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Some Reflections on the Influence of Chinese Thought on Jung and his Psychological Theory

Many tributaries flow into the main stream of Jung's psychological theory. In recent years there has been considerable scholarly interest in tracing these various sources. Evident among them is the psychiatric background, of course, with Eugen Bleuler as a key figure and followed strongly by Flornoy, Janet, and Charcot. Then there is the general intellectual background of the Enlightenment and 19th Century European thought – figures such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Carus are referenced frequently in Jung's published writings. It is evident that he read them deeply and that he let them form his thinking. Of course Freud also plays a central part in Jung's formation as a psychological theorist, and the psychoanalytic influence remains important even after Jung's break with the founder in 1913. Another group of tributaries begin entering the picture already in the Freudian period: anthropologists like Lévy-Bruhl, psychologists like William James, ancient Gnostics, various Christian and pagan figures, scholars of mythology and religion, and thinkers from other disciplines as well. Later the alchemists, from whose works Jung absorbed so much, added their tinctures. Blended into the mixture from at least the time of the publication of *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* in 1912 was the (increasingly important) influence of non-Western thought – Egyptian, Indian, Tibetan, and most centrally for our purposes here Chinese. It is on this latter one that I want to focus, without giving it too much or too little weight, if this is possible.

One way to get our bearings here is to look at the significant relationship between Jung and the important European scholar of Chinese thought, Richard Wilhelm. This relationship began around 1925 and lasted until 1930, when Wilhelm died. Thomas Kirsch, upon the occasion of a visit to China in 1994, in a talk entitled *Jung and Tao*, reminded the audience that Jung “claimed that Wilhelm had influenced him more than any other individual in his life. This comes as a surprise to many who would naturally have thought that Freud was the most influential person in Jung's development” (p. 1). There is a correspondence between Jung and Wilhelm, which is housed in the C.G. Jung Archives at the ETH-Bibliothek in Zurich. It is small but revealing. Some of Jung's letters to Wilhelm have been published in *C.G. Jung Letters 1906-1950*, but not all of them and of course none of Wilhelm's letters appear there. While this was not one of Jung's major correspondences and in no way rivals the extensive exchanges with Freud (showing the influence of psychoanalysis), with Wolfgang Pauli (detailing the importance Jung gave to the relationship of analytical psychology with modern physics), or with Victor White (expounding his agreements and differences with Christian theology), it is nevertheless instructive and provides an important perspective on the significance of Chinese thought for Jung.

Let me introduce Richard Wilhelm before entering into a description and discussion of the correspondence. Richard Wilhelm was born on 10 May 1873 in Stuttgart, Germany. (He was therefore two years older than Jung.) His father was a craftsman and died when Richard was nine years old. After that his mother and grandmother raised him. In 1891, at the age of eighteen, he began theological studies at the University of Tübingen. In 1895, at the age of

twenty-two, he was ordained, and he became a vicar in the German town of Wimsheim in 1897. There he met his future wife, Salome Blumhardt. They were engaged in 1899 just before he left for China to work in the East Asia mission (the Allgemein Protestantischer Missionsverein) in the German colonial city of Qingdao (Tsingtao). In 1900 Salome joined him in China, and they were married in Shanghai. Four children followed in quick succession.

From 1899 until 1920, with a couple of brief stints back in Germany (in 1907 with his family of by then four children and his wife; in 1911 for health reasons – he had contracted amoebic dysentery from Chinese food in 1910), Wilhelm worked in Tsingtao as a pastor, an educator, and a missionary. He had strong scholarly and spiritual inclinations and quickly developed a fascination for Chinese culture and religion. His gift with languages was recognized by the German Mission, and he was allowed to spend all of his time on linguistic and scholarly studies. In a short time he became fluent in Chinese and began translating Chinese texts into German. His first publications, seven in number, among them works by Confucius, Da Hūo, Tsai-Li-Sekte, and a Chinese astronomy text, date from 1905, the year his son, Helmut, was born. After World War I, in 1920, Wilhelm returned to Germany but in two years was back in China, this time in Peking, where he served as scientific counselor in the German embassy and taught at Peking University until 1924. Returning permanently to Germany in 1924, he became the honorary professor of Chinese history and philosophy at the University of Frankfurt and remained at this university until his death in 1930 just shy of his fifty-seventh birthday.

