

Our analysis recognizes the social environment that shaped both writers’ interest in Chinese philosophy. We examine selected passages from these two representatives of the German literary tradition in order to indicate their convergent positions on Sino-Western cultural contact. Their shared stances toward the Chinese tradition, their own marginal positioning, physical migration, and intellectual alienation culminated in a unifying outsider’s view. Both Wilhelm and Döblin initiated and promoted significant interactions on a basis of equality between Chinese and Western cultures.

Keywords: translation, philosophy, Daoism, Confucius, German

Richard Wilhelm in Alfred Döblin prečno bereta kitaško tradicijo

Izvleček
Članek primerja prečno branje kitaških besedil v nemškem jeziku sinologa Richarda Wilhelma in pisatelja Alfreda Döblina. Wilhelm, duhovni posrednik med Kitaško in Evropo, je sodeloval z uglednimi kitaškimi učenci, da bi napisal nemškim bralcem dostopne prevode konfucijanskih in daoističnih klasikov. Döblin se je pri svojem prelomnem


**Ključne besede:** prevajanje, filozofija, daoizem, Konfucij, nemščina

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**Introduction: Wilhelm and Döblin as Transreaders**

Chinese classical texts have inspired many modern Western writers, including Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound, Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, and Olav H. Hauge. As literary artists, they found in the Chinese tradition elements which they used to supplement, sabotage, refine, or revolutionize inherited aesthetic practices. While they began by reading Sinologist translators, who knew the original Chinese texts, they produced original literary works that transcended their sources.

The goals of the Sinologist translator and the literary artist differ, but also overlap. The translator negotiates between fidelity to the text in its original language and the need to make it comprehensible to the foreign reader. The artist takes up the translator’s product and carries it further, guided by his own unique sensibility. Some present their works as “translations”, while others define the source as one of many “inspirations”. Both translations and inspirations are forms of transreading, which takes a text’s meanings in new directions determined by the language and its audience.

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1 Translations in the introduction and sections 1.1.2, 1.2, 2.2 are by Huiwen Helen Zhang. Translations in section 1.1.1 are by Peter C. Perdue.


3 For a full discussion of how the concept of transreading was developed and relates to other critical-analytical methods, please see: Zhang “‘Translated, it is: . . .’—An Ethics of Transreading” (2014).
In this article, we discuss a particular case of transreading, in the relationship between Sinologist Richard Wilhelm and novelist Alfred Döblin. Just as Ezra Pound relied on the notes of the Sinologist Ernest Fenollosa to inform his presentation of Chinese poetry in *Cathay*, Döblin relied on Wilhelm’s translation of the Daoist philosopher Liezi for his first novel, *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun (Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun: Chinesischer Roman)*, published in 1915, the same year as Pound’s collection.

Common elements in their aesthetic and social positions made it possible for Döblin and Wilhelm to converge; although they never met each other, shared stances toward Chinese culture, their own marginal cultural positioning, and physical migration out of Germany drew them together. From their stance as outsiders in relation to both China and the West, they viewed their inherited cultures as integrated wholes, of equal validity, as they proposed that each could learn from the other.

Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) trained as a Protestant theologian and went to China as a missionary in 1899 just as Germany established its colony in Qingdao, and he remained there for 25 years. He lived through the early days of the creation of a planned colonial city out of a small fishing village, enduring biting flies, rats, crowing roosters, muddy streets, floods, warfare, and famines. He soon grew alienated from his missionary colleagues’ narrow prejudices against Chinese beliefs. He felt that it was useless to stress those matters of Christian doctrine which had nothing to do with daily life. In Wilhelm’s view, the example of Jesus was sufficient to transmit the Christian faith, and Jesus himself stood on the same level as Confucius. He said that he found “more truth in Daoism than in all confessions” (Wilhelm 1956, 103), and later boasted that he had never converted a single Chinese person.

Working closely with the eminent scholar Lao Naixuan (1843–1921), Wilhelm produced remarkably thorough, sensitive, and readable versions of the following major Chinese classical texts, as listed with the year he published them (note that he also produced a revised edition of the *Liezi*):

1911. *Daodejing. The Book of Old on Sense and Life.*
1916. *Mengzi. The Instructive Conversations by the Master Meng.*
1928. *Chunqiu. Lü Bu Wei’s Spring and Autumn Annals.*
Living in China, Wilhelm found himself doubly marginalized: both in relation to the dogmatic missionaries, who disdained all Chinese tradition, and, along with his conservative Chinese scholar colleagues, by reformers who also attacked the classical tradition as an obstacle to China’s development. After the First World War, he saw Germany and China as countries sharing a common fate. Both had lost their empires, and both suffered from severe impositions from the victorious Western powers and, in China’s case, Japan.

When he returned to Germany, in 1924, Wilhelm established the nation’s first major centre for Sinology, in Frankfurt, and actively promoted scholarship and public knowledge of China’s cultural heritage. While celebrated by the German public, he also came under attack for his interpretations of classical texts, aimed at general readers, in contrast to the meticulously annotated philological studies of German and French Orientalists. His Chinese colleagues, however, regarded him as much more than a scholar of China. In the words of the philosopher Carsun Chang, he was “one of the few who truly experienced Chinese culture and understood it as part of his personal being” (Chang 1930). Soon after he died, Wilhelm’s Institute was shut down, but in the last few decades his reputation has risen. His writings and translations still stand as major contributions to cross-cultural understanding of China and the West (Wilhelm 1928; 1956; Wipperman 2007; 2020; Goulding 2014).

Alfred Döblin (1878‒1957), who shared with Wilhelm the impulse to transmit Chinese philosophy to Western readers, found himself in an equally marginal position. He became most famous for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which used modernist techniques to describe the fluctuating, chaotic experiences of modern urban life. His first published novel, *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun* (2007 [1915]), however, used the story of a Chinese rebellion in the eighteenth century to reflect on instability, spiritual searching, and violence experienced through Daoist-Buddhist cultural frameworks. Like many Jewish writers he left Germany in 1933, living in France and then the United States. In 1940, he wrote an introduction to Confucius’ thought for English readers, placing Confucius among the greatest philosophers of world traditions, including Plato, Machiavelli, Marx, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Like Wilhelm, Döblin transformed Chinese philosophical elements to suit his aesthetic ideals, but he went much further.
Part One: Wilhelm and Döblin in Dialogue with Liezi

1.1 Wilhelm’s Liezi

1.1.1 Transreading Liezi through Christianity

Most discussions of Wilhelm concentrate on his public achievements and say little about his translation practices. By looking at specific examples of his scholarly work, however, we can find strong connections between his worldly activities and academic research.

Wilhelm practiced what we might call “open-access” Sinology. He provided translations which could be comprehended by German readers in the terms of their own literary tradition. He aimed to convince readers that Chinese texts contained just as much literary and philosophical value as the classics of Western philosophy, and they should be included in the cultural horizon of any literate person. Although Wilhelm did not elaborate a theory of translation, several times he did remark on his goals, and in his translations he used structural and linguistic techniques to make the ancient texts accessible to modern readers. More than many other Western scholars, he aimed to place Chinese in the frame of world literature.

