Modern Europe Transreads Dao: Wilhelm—Döblin—Kafka

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German Seminar: 29 Oct, 2019, 4:30-6

East Asian Studies Seminar: 30 Oct, 2019, 11:30-1:15

These two seminars, tailored for German/Comparative Literature and East Asian/Chinese Studies, challenge the respective audiences to investigate what drove modern European thinkers’ interest in Daoist philosophy and how they reimagined Dao as they pondered alternative solutions to 20th-century Western issues.

Using Dr. Zhang’s method “transreading” that integrates lento reading, poetic translation, creative writing, and cultural hermeneutics, we explore three distinct yet related instances of cross-cultural dialogue:

1. Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) Transreads Laozi and Liezi
2. Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) Transreads Liezi
3. Franz Kafka (1883–1924) Transreads Laozi

Seminar for East Asian/Chinese Studies focuses on 1 & 2

Central texts (provided in the classical Chinese original and my English translation):
- Excerpts from Laozi and Liezi
- Excerpts from Wilhelm’s Laozi and Liezi
- Excerpts from Döblin’s “Appropriation” and two autobiographies, along with his open letter to Marinetti

Leading questions:
- How did Wilhelm transread Laozi and Liezi as a German sinologist and theologian? How did his transreading inform and inspire Döblin, a German novelist and poet? How did Döblin transread Wilhelm’s Liezi and Laozi and create his own Dao in German?
- Why did Wilhelm and Döblin transread Dao as they did?

Seminar for German/Comparative Literature focuses on 2 & 3

Central texts (provided in the German original and my English translation):
- Excerpts from Wilhelm’s Liezi and Laozi
- Excerpts from Döblin’s “Appropriation” and two autobiographies, along with his open letter to Marinetti
- Excerpts from Kafka’s Zürau collection comprised of 109 manuscript cards, along with relevant entries from his notebooks and diaries

Leading questions:
- Why is it necessary and beneficial to differentiate between China and Dao when studying Döblin and Kafka?
- How did Döblin and Kafka, through transreading Wilhelm’s Liezi and Laozi, reimagine Dao? In what sense can Döblin’s Wang-Lun Novel or Kafka’s Zürau collection be regarded as a modern German continuation of ancient Chinese classics? How are philosophy and literature, pondering and poetics concurrent in their writings?