His intellectual production was prodigious, quite typical of German scholars of the time. His most important contributions lay in the area of translation of and commentary on Chinese texts. Between 1910 and 1930 he worked on the translation and editing of an eight volume series of primary Chinese texts entitled *Religion und Philosophie Chinas* (“The Religion and Philosophy of China”). For ten years he worked in close collaboration with the noted Chinese scholar and sage Lao Nai-hsuan to produce his masterful translation of the I Ching (published in German in 1924 as *I Ching: Das Buch der Wandlungen*, aus dem Chinesischen verdeutscht und erläutert von Richard Wilhelm. Jena (Diederichs)). After his return to Germany in 1924, he became known as “the spiritual link between China and Europe” (Rennstich: 1301). He enjoyed friendly contact with numerous culturally prominent figures of the time – Rudolph Otto, Albert Schweitzer, Herman Hesse, Martin Buber, Tagore, and, most importantly for our purposes, C.G. Jung. With Jung he became “a friend” (see below).

The correspondence on file in the ETH archives is a brief one, extending over a period of only about ten months and containing merely thirteen letters all told. Some letters between the two men are evidently missing from this collection. The first one is a letter from Wilhelm to Jung dated 28 December 1928. The letterhead reads “China-Institut, Frankfurt a. M., Director: Prof. Dr. Richard Wilhelm.” In a formal and typically “correct” style, Wilhelm asks Jung if he would be willing to let his name be used as a sponsor of the newly founded *International Institut für Buddhismusforschung* (International Institute for the Study of Buddhism). This Institute was founded by a committee at the Musée Gaimet in Paris. S.E. Tai Hsü, the President of the Chinese Buddhist Union, had come to Europe to found this organization, which also had centers in Nanking and Singapore.

It is unclear from the available correspondence what sort of relationship Jung and Wilhelm had prior to this letter. Nor is it evident why Wilhelm would have wanted to ask Jung to add his name to the list of sponsors of this organization. It must have been the case that from their

previous encounters and discussions (see below) Jung had struck Wilhelm as someone with a deep interest in Eastern, as particularly in Chinese, thought and religion. Also, it was true that Jung's reputation and intellectual standing in Europe at the time was such that the leading European scholar of Chinese religion and philosophy would want him as a support. We know from many sources that Jung had a voracious appetite for the study of religious symbols and concepts from all corners of the world. For his part, Jung would have known of Wilhelm at least from the time of the German translation of the *I Ching*, which appeared in 1924. In his later (1950) Foreword to the Baynes English translation of the Wilhelm *I Ching*, Jung states that he had been familiar with Legge's translation of the *I Ching* before he found Wilhelm's. He also writes that he met Wilhelm "in the early 1920's" (CW 11, par. 966). They probably first encountered one another in person in the circle of Count Hermann Keyserling, founder of the "Schule der Weisheit" (the "School of Wisdom") located in Darmstadt, Germany. Wilhelm had a connection with Count Keyserling, as did Jung, who lectured at the School in Darmstadt in 1927. In May 1926 Wilhelm lectured twice at the Psychological Club in Zurich. (Toni Wolff was the president of the Club at the time.) Wilhelm's lectures were titled 'Chinesische Joga-praxis' ('Chinese Yoga Practice') and 'Chinesische Seelenlehre' ('Chinese Spiritual Teachings'). So it is clear that by the time the first letter in our extant correspondence arrived on Jung's doorstep, the two men had had a considerable exchange of views and would have built up a relationship.

The second letter in the series is from Jung to Wilhelm, dated 6 April 1929. This letter is published in Jung's *Letters* (pp.62-63). Reading between the lines, it seems that a great deal has transpired between the two men since the first letter was written some three months earlier. Jung addresses Wilhelm as "Mein lieber Professor," (My Dear Professor), a somewhat more familiar form than the more usual formal German greeting, "Sehr geehrter Professor" ("Highly Esteemed Professor"). His letter is friendly and casual, and he says that he hopes Wilhelm is feeling better: "It was the cold mayonnaise at the Schlegels that caused the problem" (my translation), he writes. Wilhelm must have gotten indigestion after a meal with the Schlegels, who were members of the Psychological Club in Zurich. On 29 January 1929 Wilhelm had given a lecture at the Psychological Club entitled 'Einige Probleme der buddhistischen Meditation' ('Some Problems in Buddhist Meditation'). Jung goes on to say that he will be passing through Frankfort on his way to Bad Nauheim for a Psychotherapy Congress (the 4th General Medical Congress for Psychotherapy, where he delivered the much referenced lecture 'The Aims of Psychotherapy' – cf. CW 16) and would like to meet with Wilhelm if possible, however briefly – he would have a three hour stopover in Frankfort between trains. He also mentions a joint project: "I shall soon be able to make a start on our MS" (*Letters*, p. 63). This, it turns out, is a reference to the text that would eventually be published as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* with a psychological commentary by Jung. It seems that Wilhelm sent this translation to Jung sometime in 1928. So already by this point, we find Jung and Wilhelm in an intellectual partnership.