Wilhelm presents his intercultural objectives of translation most explicitly in his justification of the use of the term *Sinn* (sense, meaning) to translate the Chinese term *Dao*:

> The entire metaphysic of the *Daodejing* is built upon a fundamental insight, which cannot be reached through strict conceptual definition, which Laozi, in order to give it a name, as a “makeshift”, calls Dao. From the beginning, there have been many contenders for the correct translation of this word. “God”, “Way”, “Reason”, “Word”, are only a few of the suggested translations, while some translators simply use the untranslated term *Dao* in European languages. Basically, the actual word used does not matter much, since the term even for Laozi is only as it were an algebraic sign for something inexpressible. It is basically aesthetic considerations that make it desirable to use a German word in a German translation. We have chosen to use the term *Sinn* throughout. (*Daodejing*, 1911, Introduction; Peter C. Perdue italics)
All translators face constant choices between fidelity to the original text and writing in a way readily understandable by their readers. The Chinese version of the translator’s dilemma is the tension between *xin* (信) “fidelity” and *ya* (雅) “literary elegance”. Here Wilhelm strongly favours the aesthetic pole, but he does not reject the value or possibility of scholarly faithfulness, either.

He defended his method in a response to a sharp critique by the German Sinologist Erich Hauer of his translation of the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*, which he and his collaborator Lao Naixuan believed to be the supreme work of Chinese philosophy. Hauer had accused him of incompetence and blunders, and Wilhelm objected to Hauer’s insulting tone, which he found unworthy of serious scholarly debate. While admitting that inevitably there were mistakes, he defended the thoroughness of his efforts, and argued that his philosophical objectives were fundamentally correct:

> With my translation of the *Yijing* I have tried to explore without preconceptions the world of thought of this work of world literature and make it accessible in German. This was a difficult task, which I have carried out with the greatest possible thoroughness ... And although I am convinced that my work is by no means free from error, my essential intentions, especially in their philosophical aspects, have been fulfilled. (Wilhelm 1956, 313; Peter C. Perdue italics)

In short, Wilhelm defended his translation choices for aesthetic purposes, but he also felt that he had attained philosophical accuracy. He did not see the two goals as contradictory. Modern readers may find some of Wilhelm’s solutions to translation issues stylistically jarring and philosophically inadequate. Using the word *Sinn* for *Dao*, or *Leben* for *De*, now sounds too awkward to be convincing. Since Daoism is now much more familiar to Western readers than it was in Wilhelm’s day, using the term *Dao* alone seems more appropriate, and he could be critiqued for distorting the original meaning of the Chinese text in order to serve a specific cultural agenda. Nevertheless, he clearly recognized the translator’s dilemma, and he explained his own distinct approach in both aesthetic and philosophical terms. Throughout his many translations, he demonstrated sensitivity to the nuances of Chinese texts while he aimed to draw out the concerns that they shared with German literary traditions. We may disagree with his particular choices in certain instances, but we must respect his dedication to accuracy and intelligibility.

For examples of Wilhelm’s practice, we may look at excerpts from his translation from the *Liezi*. Wilhelm translated it first in 1912 and published a revised edition in Jena in 1921. The cover and opening pages indicate that this is a Chinese work
intended to be read as a German philosophical text. Wilhelm uses a title taken from a Tang edition, *Chongxu Zhen Jing*, which he translates as “*Das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund*”. The date is given at the top and the place and author on the right: “Qingdao, translated by Wei Lixian (Wilhelm)”. The German publisher’s name is given on the left in Chinese characters. This page is not a version of the text for Chinese readers; it is a mimicry of Chinese book format for German readers:

Figure 1. Liezi 1921. (Source: Chinese title page)
Section 1.8 in Wilhelm’s translation, entitled *Von der irdische Pilgerschaft* (Of the Earthly Pilgrimage), describes the fate of mortal man as a wanderer in the world. Unlike the Chinese text, this added title evokes for English readers John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, allegorically describing the course of a Christian life battling against temptation and sin:

Master Yen said, “How well the men of old thought about death! It brings rest to the good, it subdues the bad. Death is the return of Essence. [de 德] The men of old called the dead “those who have returned home”. When we speak of the dead as those who have returned home, then the living are wanderers. He who wanders and knows not where he goes, is homeless. When an individual man has lost his homeland [jia 家], everyone around him considers it to be wrong. Now, however, that the entire world has lost its homeland, no one finds it to be wrong. When a man leaves his homeland, abandons his kinsmen, squanders his wealth, wanders in all directions and does not return home, truly, what kind of man is he! Others will certainly consider him to be lost [kuangtang 狂蕩]. And there is another man, who obsesses over external appearances, and is very adept at making a name for himself; he strides grandly through the world with no restraint; what kind of man is he! But both men are lost. Yet ordinary people praise the second and condemn the first; only the chosen [shengren 聖人] know what deserves praise and what deserves blame.” (Liezi 1921, 7)

Wilhelm uses several unusual words in his translation which deviate from the literal meaning of the Chinese text, but make it more compatible with Western philosophical frameworks. For the Chinese word *de* (德), usually translated as “virtue”, he uses *Wesen*, meaning “nature”, or “essence”. Just like his use of the term *Sinn* for *Dao*, Wilhelm chooses a heavily laden philosophical term instead of a literal translation, in order to convey that the Chinese term itself also carries philosophical weight. For the Chinese word *jia* (家), meaning “household”, he uses *Heimat*, the very resonant German romantic concept of “homeland”, often considered untranslatable in other languages. He translates the Chinese term *kuangtang* (狂蕩), “crazed”, as “lost”, supporting his picture of the isolated man who has abandoned the human world. For the Chinese *shengren* (聖人), or “sage”, he writes *Der Berufene*, “one who is called”, a clear reference to the Christian concept of a calling (*Beruf*) to follow a spiritual path.4

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4 Matthew 22.14: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Luther’s Bible: “Denn viele sind berufen, aber wenige sind auserwählet.”
“The living are wanderers” (*Shengren wei xingren* 生人為行人), in Wilhelm’s translation, evokes much greater resonance than the flat translation “the living are travellers” (Liezi 1990, 26). The theme of a spiritual seeker, who is a wanderer without a clear goal, a lost person in an indifferent world, reverberates in Wilhelm’s translation much more strongly than in the original Chinese text, or in other translations. For Wilhelm homelessness, wandering, and a sense of loss pervade our life in this world, and only death brings relief. Wilhelm has overlaid on the Daoist text a heavy layer of Christian implications that go well beyond the text itself.

