Castles, Churches, Common Halls:
How to Present Chinese Literature Abroad

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Those who are engaged in the theory and interpretation of literature very often do not pay much attention to the practice of literature, i.e. to the simple question how literature works in public. According to my experience that I gained in the past it is, however, not sufficient just to prepare a good text for a reading. It might be of much more importance to take the surroundings of a meeting between an author and his readership into one’s consideration. In recent years it has turned out that any organization of literature in public, if it wants to be successful, has to be an event accompanied by a performance. I had to learn this in the past thirty years step by step. When I first started my way of presenting Chinese writers to a broader

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audience, I did not think about it as a certain kind of art, but the professionals soon forced me to change my pure, ill-considered (academic) style and to search for that kind of presentation that the listeners expect and the sponsors demand.

I. The Art of Reading

Scholars and students in Chinese studies are very often out of touch with the world around them. They can hardly imagine that what they do might appeal solely to their colleagues and friends, and not to those who do not belong to the field of, for instance, Chinese literature as in our case. Specialists on China are rarely able or even willing to step out of their academic area and satisfy the need for knowledge about China, which a broad readership might nourish. And if there are two or three scholars in Chinese studies, who write in a lucid style and at the same time on a high level like Jonathan Spence or Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, and should they attract attention at home and abroad, they sometimes become victims of suspicion. One doubts their methodology, the depth of their thought, and might even accuse them of popular science.

I myself think that it is possible to be a specialist and a professional at the same time. One only has to know how to combine insider knowledge and professional circulation. Success in this respect is nothing else than a question of good preparation and thoughtful representation.

As scholars and translators of Chinese literature we have something in common with any writer: We share the instruments of language or better to say the art of language, at least we should. Good language makes a good writer; good language also makes a good translation. Good language works, it is able to put a spell on someone who is not only able to read, but also to listen. The sensual success of a spoken text is based upon two factors: good speaking and careful listening. Both of them should not be taken for granted as talents one is born with, as just the opposite is true: They must be learned. We may be familiar with speech training, but not with the cultivation of hearing ability. Of course, proficiency in listening only makes sense when the listener is offered different levels and varied timbres. An interesting sound of language requires a person who knows what time and volume during the speech act is.

Unfortunately there are not many writers who are trained, by teachers skilled in performance, to read their texts in public. And the same is true for translators who, often without any real professional preparation, enter the stage together with the
author whom they translate and whose works they sometimes have to read in their translations. Be it the author or the translator, a good piece of literature, both in the original version and in translation, can be totally destroyed by a poor act of reading. But the same is also true vice versa: A mediocre text can be elevated to the level of an excellent piece, so much so that upon reading the text with our own eyes at a later point, we sometimes ask ourselves what did we listen to before, why were we fascinated then and are no longer?

To give you a very simple and neutral example: Karin Hempel-Soos (1939-2009), until her death the centre of the literary scene in Bonn, was a comedian and a poetess. People liked her comedy very much, but did not really want to read her poetry, which seemed to be some kind of farce in lyrical form. But whenever she recited her poems, they gained depth word for word. Why? The intervals of time she left between single words and the emphasis she put upon certain syllables, the way she altered her voice from irony to warmth, from defence to attack, lent her poems seriousness: a seriousness that had to do with her childhood during WW II, with her upbringing in the totalitarian GDR, with her escape to West Germany in the 1960’s and with her hunger in Cologne. Her reading came close to what in philosophy is called excavating, i.e., at the bottom of any word there is a long history of different meanings hidden. Through the speech act its history is illustrated. In this respect not only writing poetry is an act of excavating, as the poet Yang Lian, now based in London, sees it, but reading poetry means also bringing to light the forgotten side of the past.

What, however, happens when there is a discrepancy between written form and oral presentation? Durs Grünbein for instance, certainly Germany’s best and most successful poet, does not know how to read his very sophisticated texts in front of his very open-minded fans. He has no real feeling for a single verse or a single word. He lines his poems up, one after the other, without any break in between, and speaks so quickly that one cannot follow. In short, through his presentation he completely minimizes his great work of art. Finally the audience gets so bored that they want to leave.

Few Chinese writers have a clear understanding of public performance. Among them are Yang Lian, Ouyang Jianghe, Zheng Chouyu, Wang Meng, and Zhang Chengzhi. They are able to fascinate their listeners. But many are not. They might be better in the subsequent discussion of their texts. Leung Ping-kwan (Liang Bingjun) from Hong Kong, for example, reads sitting in a low voice and in
Cantonese which nearly no one in Germany understands. But he is excellent in the following English or Chinese (Putonghua) conversation, so that his witty readings in German speaking countries are always well-attended.