In fact, this text created a critical turning point for Jung. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he writes: "Light on the nature of alchemy began to come to me only after I had read the text of the *Golden Flower*, that specimen of Chinese alchemy which Richard Wilhelm sent me..." (p. 204). Jung's fascination with alchemy had its major point of origin, according to Jung himself, in this Chinese treatise, and he would spend the next thirty years deeply immersed in the study of alchemy. In fact, so personally important for Jung was the opening to alchemy that he left off writing in his famous Red Book because of it (cf. *Erinnerungen*: 387). The study of alchemy became one of the structural pillars of his later psychological writing and thinking. Why?

From at least 1910 forward, Jung was searching for the fundamental stratum of the human psyche. He was quite sure that Freud had not found it in his theory of the unconscious, with its emphasis on sexuality and the Oedipus complex. This quest for basic structures led him to postulate (eventually) the theory of archetypes, which he would later often define as the basic building blocks of the human psyche and common to all members of the species. What he found in the Chinese treatise that Wilhelm handed gave him was a set of images and experiences that ran parallel to what he had found repeatedly in the analysis of his Western patients. More importantly still, he glimpsed, perhaps for the first time, the common dynamic that points to individuation as the goal of psychological development. It was the process of individuation (transformation) that drew him to alchemy. From Chinese alchemy he would go on and enter into a deep study of alchemical symbolism, primarily in Western sources, interpreting and translating them into psychological categories, and relating these symbols and images to the deep unconscious structures, processes, and symbolic representations offered by the psyches of modern people in analysis.

The third letter in this correspondence – from Jung to Wilhelm and dated 26 April 1929 – shows Jung in a rare (for him) apologetic mode. He wants Wilhelm to know that he is sorry for intruding on his privacy by rushing to his home while passing through Frankfurt on his way to Bad Nauheim. He says that he was worried about Wilhelm's health. As an experienced and highly intuitive physician, Jung must have sensed Wilhelm's fragility. Wilhelm would, after all, die in less than a year from the date of this letter of the disease he contracted in China. Jung expresses his urgent concern by underlining: "You are *too important* to our Western world. I must keep telling you this. You musn't melt away or otherwise disappear, or get ill" (*Letters*, p. 63). And then he comes up a real showstopper: "The result of my lecture at the recent Nauheim Congress of Psychotherapy is the decision of the society to invite *you* to give a lecture next year. *This is historic!* Think about what this means if medical practitioners, who reach the ordinary people directly in their most vulnerable areas, become inoculated with Chinese philosophy! I am thrilled and only hope that no devil will keep you away from this historic deed. This hits the bulls-eye. Medicine is powerfully converting itself to the psychic, and here the East must enter. Nothing will happen with theologians and philosophers because of their arrogance" (my translation).

Here we can see the weighty importance for Western medicine and psychotherapy that Jung attached to Wilhelm's translations of Chinese texts. The transformation of medicine that Jung speaks of here was his lifelong concern, namely to shift psychiatry and the mental health professions away from the dominant materialistic reductionism of the medical model (psyche = brain chemistry) to a psychological understanding. For this he had looked to many disciplines in the previous thirty years, and now he glimpsed a brand new and powerful resource, Chinese thought. This perception that Chinese philosophy and religion would be such a potent and much needed tool in the transformation of Western medicine, especially with respect to mental health, was founded on Jung's conviction that in its deep historic introspective tradition it had discovered the psyche in all its range and complexity and this would now be revealed to Western minds through such universal symbols as the **mandala**.

At the end of this letter Jung states in passing: "The Lamaic **mandala** has been copied. I will send back the original soon" (*Letters*, p. 64). In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung comments at some length on the importance of this **mandala** image for him. He relates that as a part of his own self analysis and inner work in the years 1927-28, he painted a couple of images that he would later call **mandalas**: the first he titled 'Window on Eternity' (which is reproduced in several places, e.g., in 'Concerning **Mandala** Symbolism', *CW*, Vol. 9/1), and

the second he says had an odd Chinese quality to it (*MDR*, p. 197). Shortly after this, he writes, “I received a letter from Richard Wilhelm enclosing the manuscript of a Taoist alchemical treatise entitled *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, with a request that I write a commentary on it [this letter, incidentally, is not found in the correspondence in the ETH archives]. I devoured the text at once, for the text gave me undreamed of confirmation of my ideas about the **mandala** and the circumambulation of the center. That was the first event which broke through my isolation... In remembrance of this coincidence, this ‘synchronicity,’ I wrote underneath the picture which had made so Chinese an impression upon me: “In 1928, when I was painting this picture, showing the golden, well-fortified castle, Richard Wilhelm in Frankfurt sent me the thousand-year-old Chinese text on the yellow castle, the germ of the immortal body” (*MDR*, p. 197).