Wilhelm develops this theme further in his translation of Section 4.7, which he entitles “Wandering”:

> Liezi always liked to wander. Hu Qiuzi asked him: “You love to wander. What do you like about wandering so much?” Liezi answered: “The joy of wandering is that it has no purpose. Others wander to look at the sights; I wander just to see them change. There is wandering and wandering! No one can tell the difference.” Hu Qiuzi said: “Your wandering is just like the others, yet you say it is different. For everything we see, we see it changing. You enjoy the purposelessness of the outside world, but you have not recognized the purposelessness of your own self. Whoever pays attention to external things while wandering does not know how to look within. The wanderer who looks outward seeks completeness in material things. Whoever looks inward, finds satisfaction in his own self. To find satisfaction in your own self is the highest stage of wandering. Whoever finds satisfaction in the material world, has not yet reached the highest stage. … Therefore I say: wander to the highest goal! Wander to the highest goal!” (Liezi 1921, 42)

Wilhelm translated the Chinese term *wugu* (無故), which can mean “without cause or reason”, as *Zwecklosigkeit*, “without purpose”. His version of aimless wandering emphasizes the lack of any evident purpose for a human life. Liezi’s interlocutor Hu Qiuzi stressed the futility of finding completion in the outside world, instead urging Liezi to look within himself. He concludes with an injunction to wander inwardly in a state of transcendent contemplation, a consciousness completely detached from the outside world: “Wander to the highest goal! The Chinese term *you* (遊), meaning “to roam, wander”, however, has more positive implications than Wilhelm’s aimlessness. It implies freedom from the constraints of all social obligations, leading ultimately to a merger with the cosmic processes of the natural world. The playfulness of *you* (here, 遊) is expressed in the title of
BUCH I

OFFENBARUNGEN DER UNSICHTBAREN WELT

"Alles Vergängliche / Ist nur ein Gleichnis / Das Unzulängliche / Hier wird's Ereignis."

1. VOM DING AN SICH

Meister Liä Dsi wohnte in einem Garten zu Dscheng vierzig Jahre lang, und niemand kannte ihn. Vor den Augen des Landesfürsten und der hohen Würdenträger war er wie einer aus der Menge des Volkes. Es entstand aber Mangel im Lande, und er machte sich auf, aus seiner Heimat nach We zu ziehen. Da sprachen seine Schüler: „Meister, du gehst, und deine Rückkehr ist unbestimmt, darum wagen wir Schüler um etwas zu bitten, worüber uns du, Meister, belehren mögest: Hast du, Meister, nicht die Reden des Hu Kiu Dsi Lin gehört?"

Meister Liä Dsi lächelte und sprach: „Ja, was hat denn Meister Hu gesagt? Immerhin; der Meister unterhielt sich oft mit Be Hun Wu Jen, und was ich gehört, wenn ich daneben stand, will ich versuchen, euch zu sagen. Seine Reden lauteten also: Es ist ein Zeugendes, das nicht erzeugt ist; es ist ein Wandelndes, das sich nicht wandelt. Das Unerzeugte hat Freiheit, Zeugendes zu zeugen, das Unwandelbare hat Freiheit, Wandelndes zu wandeln. Das Erzeugte muß aber notwendig weiter zeugen, das Wandelbare muß notwendig sich weiter wandeln. Darum ist es immer im Zeugen und Wandeln begriffen. Das immer im Zeugen und Wandeln Begriffene hört niemals auf, zu zeugen und sich zu wandeln; so verhält es sich mit Licht und Finsternis, so verhält es sich mit den vier Jahreszeiten.

Das Unerzeugte ist vermutlich einzig. Das Unwandelbare wailt im unendlichen Raum hin und her, ohne daß es in seinem Pfad an eine Grenze käme. Im Buch des Herrn der gelben Erde steht:

Der Geist der Tiefe stirbt nicht.
Er ist das Ewig Weibliche.
Beim Ausgang des Ewig Weiblichen
Liegst die Wurzel von Himmel und Erde.
Endlos drängt sich's und ist doch wie beharrend.
Der es wirkt, bleibt ohne Mühe.

1 Liä Dsi, Urgrund

Figure 2. Liezi 1921. (Source: page 1)
the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, *Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥遊 “spontaneous free play” or “free and easy wandering”. The Chinese Daoist has “lost” his human connections, but he has regained unity with the eternal Way.

This mystical state appears to be quite contrary to the ordinary Christian missionary’s engagement in the world, but it reflects Wilhelm’s preoccupation with his own inner life, and his view of Christianity as a personal quest rather than the performance of empty rituals.

### 1.1.2 Transreading Liezi through Goethe

In the structure and presentation of the chapters, Wilhelm’s translation of the *Liezi* also reveals an audacious paradigm of reframing. In the classical Chinese original, the *Liezi* consists of eight titled books with varied numbers of untitled chapters. In Wilhelm’s German edition, however, not only does he create a title for each chapter to direct the reader’s attention to that which he considers to be the chapter’s pivotal point, but he also consistently chooses a Goethe citation as the epigraph for each chapter. Rather than providing bibliographical references for these citations, Wilhelm lets the reader seek the sources himself—or even take these quotes as integral parts of the original. Take Book I, for instance: (Liezi 1921, 1)

*Book I*

*Offenbarungen der unsichtbaren Welt* [Wilhelm’s translation of the original book title]

“All Vergängliche / Ist nur ein Gleichnis / Das Unzulängliche / Hier wird’s Ereignis.”

[Goethe quote without a reference]

1. *Vom Ding an sich* [Wilhelm’s chapter title]

*Book I*

Manifestation of the Invisible World

“All the ephemeral / Is only a parable / The unfathomable / Comes to pass here.”

1. On the Thing Itself

Moreover, in Books II, III, IV, and V Wilhelm crafts a pithy phrase to pinpoint the book’s core idea, which, in his view, unites Liezi the ancient Daoist master and Goethe the modern German icon. Take Book IV for instance. To reframe it, Wilhelm draws a stanza from Goethe’s canonical poem “Blissful Yearning” and crafts the phrase “Devotion to the Cosmos” to capture the book’s message in his perception, i.e., an individual’s dedication to the universe:

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Buch IV

Konfuzius [Wilhelm’s translation of the original book title]

Hingabe ans All [Wilhelm’s phrase]

“And solang du das nicht hast / Dieses: Stirb und Werde / Bist du nur ein trüber Gast / Auf der dunklen Erde.”

[Goethe quote without a reference]

Book IV

Confucius

Devotion to the Cosmos

“And so long as you have it not, / This: Die and become! / You are but a mournful guest / Upon the dark planet.”

The second example of “wandering” is embedded precisely in Book IV, Chapter 7, discussed above. When viewed in juxtaposition, the Daoist command “Wander to the highest!” and Goethe’s imperative “Die and become!” illuminate one another beautifully: both argue for the indispensability of introspection to an individual’s spiritual bliss. That “Blissful Yearning” is a quintessential poem in Goethe’s West–östlicher Divan may be another motivation for Wilhelm’s choice: the Liezi in his reframing is a West–Eastern Divan in philosophy.