Experienced organizers of readings can often foresee the problems of a meeting between readership and a favourite writer. The danger is real, that some (Chinese) authors may spoil their own texts through bad oral presentation. When the translators also have difficulties making a dynamic impression, they are very often replaced by professional speakers/actors. An actor might stand and not sit; he might know most of the excerpts by heart and not fix his eyes upon a sheet of paper as most Chinese authors do. Eye contact is very important, as it invites the listener into the oeuvre of a writer. A good performer knows the tricks which connect an interested readership with an author, even if he holds a rather unreadable piece of literature in his hands. A small measure of stage presence, which catches and holds the attention of the audience, is invaluable; otherwise the text, when read, will not develop its spirit.

II. A Typical German Reading: What Works

Reading is an art and has to be treated as an art. That means any event has to be prepared very carefully, if it should be a great success. Working together with professional organizers for more than 25 years, I have learned a lot from them, though they might have no idea of Chinese literature.

A reading is not just a reading of words; it should be the total presentation of an author with all his talents and deep thoughts. That is why it must be clearly structured and accompanied by certain actions and gestures.

During his stay in German speaking countries, a Chinese author is not alone on a stage in order to introduce himself and his oeuvre. There are usually two persons who help him to get into contact with his audience. One is his translator who is responsible for the written and the oral translation, the other one is the presenter who will represent the institution who invited him for the reading. If the host is a professional - and in most cases he is - he will organize the reading in a way that the event will not last for more than $50 + 10$ minutes, followed by a discussion between the author and his readers. After the session wine and bread are usually offered for free so that, for about half an hour, individuals have the chance to start a conversation with the writer, to buy his books, and have them signed.

As the German audience is not really familiar with Chinese writers, it is the task
of the moderator to mediate between the Chinese author and the German side. He will do this by reading his introduction, which he prepared by using all the material he was provided with or could get a hold of. More important in this respect, however, is the art of conversation which is implanted into the reading. That means the presenter will not allow the author and his translator to read one text after the other, first in German and then in Chinese, but will ask them to pause for a moment after one or two texts, so that he can ask the Chinese writer questions concerning his writings and his whereabouts. In this way an event will get very lively, and if the host has a good sense of humour, the reading will not only have an informative character, but will at the same time allow the listeners to relax. Readings with Leung Ping-kwan, for instance, are always like this.

Although she may not have invented them, Karin Hempel-Soos, who over the years repeatedly invited Chinese poets to Bonn, often made use of that kind of reading which combines literature with food. For instance in December 2004 when Zheng Chouyu, Yang Lian, Zhang Zao, and the German writer Tilman Spengler were in Bonn, she asked me to cook for them and their audience. With the help of the photographer Almond Chu and the video artist Ann Mak, both from Hong Kong, I ultimately had to cook Chinese food for about 50 people, who listened to texts about China while eating things like Suanlatang or Muxurou.

In the same vein, I like to organize readings where the consumption of Chinese schnapps (Baijiu) is obligatory. I have to confess, however, that major events of this kind, which are well-received by the public, meanwhile run into difficulties. As I prefer liquors of more than 50°, it needs a Chinese poet who is able to drink with me. In the past, poets like Bei Dao or Leung Ping-kwan liked to follow me emptying bottles of Erguotou (56°) or Jinmen Gaoliang Baijiu (58°) on stage, but with growing age it is hard to find the right partner nowadays. Only Zheng Chouyu is willing and able to finish any drink with me. Whenever or wherever we read together in public, a full bottle of Chinese spirits will be our third partner for sure. When it is empty, we are not drunk, only happy, and that is something the audience likes to share in and enjoy. Because of its success, reading and drinking became a habit for my partner, hopefully able to hold his drink well, and me; any presentation of Chinese literature I now plan as drinking ceremony. But in the very end most of the Chinese partners are, unfortunately, only prepared to sip at a small glass and leave the rest for me.

