

## On the Value of Philological Methods in Teaching PRC History

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My first book on China that I read in teenage years was a 1977 German translation of Edgar Snow's *Journey to the Beginning* (1958). Written in a sympathetic tone towards the ambitions and achievements of the Communist movement in Yan'an it became the starting point of my fascination with the modern history of China. It contained all the important buzzwords a young man (who had just discovered his political idealism) could be fond of: liberation, emancipation, anti-imperialism, as well as the fight against economic exploitation. In the Federal Republic of Germany these political values had become part of both political rhetoric and political culture since the 1968 student movement. Starting with protests against the Vietnam War it spread the word of another significant movement, the Cultural Revolution, and resulted in the 1970s into a fairly positive image of China as an alternative model of social and political modernity. That idealism could be found in the German translations of Chinese propaganda journals such as *Beijing Review* and *China Pictorial*, but also in moving pictures such as Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972). From today's perspective, these materials are easily identified as propaganda because they stem from an era of radical political activism that nowadays seems to be absent. Back then, though, I was fairly impressed.

After starting my studies in Sinology at the University of Bonn, I slowly recognized that such images of China—may they be positive or negative—do not necessarily conform to reality. During my undergraduate years I gained such insight not by learning of how to read the signs (Roland Barthes accompanied me on *Travels in China* only later), but by understanding of how to take Chinese texts seriously. That was the aim of Sinology, I was told. Understanding rhetorical figures and political symbols in propaganda (and beyond) however had two preconditions. First, the acquisition of Chinese language enabling one to read the original source and not to rely on existing translations exclusively. Second—and this was more important—the ability to apply philological methods to the object of research.

Since the founding of the first chair in Sinology in Hamburg in 1909 (the world-wide first academic institution establishing Sinology as a discipline was the Collège de France in Paris in 1814) the interest of Sinology was primarily research in Chinese language and the translation of canonical texts. This led to a century-long tradition of philological approach whose aim is to decipher perplexing phenomena from a far region of the world by opening horizons (in the sense of Gadamer's hermeneutics) that are nothing short of being discourse spaces where different actors can engage in open arguments of how to understand both the past and the present. Taking philology as a discipline that critically combines conceptual universality with methodological

plurality it is—according to Sidney Pollock—more than able to create a world philology that goes beyond Europe. It is his conviction that philology is *the* discipline of the world university of the twenty-first century, especially because it enables one to “make sense of texts” (Antonio Gramsci) and can be taken as a counterforce to traditionalism, cultural essentialisms, and political ideologies.

It is for this reason that starting from the second year of our undergraduate Sinology program, students are continuously reading and translating of primary sources. An adequate source to begin with is the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) that due to its repetitive sentence structures and normative language is fairly easy to access. The aim is not only to instill a habit of reading Chinese texts, but also by taking a broader time frame to show that speech patterns and rhetoric today do not differ much from the socialist new-speak style of the pre-1978 period. An important element of translating is to include a rigid training in philological methods that makes students familiar with a number of dictionaries and encyclopedias that go beyond those available online (although one has to admit that the progress in digital databases is phenomenal). Teaching the use of dictionaries from the twentieth and twenty-first century exclusively might appear adequate when dealing with recent success stories of China's economic and geopolitical growth, but is surely insufficient for understanding either Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 poem *Kunlun* 昆仑 or a speech of Xi Jinping 习近平. In order to grasp the historical allusions in these and other texts and in order to understand how traditional ideas and values of the past still resonate in today's China, it is imperative to take a longer historical perspective, which makes the inclusion of classical Chinese (that is present in the writings of both Mao and Xi) into the curriculum indispensable. In other words, a philological reading of Chinese texts is not limited to the imperial era. Though some Sinological institutes in German academia have made classical and literary Chinese an elective course in recent years, it is still an integral part of Sinology at a number of universities (including Hamburg, Heidelberg and Erlangen-Nuremberg, among others). At our university, second-year students in the bachelor program are required to attend two consecutive courses for learning how to read and translate texts from Mencius and the dynastic histories to Tang poems and Ming literary works (at our institute we currently use Michael Fuller's *An Introduction to Literary Chinese* [Harvard University Press, 1999]). While the variety of texts depends on the specialization and expertise of the lecturer, the general idea is to offer an introduction to a broader range of texts that goes beyond those available in non-Chinese language textbooks.