Another example of Wilhelm’s framing lies in “Book II: The Lord of the Yellow Earth”, where Wilhelm distils three lines from the opening of Goethe’s poem “One and All” and crafts the phrase “The Potency of the Spirit” to convey his insight into the book, i.e., the concentration and force of the spirit:

Buch II

Der Herr der gelben Erde [Wilhelm’s translation of the original book title]

Die Macht des Geistes [Wilhelm’s phrase]


[Goethe quote without a reference]

Book II

The Lord of the Yellow Earth

The Potency of the Spirit

“Rather than feverish ‘wish’ or wild ‘want’ / Rather than onerous ‘demand’ or strict ‘must’ / To surrender oneself, is bliss.”
This combination effectively primes the reader to digest the core passage from Book II, Chapter 3, which Wilhelm—in accordance with Goethe’s “One and All”—titles “Self-Surrendering”:

3. Self-Surrendering

The distinction between I and Not-I was no more. After that the distinctions between the five senses also ceased to be, they all became similar to one another. Then the thoughts condensed, the body became free, flesh and bone dissolved, I no longer felt that against which the body leaned, upon which the foot trod: I followed the wind east and west like a leaf or dry chaff, and I truly know not if the wind drove me or I the wind. (Liezi 1921, 50‒51; Huiwen Zhang italics)

This passage is embedded in Liezi’s revelation of his own becoming. As the passage recurs in “Book IV: Confucius, Chapter 6,” Wilhelm retitles it “The Evolution of Liezi”. In both occurrences, Liezi’s dissolution of “the distinction between I and Not-I”—which culminates in his fusion with the wind, “I truly know not if the wind drove me or I the wind”—anticipates Book II in the Zhuangzi, the title of which Wilhelm translates as “The Adjustment of World Views”. In that book’s final chapter—originally unnamed yet titled by Wilhelm “Butterfly Dream”—Zhuangzi draws a playful and perplexing inference, “I know not if Zhuangzi has dreamed himself becoming a butterfly or the butterfly has dreamed itself becoming Zhuangzi” (Zhuangzi 1912, Book II, Chapter 12).

This analogy is well-known to Wilhelm, who in his “Introduction” to the Liezi calls it “the mediating link between the fundamental conception of the Taoteking on the one hand and the summary of the Daoist teachings in the work attributed to Zhuangzi on the other” (Liezi 1921, xxix), In his chapter-by-chapter “Explanations” of the Liezi, Wilhelm frequently uses the Zhuangzi as a reference point. For instance, he cites the Zhuangzi to declare how Liezi is revered as “the true man who rides the wind”: “with sublime superiority, Liezi let the wind drive him, totally free from the striving after bliss” (Zhuangzi 1912, Book I).

This ancient Chinese philosophical genealogy, however, was generally inaccessible to Wilhelm’s German readers. By inviting Goethe onto the stage reciting “To surrender oneself, is bliss” and naming the Liezi-chapter after Goethe’s message “Self-Surrendering”, Wilhelm initiates a trans-cultural, trans-era conversation that renders Liezi’s idea and articulation accessible.

Yet another excerpt that exemplifies Wilhelm’s provocative reframing of the Liezi harkens back to “Book I: Manifestation of the Invisible World”, for which
Wilhelm chooses one of the most memorable moments in German literature as a motto: the ending of Goethe’s *Faust*. This motto primes his reader to explore Chapter 12, which Wilhelm titles “Property”:

“All the ephemeral / Is only a parable / The unfathomable / Comes to pass here.”

12. Property

Shun (the grand ruler) asked Cheng: “*Can one appropriate the Dao of cosmic phenomena?*” Cheng spoke: “*Not even your body is your property, how do you want to appropriate the Dao?*” Shun spoke: “*If my body is not my property, whose property is it then?*” The other spoke: “*It is the form assigned to you by Heaven and Earth. Your life is not your own, it is the balance of forces assigned to you by Heaven and Earth. Your nature and your fate are not your own, they are the course assigned to you by Heaven and Earth. Your sons and grandsons are not your own, they are the vestiges assigned to you by Heaven and Earth. Therefore: we go and know not whither, we stay and know not where, we eat and know not why: all this is the potent life force of Heaven and Earth: who can appropriate it?*” (Liezi 1921, 44–45; Huiwen Zhang italics)

Wilhelm’s juxtaposition of Goethe’s *Faust* and the *Liezi* rejuvenates both. In one direction, Goethe’s discernment between “the unfathomable” and “the ephemeral” enables German readers to approximate Liezi’s distinction between “Heaven and Earth” and the individual’s body, life, nature, fate, sons, and grandsons. In the opposite direction, Liezi’s denial of “property” and his argument against “appropriation” reveals a Daoist premise that is at once archaic, alien, and stimulating to German readers, thus offering them a novel perspective from which they can revisit and penetrate Goethe’s “parable”.

Also worth noting is Wilhelm’s translingual aptitude. In classical Chinese, the central question of Book I, Chapter 12 is encapsulated in *de er you* (得而有), a phrase consisting of two verbs, *de* (得) “to receive or acquire” and *you* (有) “to have or possess”, joined by the conjunctive *er* (而) that implies consequence. By turning *de er you* into the German phrases *sich zu eigen machen* “to take for one’s own” and *sich zum Eigentum machen* “to make something one’s property”, Wilhelm bypasses the character-by-character approach and grasps the target—an individual’s “appropriation” of the Dao, a motive and act of which the *Liezi* disapproves.

As demonstrated in his renditions of “Wandering”, “The Earthly Pilgrimage”, “Self-Surrendering” and “Property”, Wilhelm’s transplantation of the *Liezi* into
the Goethe-fermented soil is methodologically daring, philologically intuitive, aesthetically delightful, and spiritually thought-provoking. Clearly, this missionary-turned-sinologist reframed the *Liezi* not only to probe and transcend the limits of translation, but also to seek and declare the unfathomed intersections between the ancient Chinese and modern German languages and philosophies.

1.2 Döblin’s Liezi

Wilhelm’s approach to the Daoist canon may be deemed radical until one meets Döblin, whose audacity and creativity even surpasses Wilhelm’s. While Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has become known as one of the most significant German novels of the 20th century, his transreading of ancient Chinese philosophy remains relatively unknown. Yet his two encounters with Chinese antiquity form an unparalleled *bildungsroman*.

First, in the 1910s, Döblin met Laozi and Liezi through Wilhelm’s German translation. Then, in the 1930s, Döblin, exiled in France, met Confucius through James Legge’s English translation. The younger Döblin’s poetic and philosophical resonances with Daoism led to his two idiosyncratic works, *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun: Chinese Novel* (2007 [1915]) and *Mountains Oceans and Giants* (1924). The older Döblin’s political and pragmatic recognition of Confucianism led to his 1940 publication of *The Living Thoughts of Confucius*, which incorporates a distinct presentation of Confucius and an eclectic selection and argumentative arrangement of what he called “the essence of Confucius’s thought”.

An optimal angle from which to cut into Döblin’s encounter with Daoism (1911–1913) lies in *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun*, an epic novel that earned him the Fontane Prize for Culture and Literature in 1916. It reconstructs a turbulent 18th-century China through the titular figure—the historical rebel Wang-lun—who led an uprising against the Qianlong Emperor and was defeated in 1774. What Döblin named *Chinese Novel*—as the peculiar absence of the article in the subtitle *Chinesischer Roman* implies—creates a genre of its own which resists labelling by conventional criteria.