What this gift from Wilhelm provided for Jung was a way of understanding the meaning of what he had been doing spontaneously for about ten years, i.e., drawing **mandala** images (see: *MDR*). The **mandala** represents circumambulation of the self, and therefore the individuation process. What the Chinese text taught him – or confirmed for him – was that psychological development is not linear but rather “circular,” a circumambulation of a non-representable center: “There is no linear evolution; there is only circumambulation of the self. Uniform development exists, at most, only at the beginning; later, everything points toward the center” (*MDR*, pp. 196-97). This notion of individuation as circular rather than linear, basically a Chinese one, would become a central feature of Jung’s theory of individuation. Chinese thought, therefore, played a key role in coming to this understanding and formulation of a process that is perhaps the centerpiece of Jung’s psychological theory. It was precisely the absence of linear thinking in Chinese philosophy that impressed Jung. His theory of synchronicity would also grow out of this.

At the time of the correspondence, of course, Jung had no idea of how important the long-range influence and effect of Wilhelm’s friendship and gifts would be for him. His intuition led him, however, to use the word “historic” when speaking of Wilhelm’s potential contribution to medical psychotherapy. This is because he sensed the power and depth of what Chinese thought had to offer to the one-sided rationalism of Western medical science, with its strictly causal explanations and exclusively linear perspective on growth and development. Chinese thought, as delivered by Richard Wilhelm, would further an historic transformation. With respect to Jung’s own thinking, at least, this seems to have been the case.

The next letter in the correspondence is short but quite moving (25 May 1929) and marks a definite turning point in the personal relationship between the two men. Again there seems to be a missing letter from Wilhelm to Jung in the extant correspondence, since Jung writes back to Wilhelm celebrating his acceptance of the invitation to give the lecture proposed by Jung a month earlier. For the first time in the correspondence he addresses Wilhelm as “Dear Friend.” He writes: “Dear Friend, It is lovely to hear the word ‘friend’ from you. Fate seems to have assigned us the role of being two piers which support the weight of the bridge between East and West. I thank you with all my heart that you have agreed to give the lecture” (*Letters*, p. 66, with my alterations). The lost letter from Wilhelm, it must be surmised, invited this new level of closeness between them – now friends, not collegial professors – and Jung responded with feeling and the image of a joint mission: to mediate East and West together. The remarkable thing is that Jung locates himself in this way. It was obvious that Richard Wilhelm was such a mediating figure for Europeans. But Jung? Jung’s role would be somewhat different from Wilhelm’s, as it turned out. Always he begins his

reflections and interpretations of non-Western materials from the point of view of the Westerner, with his own experience as a primary reference point. Whereas Wilhelm, the learned Sinologist, had spent nearly twenty-five years living and working in China, Jung was a Western psychiatrist who spent his entire adult life in Zurich, Switzerland. But the meeting with Wilhelm struck a chord deep within him, and he was never the same afterward.

Jung's method in mediating East and West called for him to stick with the Western psyche and to find points of commonality with Eastern thought as revealed in its classical texts. Wilhelm was a Western Christian missionary who had so deeply immersed himself in Chinese thought that he engaged the West from a Chinese point of view. In a sense, he was a missionary who had "gone native." (He is supposed to have boasted to Jung that during his twenty years as a missionary in China he had never baptized a single Chinese!) Knowing the philosophy and religion of both sides so well, he could critique his own original religious tradition from a Chinese perspective. And his translations of Chinese texts into German are more than literary translations; they transform the content in such a way that it can be effectively transmitted to Western intellects. This has of course been a point of criticism: that his translation of the *I Ching*, for example, is not literal and exact enough. But this transformation of texts also makes them accessible. Wilhelm was hermetic, more a transformer than a mere translator.

In the same letter Jung again expresses his concern about Wilhelm's health. Given that Wilhelm had agreed to give the lecture the following year to the Medical Psychotherapy Society, Jung wanted to be sure that he would follow through. (In fact, he would not be able to give that lecture. He died a couple of months before it was due to be presented.) Jung also apologizes for not yet completing his commentary on "The Secret of the Golden Flower," and writes: "No harm has been done by my putting it off, because I have had a number of experiences that have given me some very valuable insights" (*Letters*, p. 66).