It is quite common for European writers to drink some (red) wine on stage. And
it is quite common to eat some bread with the wine after the session is over. Why not then combine bread and wine during a reading? Bread and wine is the name of a very famous poem of Hoelderlin. And Hoelderlin is one of the favourite poets of Chinese friends of good literature. When Ouyang Jianghe came to Bonn for the first time in 1997, the event was celebrated by some 150 students and teachers in the beautiful Festsaal (Hall of Festivities) of Bonn University, itself a castle. As he is a fan of Hoelderlin, I thought of something special at the end of his poetry “singing” (Ouyang sings rather than reads his poems!). I invited everyone into the adjacent Senatssaal (Hall of the Senate) of the university, where we had prepared bread and wine spread all over the room. While our hands were busy holding wine and bread, a Chinese and a German student recited Hoelderlin’s great poem in both languages.

In short, from a German point of view a reading has to be a spiritual, intellectual, and sometimes even a sensuous event. Furthermore, if music is also involved, as it sometimes is in China, too, it must classical or modern, never of popular character, and it has to be separated from the recitations. A musician might start and end the event, and in between we might listen to him again. Instruments are usually the Chinese lute or Western piano or violin. They should not mix up Chinese and occidental tunes or musical instruments. This is different from China where, when put to music, poems are sung nowadays in a popular mixture of East and West. The impression a Westerner might get from this is: sweetness has replaced intellect. A very good example in this case is the poetry of Zheng Chouyu. His poems set to music become pop songs full of sentiment. And here we can find an essential cultural difference between China and Europe: any Chinese performance comes closer to sentimentality, and any European production rather prefers an exchange of ideas. We can of course conclude from this that a Chinese reading that is successful in Europe will not be as successful in China! The same is true vice versa. This goes without saying.

III. Settings for a Successful Gathering

In keeping with the theatrical metaphor, now that we have dealt with the structure of the reading, the plot if you will, including the characters and timing, voice and props, let us turn our attention to the spatial dimension.

So far we have only slightly broached the question of where to introduce Chinese literature abroad in public. In Germany, the traditional form of reading, including traditional venues for presenting literature, has become anachronistic. Of course one
can still find the classical standard reading offered, for instance, in a place called “Literaturhaus” (House of Literature), an institution which can be found in every major German city: Nearly every evening there will be a writer sitting on a stage in front of an audience and reading from his works for about an hour. The listeners will keep very quiet; some have their eyes closed. It often looks like secularized worship.

But choosing a different place for a recital might give a different touch to a piece of literature. So when I prepared Ouyang Jianghe’s reading tour for Germany and Austria, in order to introduce his German collection of poetry (2010) to a broader public in January 2011, I decided to read his cycle “The Tears of Taj Mahal” only once. Why only once, whereas poems of his like “Schubert” were read in nearly all the nine cities to which I took him? As this cycle is of a religious nature, I was of the opinion it needs its special place, it needs a church. But it is not easy to open a holy place for a secular reading. I was, however, successful in convincing the court chaplain of the old Castle Church in Bonn University. This structure, which was once the place where the prince elector, with his family and court, went for worship, has a well-preserved atmosphere of the 18th century. I did not allow the usual questions and a discussion. Ouyang was seated and I remained standing in or close to the chancel. I wanted to keep the holiness of the surroundings. After a short introduction we read for one hour in German and Chinese. About fifty people listened in silence. For me personally this was an overwhelming event, the best reading of my life.

I did not invent reading Chinese literature in holy places. In the summer of 2010 I was invited by Detmold’s (a German city) “Office of Literature” to join together with poets like Adonis and Yang Lian in an old monastery. Very famous actors from TV and film were with us in order to support our recital in a professional way. Reaching the monastery required patience and driving skill. I expected about fifty people to come - in fact a crowd of 400 filled the open space under the sky. As Yang Lian celebrates poetry in the old style of poets as seer, a German monastery is the right place to lend his poems a holy touch. Though what he writes is of a secular nature, the form is not. And this was perhaps the reason why Karin Hempel-Soos invited him to Bonn about a dozen times!

In addition to holy places, which attract more people than public buildings like modern universities and their institutions (Confucius Institute), there are castles and parks which are very apt to readings. On the strength of their beauty and space they
invite listeners to come, regardless of the sort of literature being presented. Darmstadt, for instance, has no connection with China and its university does not offer Chinese. Nevertheless, when Ouyang Jianghe held a reading in the cellar of the castle there, about forty members of a private literary salon showed up.