In his autobiographical sketch, “The Epic Poet, his Material, and the Critique (Der Epiker, sein Stoff und die Kritik)” (1986a [1921]), Döblin dismissed the favourable reviews on the “historical, ethnological, geographical” realities of this *Chinese Novel* and called the praise of its authenticity “burlesque”:

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For English translations of these two novels, see Döblin 1991 and 2021.
While writing a “Chinese” novel, I went to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin several times and read quite a few portrayals of trips to China and Chinese customs: but how inaccurate already are the phrases I use here: “read”: *I have never thought of engaging myself with China;* the thought of going to China, for instance, has not occurred to me even in a dream: *I had an underlying inner sensation or an underlying vision to whom I, with the utmost sensitivity, granted complete freedom and to whom I presented—submitted—what she needed to radiate.* It seemed burlesque to me that one of the first detailed references to the book stemmed from an expert Sinologist who found my protagonist, even, authentic. *So little have I engaged myself—absorbent, observant—with the real China,* that after the composition of the book one would have searched in my “memory” for the most important data on China, yes, the realities of my novel, to no avail: these realities—historical, ethnological, geographical—had not been assumed, not even seen by me, as facts, but rather assumed, within the scope of an entire surging psychic process, as its vehicles, its means of transport and of provocation—so that after the cessation of the whole storm only a dim recollection of the individual cobblestones remained, past which passion flowed. [...] If I were finished with my book—now and then I figured—I would love to occupy myself with this or that matter which appeared interesting to me; haven’t done it since, what relevance to me—who does not know even Europe—did China have, apart from Laoze. (Döblin 1986a, 29; Huiwen Zhang italics)

Here, Döblin drew a conspicuous line between China and Daoism. While mocking and refuting his perceived engagement with “the real China”, Döblin confessed and appreciated Laozi’s relevance to himself. In contrast to his frank and abrupt confession at the end, Döblin’s subtle yet profound appreciation of Daoism lies in this syntactically and thematically complex line: “I had an underlying inner sensation or an underlying vision to whom I, with the utmost sensitivity, granted complete freedom and to whom I presented—submitted—what she needed to radiate.” Playing with the German feminine pronoun of *Grundeinstellung,* “underlying vision”, Döblin emphasizes her grace, potency, or pregnancy, suggesting that his reception of the Dao—likewise feminine in the *Laozi*—was in fact a predestined encounter, a cross-cultural kindship, and a trans-era resonance. According to his self-reflection, it was the Dao that awakened him, kindled his own underlying sensation, and let his own vision “radiate” in *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun,* which created a genre of its own.
To frame this Chinese Novel, Döblin composed a preface named “Zueignung”. A play on words in German, this naming simultaneously signals “Dedication” (Widmung) and “ Appropriation” (das Sich-zu-eignen):

The Three Leaps of Wang-lun

DEDICATION/APPROPRIATION

SO I don’t forget —.
A gentle whistle up from the street. Metallic starting, purring, sputtering.
A slap to my bony quillholder.
So I don’t forget —.
What now?
I want to shut the window.
The streets have acquired strange voices in recent years. […]
I don’t blame the baffling vibration. Only I can’t orient myself.
I don’t know whose voices these are, whose soul needs such a thousand-barrelled vault of resonance.
This heavenly doveflight of airplanes.
These hatching chimneys beneath the ground.
This flashing of words across a hundred miles:
Whom does it serve?
The human beings on the pavement I know, after all. Their Telesparks are new. The grimaces of avarice, the hostile smugness of the blue-shaven chin, the pinched snuffling nose of lasciviousness, the barbarity, upon whose jelly blood the heart beats itself down, the watery puppy-dog eyes of obsessive ambition, their throats have yelped through the centuries and filled them with — progress.
O, I know that. I, currycombed by the wind.
So I don’t forget —.
In the life of this Earth two thousand years are one year.
Winning, conquering; an old man spoke: “We go and know not whither. We stay and know not where. We eat and know not why. All this is the potent life force of Heaven and Earth: who can then speak of winning, possessing?”
I want to sacrifice to him behind my window, to the wise old man,

Li ā Dsī

with this impotent book. (Döblin 2007, 7–8; Huiwen Zhang italics)
Comparing this preface to the novel, Döblin’s strategy reminds one of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both of whom are astute and deliberate in using prefaces as a kind of “tuning”. Here, drawing from Wilhelm’s translation of the Daoist refutation of “property”, Döblin builds a bridge for his readers to traverse beyond the normal expectations of a historical novel. Rather than laying a panoramic foundation for his reimagining of 18th-century China, Döblin narrows his focus to the contrarian contemplation of a first-person narrator—a nostalgic yet vehement, bewildered yet discriminating poet—who seeks shelter behind his window, in vain. The phrase “a slap to my bony quillholder”, underlines the poet’s delicacy, fragility, and vulnerability when being exposed to the sinister, intrusive, and devouring modern metropolis. While his suffering from and scepticism of industrialization and urbanization urge him to write, the poet’s attempt to write is incessantly interrupted by the multidimensional distractions and assaults that the contemporary world continues to generate.

Seemingly detached from the novel, this preface nevertheless ties the first-person narrator’s inner monologue to the third-person narration of the Chinese rebel Wang-lun. The dual connotation of Zueignung implies both Döblin’s philosophical, self-referential, and paradoxical appropriation of Wilhelm’s Liezi and Döblin’s personal, ceremonial, and sacrificial dedication of “this impotent book”—his “Chinese Novel”—to “the wise old man // L i ä D s i”. Strikingly, the Daoist sage’s name is visually enshrined. The curious formatting turns “Liezi” (after Wilhelm’s spelling “Liä Dsi”) into a one-word, stand-alone, and centralized paragraph, and inserts empty spaces between letters to force the reader to slow down, ponder, and even worship.

The choice of “impotent” here is also curious, in that it can be interpreted in two ways. On the surface, “impotent” addresses the non-conformist poet’s self-perceived inferiority to “the potent life force of Heaven and Earth”. But in an ironic sense, “impotent” also suggests his self-perceived superiority to his conformist contemporaries. The latter is manifested in the poet’s mercilessly scornful critique of the self-deceiving people who, in his view, fail to recognize the futility of winning, conquering, and possessing. This might indeed be the rationale behind Döblin’s literary appropriation of Wilhelm’s Liezi for his preface, i.e., the citation from “Property” (Liezi 1921, Book I, Chapter 12) in quotation marks. Instead of “all this is the potent life force of Heaven and Earth: who can appropriate it?”, the quote now ends in “who can then speak of winning, possessing?”

In fact, even before this unmistakable citation, the line that instantly shifts the preface’s tone from offensive to serene—“O, I know that. I, currycombed by the wind”—already bears a parallel to “Self-Surrendering” and “The Evolution of
Liezi”, Book II, Chapter 3 and Book IV, Chapter 6 in Wilhelm's Liezi: “I followed the wind east and west like a leaf or dry chaff, and I truly know not if the wind drove me or I the wind”. This parallel reinforces the dual implication of Döblin’s wordplay with “impotent”: the first-person narrator, while admitting his impotence to appropriate “the potent life force of Heaven and Earth”, regards himself as a modern European Daoist who rides the wind beyond “the human beings on the pavement”, spreading a potent message with his “Chinese Novel”—a powerful antidote to the current worship of that taken-for-granted “progress”.

From this point of view, the enigmatic fragment that recurs three times in the preface and ends each time with an em-dash and a period, “So I don’t forget —.”, finds a promising solution. The first-person narrator—the idiosyncratic and non-conformist poet—writes his “Dedication/Appropriation” in order not to forget his spiritual temple and philosophical ideal, his trans-era origin and cross-cultural kinship, his inner sensation that resonates with “the Earth’s gushing springs”, and his underlying vision awakened to the ancient Chinese Dao, by which he, a 20th-century German who “can’t orient” himself, may ultimately re-orient himself.