Translation here means of course annotated translation of both classical and modern texts, which is a core requirement in

term papers in the advanced BA and the MA program. Weekly assignments include next to Western language research literature the reading of excerpts of primary sources (modern texts 600-800 characters, classical texts 200-250 characters per week), thus instead of talking about China to engage in a critical exchange with Chinese historians. In this context, translations serve as a training in approaching texts carefully and with a sharp eye, or as Nietzsche put it once: “For philology is that venerable art which demand of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the *word*...” He describes himself here as a philologist, that is, “a teacher of slow reading.”<sup>1</sup> Only slow reading makes an in-depth understanding of texts possible, which can reveal hidden meanings that are often overshadowed by faulty presumptions or orientalist prejudices (it is in this sense that Nietzsche defined philology as constraint in interpretation).<sup>2</sup>

The task is to excavate hidden meanings and contradictions by deciphering a text while avoiding confusing words with concepts. It is for this purpose that I make master students read a 1977 text by the German Sinologist Rolf Trauzettel in which he points to the existence of so-called pseudo-pronomen, or false equivalents.<sup>3</sup> A typical example of such equivalent that easily distorts our understanding of Chinese history is *minben* 民本. In a publication of 2006 (whose preface had been pinned by the then-CCP secretary of the Provincial Committee of Zhejiang Province, Xi Jinping), it is equaled to *minzhu* 民主, thereby claiming that imperial China had a political concept equal or even superior to its “Western” counterpart.<sup>4</sup> If only read in translation without reconsidering its meaning and role in the Mencius 孟子 or in the texts of Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 in the late Ming dynasty, it gives rise to false equivalents that have the potential of becoming conceptual challenges no longer limited to China anymore (see here the English-language publications of Qin Yaqing 秦亚青, Jiang Qing 蒋庆 and Yan Xuotong 阎学通 and their discussion by Daniel Bell).

A case in point is the publication of Xi Jinping’s *Quotations from the Chinese Classics (Xi Jinping yongdian 习近平用典, 2015)* that intends to demonstrate that the chairman

is an erudite scholar well versed in the Chinese tradition. His quotes from traditional sources and classical Chinese poetry, however, are in most cases taken out of the historical context, which in some cases leads to irresolvable contradictions of the quoted text and the speaker’s intention.<sup>5</sup> The same *faux pas* occurs in academic publications, such as in Zhao Tingyang’s 赵汀阳 writings on *tianxia* 天下<sup>6</sup> (where he misquotes the *Book of Odes [Shijing 诗经]* numerous times), and is not limited to politicians. It is for this reason that I always demand students to go back to the original source for verification, and not to trust later editions or the account in today’s textbooks. The aim in class is to make them reflect on the (non-) contingency of historical phenomena, something that philology can help them to do. Similar to Edward Said in one of his last essays I doubt that this scholarly tradition will become “sterile, ineffectual, and hopelessly irrelevant to life” (at least, I hope so).<sup>7</sup> The examples given above show that it can still provide the way to a critical spirit that not only takes facts seriously (again), but also helps to apply core principles of critical theory.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe – Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurtheile* (1881). Here quoted from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 5.

<sup>2</sup> See here the introduction by Sheldon Pollock, in Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (eds.), *World Philology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For Trauzettel’s understanding of philological research see three of his most important texts: Rolf Trauzettel, “Individuum und Heteronomie: Historische Aspekte des Verhältnisses von Individuum und Gesellschaft in China,” in: *Saeculum*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (1977): 340–364. English translation: “Historical Aspects of the Individual-Society Relationship in China,” in C.-A. Seyschab, A. Sievers, and S. Szykiewicz (eds.), *Society, Culture, and Patterns of Behaviour: East Asian Civilizations: New Attempts at Understanding Traditions 3/4* (Unkel/Rhein, 1977): 25–70; Rolf Trauzette, “On the Problem of the Universal Applicability of Confucianism,” in Rolf Trauzettel and Silke Krieger (eds.), *Confucianism and the Modernization of China* (Mainz: V. Hase & Koehler Verlag, 1991): 42–50.

<sup>4</sup> See Wu Guang 吴光, *Cong minben zouxiang minzhu: Huang Zongxi minben sixiang guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 从民本走向民主: 黄宗羲民本思想国际学术研讨会论文集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Such as in the case of a speech on Chinese innovation power given by Xi Jinping on 9 June 2014 at the opening of the 17<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Chinese Academy of Engineering that by heavily quoting legalist sources actually proves that it is hostile to innovation, contrary to chairman’s original intention. I thank Christian Schwermann for pointing me to this example. The source he analyzes in an unpublished manuscript is Xi Jinping 习近平, “Zai Zhongguo kexueyuan dishiqi ci yuanshi dahui, Zhongguo gongchengyuan di shier ci yuanshi dahui shang de jianghua 在中国科学院第十七次院士大会、中国工程院第十二次院士大会上的讲话,” publ. by Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi 中共中央党史研究室, <http://www.zgdsw.org.cn/2014/0610/c218988-25127885.html>, 9 June 2014 (last access 15 October 2018).

<sup>6</sup> On his problematic use of pre-imperial sources in this context see the discussion in Marc Andre Matten, *Imagining a Postnational World — Hegemony and Space in Modern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, “The Return to Philology,” in: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 57.

<sup>8</sup> The Frankfurt School of Adorno and Horkheimer insisted that social inquiry should combine rather than treat philosophy and social sciences separately. Only then it is possible to apply a philologically founded critique of ideology that confronts ideology with its own truth, as Adorno put it in his *Contribution to the Theory of Ideology*. See Theodor W. Adorno: *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre*. In: Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8: *Soziologische Schriften I* (third edition) (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1990): 465.