One of my favourite places in Bonn is “The House at the Redoute”. This “House” was once the theatre of the local aristocracy. The “Redoute” itself is a former ballroom, where Haydn met Beethoven in 1792 and invited him to Vienna. The “House” is now a meeting place for artists of all kinds, as it still offers the splendour of days gone by: high rooms, huge mirrors, white marble, stucco ceilings, good acoustics etc. Anyone can rent it for artistic activities. As head of the German Writers’ Union in Southern North Rhine-Westphalia I often arrange readings there, for instance in the fall of 2008 for Xi Chuan and his friends, when they were on their way to Berlin for the literature festival there.

When mentioning locations where writers and their fans gather, we must not forget museums, which have a lot of advantages: a perfect infrastructure, a professional staff, and an excellent technical apparatus. Thus it was possible for the above mentioned video artist Ann Mak to present the poetry of Zheng Chouyu through the help of video clips, slides, music, calligraphy and performances in Bonn’s Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, when the presentation of Tang artefacts from Xi’an was scheduled for 2006 and our Chinese poet was asked to introduce us into his lyrical vision of Tang China (618–907) one evening there.

IV. Practical Aspects of Readings

Readings depend upon language. Not only the writer, but also the translator, the organizer, and the moderator should be masters of language, or even better, languages. A reading with a Chinese author demands at least two languages: German and Chinese. Because in university cities the Chinese audience might replace the German audience, it sometimes seems necessary to make use of these two languages at the same time. Furthermore, there may be some foreign intellectuals or artists who are interested in Chinese literature, but not good at these two languages. Then one has to add English to the event.

Karin Hempel-Soos once even brought a fourth language into a reading with Yang Lian: French! Why? Yang Lian maintains the theory that a poem is only completed through translation. So reading the German, English and French
translation of his poems by three different speakers would make – so it seems - his poetry most complete. But does an audience really accept four languages (including Chinese) in about sixty minutes? That depends upon the city where the reading takes place.

It might sound strange, but unfortunately it’s true: All those who are in Chinese studies, be they teachers or students, seldom appear when I organize a recital with a Chinese writer. Typical for this odd phenomenon are huge cities like Berlin, Cologne and Munich. Participants in most cases are individuals interested in good literature or in contemporary China. Their numbers vary from place to place: In small towns there will be usually 30-50 people coming, in big cities one has to be satisfied with a dozen or so.

For the past few years, organizers have charged an entry fee for readings: a regular admission costing less than ten Euros, half-price for students. Gazettes in small towns dispatch a journalist who reports about the reading, before and after. A local bookstore usually sets up a stand selling works by the Chinese author and related literature. In German speaking countries, a writer can make a living through readings. The remuneration will be at least 200 Euros. Travel and hotel costs are paid by the organizers extra. As speaker’s fees are not fixed, they might go up to one thousand Euros per reading. The price is a question of negotiation; Chinese writers usually accept between 200 and 250 Euros, but sometimes they make 400 Euros per session.

Germany is a small country with a long tradition of literary activity. Even in small cities like Bonn you will find privately organized literary salons. Since 1979, any important contemporary Chinese writer has not only been translated into German, but also invited to Germany for a reading and/or a longer stay. Some authors have been invited repeatedly, as is true in the case of Leung Ping-kwan, Bei Dao or Wang Jiaxin. After their stay in Germany they will go to other German speaking countries, and might continue their travels to France or Sweden.

Could something similar be said of the Chinese speaking world? After 1989 German literature found her way back to world literature. In recent years three German-writing novelists won the Nobel Prize for Literature. China, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau seldom invites, translates, and introduces single writers and for sure not as many within ten years as Germany does every year. That is why the German readership probably knows more about contemporary Chinese
literature than the Chinese readership about contemporary German literature.

Is there any hope to level out this state of imbalance? I do not answer this question. When writing this paper I was awaiting Wang Jiaxin to come from Peking to Bonn and to go with me to Leipzig and Berlin. His first collection of poetry (2011) was published in German. The public is already eager to get to know it. Our reading tour will start in Bonn’s House of the Electoral Gardener. It is an old house and just the right place for someone from an ancient civilization.

Notes:

[1] As in German children have a personal pronoun of their own and as children are also able to produce art (cf. young Mozart), I would have to use he, she, it and his, her, its at the same time from a German perspective. But this will spoil language, so “his” in the following will include “her” and “its” etc.

[2] German has incorporated the English expression which means something very special and of broad interest on the side of the audience and the media.

[3] Cf. Friedhelm Kemp: <… das Ohr, das spricht>. Spaziergänge eines Lesers und Übersetzers. Munich and Vienna: Hanser 1989.

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