I—in a pent-up rage, nevertheless unable to break through, not even in my environment, and beyond this also in arrogance and certainty: “I already know, what I can do, I have time,”—have executed nothing right for an entire decade. Instead, I hung around in psychiatric clinics, all the way into the night at laboratory work of a biological sort […] From 1911 on, a breakthrough or breakout of literary productivity. It was almost a dam break; the originally almost two-volume Wang-lun was written, including preparatory work, in eight months, written everywhere—gushing out—on the train, in the emergency room during night-watch, between two consultations, on the stairs while visiting patients; finished May 1913. […] Since two or three months ago, on a new grand epic work [Mountains Oceans and Giants]: non-history, but futuristic, from the epoch around 2500—the peak violence of technology and its detainment by nature. (Döblin 1986b, 36–37; Huiwen Zhang italics)

This excerpt illuminates what one may call the artistic, psychological, and philosophical “evolution” of Döblin, marked by his two experimental novels, both of which resist labelling by conventional criteria. Regarding the first turning point,
The Three Leaps of Wang-lun, Döblin’s layering of three breaks—“breakthrough” (Durchbruch), “breakout” (Ausbruch), and “dam break” (Dammbruch)—highlights the explosive impact of his newly gained Daoist insight on the conception and composition of his Chinese Novel.6

Regarding the second turning point, Mountains Oceans and Giants—titled without a comma and seen by Döblin as “a new grand epic work”—his terse yet pungent summary, “the peak violence of technology and its detainment by nature”, evokes two excerpts from Wilhelm’s renditions of the Laozi and the Yinfujing, both of which illustrate the Daoist genesis, though in opposite directions:

Tao Te King (Daodejing)—The Book of Old on Sense and Life
25. The Unfathomable Parable7

[...]
Man is modelled on Earth.
Earth is modelled on Heaven.
Heaven is modelled on the Dao.
And the Dao is modelled on itself.
(Laozi 1911, 27)

Yin Fu Ging—The Book of Esoteric Addenda
19.
The Dao of that which is rooted in itself is peace:
So Heaven, Earth and nature come into being.
The Dao of Heaven and Earth
Saturates the cosmos:
So darkness and light win over one another.
While darkness and light come off,
Change and transformation go their way.
(Liezi 1921, XXI, no. 19)

Chapter 25 in Wilhelm’s Tao Te King (1911)—originally attributed to Laozi (5th century BCE)—presents the Daoist genesis from the lowest to the highest, i.e.,

6 Beyond the idiosyncratic preface “ZUEIGNUNG”—a dedication to and appropriation of Wilhelm’s Liezi—Döblin titles Book III of The Three Leaps of Wang-lun “Der Herr der gelben Erde (The Lord of the Yellow Earth)”. The title is identical with Wilhelm’s translation of the original title of Book II of the Liezi. Moreover, the title hints at the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi 黄帝, to whom the Daoist classic Yinfujing 阴符经 is attributed.

7 Wilhelm titles the originally untitled Chapter 25 of the Laozi “The Unfathomable Parable”, which resonates with his invented motto for Book I of the Liezi, drawn from Goethe’s Faust: “All the ephemeral / Is only a parable / The unfathomable / Comes to pass here.”
from man to the Dao. Chapter 19 in Wilhelm’s *Yin Fu Ging*—originally attributed to “The Lord of the Yellow Earth” Huangdi (ca. 2700 BCE) and selected by Wilhelm for his “Introduction” to *The True Book on the Earth’s Gushing Springs* (1912), originally attributed to Liezi (4th century BCE)—portrays the Daoist genesis from the highest to the lowest, i.e., from the Dao to “change and transformation”.

Together, these two depictions converge into the true way—a journey home—on three grand scales of space and time. Döblin begins with the first-person narrator in his preface to *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun*, then expands his view to historical actors, and finally embraces the future of the human race, as indicated in his vision for “the epoch around 2500”. The Dao encompasses them all.

**Part Two: Wilhelm and Döblin in Dialogue with Confucius**

2.1 *Wilhelm’s Confucius*

Although both Wilhelm and Döblin discussed Confucius, Döblin’s encounter with Confucius occurred twenty years after he discovered Daoist texts. The *Analects* of Confucius, on the other hand, was the first translation published by Wilhelm. The first edition appeared in 1910, with revised editions in 1914 and 1923 (Wilhelm 1923 [1910; 1914]). His introduction provided social and historical information about Confucius’ times and evaluated the sage’s fundamental character, his philosophical message, and his achievements. For Wilhelm, Confucius was a “great man” of immense historical significance, whose life and teachings expressed a unified vision that lifted him above other human beings. Confucius dedicated himself to studying the culture of antiquity, especially the period of the early Zhou dynasty, the time of the great sage-kings Wen and Wu and the advisor Duke of Zhou. He aimed to make himself a complete *Kulturträger*, or “culture bearer”, an integrated person who could contain in himself the scattered fragments of antique culture.

For Wilhelm, Confucius’s obsession with antiquity exemplified Goethe’s observation that destiny provides the striving man with what corresponds to his nature and what he requires for his own perfection (Wilhelm 1923, XIII). He compared Confucius’ encounter with ancient texts to the experiences of Luther and Goethe on their travels to Rome.

Confucius, however, aimed to be more than a textual scholar, as he constantly sought a ruler who would carry out his moral and political prescriptions, and thereby restore the harmony of the Golden Age of the early Zhou. Although for
a short time he advised the ruler of his state of Lu, he spent most of his life in a fruitless search for anyone who would listen to him. His influence after his death was transmitted through the texts he edited and through the students who developed his thoughts. Thus Confucius built the foundations of Chinese culture in a time of “social collapse” (Wilhelm 1923, XIX).

Wilhelm’s version of Confucius explicitly compares him to major German figures, and he highlights modern aspects of Confucius’ thought. As Minister of Justice in Lu, Confucius showed the “generosity” of a modern judge. Wilhelm singles out Confucius’ love of music to show that he genuinely valued Ausdruckskultur—“expressive culture”—and was not the pedantic moralist rejected by modern Chinese. Wilhelm believes that the Western moral philosopher whom Confucius most strongly resembles is Immanuel Kant, and translates the virtue of zhōng (忠), or “loyalty”, as Gewissenhaftigkeit—“conscientiousness”—to make it comparable to Kant’s dedication to moral autonomy. Confucius’ dedication to re-enacting the rituals of the past did not stress their exterior form, as what mattered most was their effect on one’s inner life. Just as Wilhelm rejected rigid adherence to the sterile practice of Christian rituals such as baptism if they had no relationship to genuine spiritual insight, he recognized in Confucius a fellow searcher, a man dedicated to Innerlichkeit, or “inwardness”. Kant’s concept of autonome Sittlichkeit (“moral autonomy”) echoed Confucius’ determination to follow the path of virtue regardless of external constraints and personal suffering. Wilhelm’s Confucius, like Socrates and Kant, recognized that virtue does not necessarily lead to happiness. Wilhelm thereby turned Kant’s abstract “autonomous morality” into a spiritual quest. Wilhelm in part echoed the arguments of the Jesuits of the 18th century, who espoused a secular, this worldly version of Confucian teaching, but he also recognized Confucianism as a genuinely religious culture, and insisted that China’s religious beliefs could be placed on an equal level with the major world religions.