In the months following this exchange, Wilhelm received some treatments for his health problems, and the correspondence turns to the minutiae of publishing – contracts, fees, etc. and some further projects being planned. Then on 10 September 1929 Jung writes to Wilhelm from his tower at Bollingen and announces that the commentary "is more or less finished" (*Letters*, p. 67). It is longer than expected "because it represents a European reaction to the wisdom of China. I have tried my hand at interpreting Tao" (.). In *ibid.* the commentary as it is finally published, Jung offers a rich and nuanced psychological interpretation of the Chinese alchemical text and relates his own and his patients' inner development to the processes described in it. In both the Chinese text and the inner experience of Western patients, he writes, the goal of the work is consciousness and wholeness, i.e., realization of the self. Jung puts the emphasis in his commentary decidedly upon living the Tao rather than only interpreting it verbally. (He acknowledges the several ways in which it has been translated, as "way," "meaning" (Wilhelm), "God" (Jesuits), "providence.") Jung's essay is a tour de force and must be ranked as one of his most brilliant and inspired works. The careful methodology he lays out and employs here is one that he will carry forward in his work over the decades to follow. While Wilhelm bridges from China to Europe with his translation, Jung bridges from Europe to China with his psychological commentary. Between them, they did truly create a splendid avenue for exchange and discourse between East and West.

It seems important to me that any further work on the dialogue between analytical psychology and Chinese thought begin with this text of Jung's. Here he offers a methodology that will betray neither side in the dialogue and will create numerous subtle and profound

inner connections that can link the psychological theory of analytical psychology to the traditional insights of Chinese thought and philosophy.

In the penultimate letter of the correspondence, dated 24 October 1929, Wilhelm suggests some minor changes in Jung's text and in the contract with the publisher. He also confirms that the German title of the book will be *Das Geheimnis der Goldenen Blüte* ("The Secret [or Mystery] of the Golden Flower [or Blossom]"). A Chinese editor had previously changed it to "The Art of Prolonging Human Life," but they decided to go back to the original title.

In the final letter, remarkably the thirteenth in the series, dated 28 October 1929, Jung states his agreement with the changes and expresses his warm approval of the title. He also says that he is preparing a series of mandalas drawn by patients: "The pictures complement one another and reveal in their complexity an excellent picture of the efforts of the European unconscious spirit to grasp the Oriental eschatology" (my translation). What Jung means by "Oriental eschatology" is the goal of the individuation (or spiritual) process: wholeness and conscious realization of the self, "the diamond body" in Chinese alchemy. He closes the correspondence with the unforgettable sentence: "At any rate you must never forget the care of your body, since the spirit has the unfortunate tendency to want to devour the body" (my translation). The book was published at the end of 1929. Wilhelm died on 1 March 1930.

In May 1930 Jung delivered the principal address at a memorial service for Richard Wilhelm in Munich (see *CW* 15, paras. 74-96). In this moving speech, Jung expresses his deep gratitude for what he received from Wilhelm: "Wilhelm's life-work is of such immense importance to me because it clarified and confirmed so much that I had been seeking, striving for, thinking, and doing in my efforts to alleviate the psychic sufferings of Europeans. It was a tremendous experience for me to hear through him, in clear language, things I had dimly divined in the confusion of our European unconscious. Indeed, I feel myself so very much enriched by him that it seems to me as if I had received more from him than from any other man" (*CW*, 15, par. 96). Jung tells why he feels Wilhelm's contribution was so important: his translation of and commentary on the *I Ching* provides "an Archimedean point from which our Western attitude of mind could be lifted off its foundations" (par. 78). Moreover, he "has inoculated us with the living germ of the Chinese spirit, capable of working a fundamental change in our view of the world" (par. 78). The *I Ching* is based not on the principle of causality but on the principle of synchronicity, and this related, in Jung's view, directly to his work on the unconscious of his European patients.

The treasures that Jung found in Chinese thought, thanks to the work of Richard Wilhelm, continued to influence his thinking for the rest of his life. What began in their joint mission of holding up a bridge between East and West ended in a complex psychological theory that combines Western linear, causal, scientific thinking and Eastern (i.e., Chinese) non-causal, synchronistic, holistic thinking. In such works as *Aion*, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," and *Mysterium Coniunctionis* Jung proposes a view of (psychic) reality that is as compatible with Chinese Taoist thinking as it is with European scientific thinking.

In his life, too, Jung made himself an experiment in the uniting of these "opposites," East and West. He did attempt to live the Tao and not only to think and write about it. The influence of China entered into his everyday life as well as into his psychological theorizing. I believe this has continued, to some extent at least, in the clinical tradition that is so much a part of analytical psychology.

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