In Wilhelm’s account, Chinese society moved in a direction radically opposed to Confucian ideals after his death. The Warring States period culminated in the victory of the Qin, whose leader completely rejected humanist values. Confucian ideas survived in the following Han dynasty, and the “educated middle class”, or literati, became the culture-bearing class. But the rituals which Confucius valued froze into sterile orthodoxy and intolerance, and the inwardness at their core was lost. By the 20th century the collapse of the Qing dynasty, and along with it the collective family system, seemed to imply the collapse of Confucianism as well. Modern efforts to recreate Confucian doctrines in a form modelled on the Christian church, Wilhelm felt, completely missed its essence. What would last in Confucianism would be die Souveränität der sittlichen Persönlichkeit—“the sovereignty of the moral personality”. Like Kant, what endured was not the institutionalized
form of religious doctrine, but the force of an integrated personality (Wilhelm 1923, XXVIII).

Wilhelm, in all of his studies, overwhelmingly concentrated on the native Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. Although he respected Buddhism, he often described popular Chinese religion as “superstition”, nor did he explore the frontier regions of China, or non-Chinese texts. Wilhelm maintained that Chinese culture consisted of a fundamental unity and harmony, which he contrasted with the multiple warring orientations of the West. In his view, Confucian tolerance of multiple sources of truth contrasted with the dogmatism of Western religions, Islam, and Buddhism, while the Confucian stress on daily life contrasted with Western and Indian concern with death, the future, heaven and hell. He tried to persuade readers of the need to combine this harmonious vision with the Western assertion of the individual self, but he seldom addressed the contradictions between individualism and Confucian-Daoist orthodoxy.

2.2 Döblin’s Confucius

In 1940, Döblin published a short book entitled The Living Thoughts of Confucius, included in a series of writings edited for North American audiences by Alfred O. Mendel. This series, “The Living Thoughts Library”, explained to American readers the basic doctrines of leading thinkers accompanied by short excerpts from their works. The motto of the series was: “Life travels upward in spirals. He who takes pains to search the shadows of the past below us, then, can better judge the tiny arc up which he climbs, more surely guess the dim curves of the future above him” (Döblin 1940, front). The series included studies of Jefferson, Darwin, Freud, Kant, Marx, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, with Confucius, Muhammad, and the Buddha as the only non-Western thinkers. Many well-known literary figures wrote for it: W. H. Auden, for example, wrote on Kierkegaard, John dos Passos wrote on Thomas Paine, Thomas Mann wrote on Schopenhauer, and Heinrich Mann wrote on Nietzsche.

In his introductory essay Döblin, like Wilhelm, outlines Confucius’ life, his personality, and his major teachings, and explains his relevance to readers of modern times. The excerpts from Confucius and other classic texts are taken from James Legge’s English translations, presented without commentary. Döblin addresses the general English-language reader, with the explicit goal of connecting the ancient sage’s thoughts to concerns of the present day.

Döblin’s Confucius is a powerful and moral person, focused on his goal and influential by virtue of his determination. He exemplifies sincerity, “the supreme
importance of keeping one’s actions in tune with one’s surroundings”. He follows his own moral duty, which is “morality with a cosmic perspective”, derived from the “natural reason” that unites the Heavenly cosmos with the individual human character. He provides the basis for a critique of modern social and psychological assumptions: “what a contrast to the empty wisdom and hellish indifference of our day! … in contrast to our materialist line of thought … our actions are capable of influencing and do influence world happenings … for we have here spiritual power” (Döblin 1940, 15, 17, 18).

Döblin’s Confucius, however, has a more political orientation than Wilhelm’s, as Confucius always aimed to influence the ruler, backed by his claim to represent Heavenly force. Confucius supported centralized rule against the arbitrary power of lords and rebels, but insisted on reciprocity as its central principle. The performance of rituals, as prescribed by the scholars, constrained emperors and princes, ensuring that they ruled on behalf of the people: “Emperors and rulers, by making mistakes, lose their right to rule.” In Döblin’s interpretation, Confucius’ espousal of the “golden mean” and his avoidance of praise for heroic deeds and unusual phenomena made him a spokesman for the “average man”. He was a practical, secular thinker, focused on the essential components of social order: human behaviour, the family, and the state. Unlike the Buddha or Jesus, who had much more transcendent spiritual goals, Confucius simply aimed to improve the society of his own time. While Wilhelm compared Confucius to Kant, because of his strong inner morality, Döblin remarked that “even Kant, marveling at the starry heavens above and the moral law within him, was far from connecting these two things”. Confucius, by contrast, links Heaven’s order and human moral order: “Only together do humanity and Heaven build the universe”. Just as Wilhelm placed Confucius on a level with Kant, Döblin ranked Confucius above Marx, who only “stressed the importance of external, material things”, or Nietzsche, whose “hopeless nihilism” led only to “tyranny and brutality” (Döblin 1940, 21–23).

Döblin’s attraction to Daoism as both a moral and political force is also apparent in his characterization of Confucius. Although his Confucius avoided metaphysical speculation, his ability to persuade rulers and students of the power of moral behaviour depended on the assumption that the Dao, as the order of Heaven, enforced humanity’s obedience to the rituals seen in ancient texts, which described an ideal social order. Rulers who violated these prescriptions would lose the support of both Heaven and the people. Döblin thus portrays a radically democratic Confucius, a “teacher of democracy” who “brought into esteem the will of the people”, even though he never knew of representative institutions, the rule of law, or modern individual rights (Döblin 1940, 26).
Döblin’s nonconventional presentation of Confucius led to polarized receptions. In December 1940, the American novelist Albert Guerard published a critical review in the *New York Herald Tribune*, in which he did not appreciate Döblin’s recontextualization of Confucius. Instead, he ridiculed Döblin’s unscholarly approach of drawing light from the ancient East to inspire the present-day West as “not Confucianism but Confusionism”, Guerard’s review concluded that “Döblin has achieved the miracle of creating opacity out of translucent materials”, and that “the interpreter is much harder than the original” (Guerard 1940, 30).

By contrast, Döblin’s Confucius was warmly received in 1940s Norway. Starting in 1939, the influential public intellectual Nic Stang selected eleven titles from the expansive spectrum of the “Living Thoughts Library” for Norwegian readers. For his re-envisioned book series *De store filosofer* (The Great Philosophers), Stang chose Döblin’s Confucius—over Ali’s Muhammad and Coomaraswamy’s Buddha—as the sole Eastern representative. Upon its release in September 1949, the publisher Gyldendal Norsk Forlag used Döblin’s established appeal to promote the Norwegian edition of his transreading of Confucius: “It is the renowned author Alfred Döblin, one of Germany’s leading intellectuals in the period between the First World War and Adolf Hitler, who has edited the Confucius volume in our series” (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1949).

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8 Two Norwegian pioneers in cross-cultural dialogue contributed to cultivating the soil for transplanting Döblin’s Confucius. In 1926, Kristian Schjelderup recognized in his book *Religion og religioner* (Religion and Religions) not only the phenomenon that Karl Jaspers later termed the *Achszeit* (Axial Age)—the resonances between Moses, Zarathustra, Laozi, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad—but also the influential personality of each master: “The followers of each religion have been shaped by the fundamental, innovating experience of the master and received the religion as a gift from him” (Schjelderup 1926, 50). Between 1942 and 1950, Harris Birkeland developed the book series *Religionsens stormenn* (The Grandmasters of Religion), featuring seven figures: Muhammad and Confucius (1942), Zarathustra (1943), Laozi (1948), Eckhart and Isaiah (1949), and Jeremiah (1950). Birkeland emphasized both the “infinite enrichment for the Christians to gain an insight into the eternal values by which the followers of foreign religions live” and the “creative religious personalities” as “starting points and milestones in a rich and dramatic development”, who “have set in motion powerful impulses that work through centuries and millennia, reshaping the course of history” (Birkeland 1942, 1–4).

9 The eleven titles chosen by Stang for Norwegian translations were: Andre Maurois’ *Voltaire*, Thomas Mann’s *Schopenhauer*, and Heinrich Mann’s *Nietzsche*, published in 1939; Romain Rolland’s *Rousseau* and Stefan Zweig’s *Tolstoy* in 1940; Julian Huxley’s *Darwin* in 1941; Alfred Döblin’s *Confucius* and Carlo Sforza’s *Machiavelli* in 1949; Robert Waelder’s *Freud* in 1950; Andre Gide’s *Montaigne* in 1952; and François Mauriac’s *Pascal* in 1954. Stang himself translated two volumes into Norwegian, those on Nietzsche and Pascal. Moreover, Stang replaced W. H. Auden’s *Kirkkog-aard* with Harald Beyer’s original Norwegian version (1942) and added a new title, Henning Mørland’s *Plato* (1951). Thus, the Norwegian book series “De store filosofer (The Great Philosophers)” features a total of 13 titles, 11 translated from the “Living Thoughts Library” and two specially written in Norwegian.
In his preface to this volume, Stang walked the opposite path from Guerard, ranking the relevance of the interpreter even above the original, for two reasons. First, parts of the original were “so tied to the time in which it was written that today they only interest the professional philosopher and historian”, and thus the task of the interpreter is “to identify those writings of the great minds which carry messages to us in today’s cultural clash”. Second, the unique richness of Döblin’s Confucius lies in its dual insight into both the original thinker and the interpreter. According to Stang, Döblin is one of those “creative writers and thinkers in the middle of today’s battle” who “are intimately related to the philosophers they treat. Therefore, the series also provides a glimpse into the vibrant intellectual life of our own turbulent century” (Stang 1949, 5–6).

In November 1949, the Norwegian transreader Paal Brekke—reader, writer, translator, and critic in one—penned an article for the widely read newspaper Dagbladet, in which he contextualized Döblin’s Confucius in a multifaceted network of eclectic Confucius commentaries. Against this background, Brekke deemed Döblin’s idiosyncratic selection of Confucian classics “wise and insightful”, fulfilling Stang’s anticipation of the interpreter to “make the selection as accessible as possible to the ordinary, interested reader” (Brekke 1949).

Moreover, Brekke appreciated Döblin’s strategy of using Confucius to overcome the fragmentation of modern Western culture. In contrast to Daoism, which “encouraged people to turn away from this evil world,” Brekke considered Confucianism to be the only solution to the Warring States Period’s “sad state of disintegration”. Brekke echoed Döblin’s characterization of Confucianism as “the law purified of all mysticism”. In contrast with Christianity, which “had eternal bliss to tempt us”, the whole Confucian package promises to be a healing force for trauma on a universal scale: historical knowledge, practical idealism, moral appeal, harmony in this world, and accessible laws for both the spiritual and mundane (ibid.).

10 Yet another motivation for Stang’s choice of Confucius in 1949 was his empathy with the suffering Chinese people: “Today, China is going through the most brutal metamorphosis in her history, and there may be reason to pause and gaze upon her ancient wisdom.” (Stang 1949, 5)

11 A representative of what I term “Nordic modes of transreading”, Brekke incorporated both American-British modernism (T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) and Asian poetry (Chinese, Japanese, and Indian) into Scandinavia, the European periphery, and cultivated a Norwegian modernism.

12 This multifaceted network of eclectic Confucius commentaries spans Sima Qian’s Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian of China), Lin Yutang’s Wisdom of China, P. A. Munch’s work on the medieval history of Norway, Sten Bugg’s Konfusius in Birkeland’s series Religionens stormenn (The Grandmasters of Religion), and Karl Reichelt’s Confucius in Fromhetstyper og helligdommer i Øst-Asia (Piety Types and Shrines in East Asia).
Conclusion: Transreading Chinese Antiquity through German Modernity

Wilhelm, who saw himself as the “spiritual intermediary between East and West”, practiced a Sinology accessible to the general public. He aimed to encourage the two cultures to understand each other by producing translations that were best adapted to intercultural transmission. He worked closely with Chinese scholars, but his translations constantly sought German equivalents for Chinese terms, allowing the reader to place Chinese literary and philosophical texts into the German cultural heritage. His work did in fact influence major writers like Kafka, Heidegger, Brecht, Döblin, and others. His German translation of the Yijing, which was in turn translated into English in 1950, has been reprinted over thirty times since then, and readers today still regard it as a key text of Oriental wisdom (Wilhelm 1967). An ordained minister who felt alienated from his fellow missionaries, he simultaneously rejected the narrow provincialism of Christian orthodoxy and the Orientalist condescension of German imperialism. Wilhelm dehistoricized his sources, and by removing particular details of time and place created the impression of a timeless, universal human culture (Lackner 1999). Living in China turned him into a genuine believer in the high moral value of Chinese classical civilization, an advocate of generosity and tolerance.

Döblin, a pioneering modernist writer, found in Daoism the inspiration for large-scale epic accounts that grasped the existential condition of humankind in a world of demonic technology and materialist philosophy. Later, writing in exile, he promoted Confucius as the archetypal personality who could lead ordinary people out of war and exile in both past and present. China, a place Döblin visited only in his imagination, still inspired, as it did with Wilhelm, a dedication to the respect for cultural difference and interchange of values guided by the principle of cultural equality.

Wilhelm and Döblin both created a Liezi and a Confucius who could engage with the central issues of the 20th century. Both men rejected the revolutionary materialism and the soulless liberalism of their times, idealizing Chinese antiquity as a special source of values. Döblin the modernist visionary appropriated Liezi to construct his own idiosyncratic novels; later, as a creative artist in exile, he argued for a Confucius with immense potential for spiritual and political influence, an answer to modern despair. Wilhelm found himself estranged from both his missionary colleagues and academic philologists, as he sought to make Chinese writings helpful for informing contemporary moral discussions.

Our study of Wilhelm and Döblin reveals the paths they forged to make East and West not only mutually comprehensible, but even integrable into something
richer and more meaningful than the sum of their parts. Such paths remain open for us today so that we might explore one culture and elevate another, finding new lessons and inspirations in both.

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