

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

# Feng Zhi and Goethe of Later Years

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**Abstract** The modern Chinese poet Feng Zhi (1905-1993) was deeply influenced by the German writer Goethe. Differing from his contemporaries who fell for the young Goethe, Feng Zhi was fascinated by the old Goethe, and focused his attention on Goethe's later writings. This paper aims to make a tentative proposal of the connection between Feng Zhi and the Goethe of his later years. It is divided into three parts: the first part discusses the discrepancies between Feng Zhi's understanding of Goethe and the general image of Goethe in the modern Chinese context; the second part examines the main intellectual characteristics of Feng Zhi's understanding of Goethe through detailed textual analysis; the third part explores the internal relationship between Feng Zhi and Goethe in the cultural context of the quarrel between the ancient and the modern.

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**Keywords** Feng Zhi. Goethe.

## 1 Introduction

In the early 1920s, when Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905-1993) was still a student, Guo Moruo's 郭沫若 (1892-1978) translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, 1774) had already passionately resonated with him. This fascination, though, was more the 'Zeitgeist' than Feng Zhi's conscious personal choice. Indeed, despite the fact that Feng Zhi discussed Goethe in his correspondence with his friends in the 1920s and 1930s, and despite the fact that he bought two different editions of *The Complete Works of Goethe*, Goethe was not Feng Zhi's focus of attention at that time. Yet, even when Feng Zhi was involved in discussions about Goethe, his perspective in interpreting the German writer was very different from Feng's contemporaries.

A striking difference is that Feng Zhi was more concerned with Goethe's later writings than the Goethe of the 'Storm und Drang' period. More importantly, Feng had not yet reached the age of thirty when he was seized by this fascination with the older Goethe, which would stay with him for several decades.

This paper will be centered on an investigation of the reasons for Feng Zhi's 'Complex of Goethe in his Later Years'. The paper consists of three sections. Section one discusses the discrepancies between Feng Zhi's understanding of Goethe and the general image of Goethe in the modern Chinese context; section two examines, through detailed textual analysis, the main intellectual characteristics of Feng Zhi's understanding of Goethe; section three explores, in the cultural context of the quarrel between the ancient and the modern, the internal relationship between Feng Zhi and Goethe.

## 2 Goethe: A Complete Man

In modern China, Goethe has always been an important figure. For modern Chinese, Goethe is a huge spiritual fountain that empowers us to confront the dilemma of modernity. A good case in point is Zong Baihua's 宗白华 (1897-1986) idea about Goethe's meaning to the moderns: «Our world has become old, in this world the people who shouldered great responsibility have been weather-beaten and dust-clothed. All their weary eyes can see is evil, scheme, pain, and emptiness». But, all of these are less daunting because we have Goethe, the «poet of true nature». He brought people not only faith, but also the possibility of returning to our true nature. With the help of the «clean, pure soul» and «innocent, bright eyes» of the great poet, we are empowered in our filthy world to «unearth the spiritual treasure, and discover the world as brand new, bright and pure, just like the first day of genesis», and hence «touch the world of childhood again» (Zong Baihua 1994, p. 26).

This passage by Zong Baihua was written for the occasion celebrating 'The Goethe Centennial' in 1932. It reflected the mainstream understanding of Goethe in the decade following the May 4th Movement (Zong Baihua 1932). However, Zong Baihua's portrayal of Goethe as a man walking past the «period of poet in youth», «period of statesman in middle age», and «period of thinker and scientist in old age», or Goethe's change in literary style from the delicacy of Rococo to the realism of the classical, cannot represent the whole Goethe (1994, p. 4). On this question Feng Zhi took a different stand. First of all, his opinions on Goethe were a meaningful contrast to his contemporaries'. Secondly, he was fascinated with certain unique aspects of Goethe's ideas. To make this point clear, I shall here take a number of references from Zong Baihua and Chen Quan 陈铨 (1903-1969).

Zong Baihua provides the first interesting contrast to Feng Zhi. In the early 1930s, Zong had fully revealed the richness of Goethe's life, while emphasizing the meaning of the young Werther or young Goethe to the moderns. Comparatively speaking, Feng Zhi, who was also deeply moved by young Werther, was skeptical about Werther's belief that «emotion

is everything». In the 1920s he barely mentioned Goethe's works, and throughout the entire 1930s, especially the early years of the decade, he was wholly devoted to Rilke.

However, less contact with Goethe did not mean that Feng Zhi was completely immune from the influence of Young Werther. The fact is that, even though he «did not, and could not» «follow Goethe into his classical period» in the 1920s, through his identification with Werther he nevertheless followed the path of Young Werther and moved «closer to the romantic literature that emerged after the Sturm und Drang movement» (Feng Zhi, p. 195). This process continued uninterrupted until the early 1930s, at which time the spirit of the Romantic period could no longer provide relief and consolation to Feng Zhi.

It is in this context that Feng Zhi developed his own understanding of Goethe. If Zong Baihua's attempt was to attain revelation and the possibility of going back from Goethe to «the world of Childhood» in order to build a «Young China», then Feng Zhi's efforts were aimed at outgrowing the immature state of his own spirit, achieving a mature self, and consummating his self-transcendence. It is the gesture of someone progressing and moving forward, instead of regressing and moving backward. In a letter he wrote to his friend, he expressed his interest in Goethe's later works. The letter said:

比起歌德的早期作品来，我更喜欢他的晚期作品。我喜欢那些包含着深刻人生睿智的书，如《西东诗集》。您一定知道这部诗集中《幸运的渴望》这首诗，这是我最喜欢的诗。(Feng Zhi 1999, p.164)

Compared with Goethe's early works, I prefer his later works. I like those books that contain the profound wisdom of life, such as West-East Divan: Poems. You must know the poem «Lucky Desire» in the collection. This is my favorite poem. (Translation by the Author)

In another letter he also said:

数月以来，专心 Goethe。我读他的书，仿佛坐在黑暗里望光明一般。他老年的诗是那样地深沉，充满了智慧。(1999, p.137)

For several months, I devoted myself to Goethe. Reading his books was like sitting in the dark while seeing the light. The poems he wrote in his later years were so profound, and full of wisdom. (Translation by the Author)

Feng Zhi's statements are not accidental. They alert us to Feng Zhi's concern for the later Goethe's life wisdom. And the works of Goethe's that he read during this time can also provide us with some clues.

Feng Zhi chose neither *Goetz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand* (1773), a book as equally sensational as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, nor *Prometheus* (1773), a work that occupies an important position in the younger period of Goethe's creation, nor *Egmont* (1787), the book that retains the 'Sturm und Drang' style. What touched Feng Zhi most is Goethe's later work, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833), especially the third volume which was finished in 1813. He was profoundly impressed by the people and things in a world that stood in striking contrast to the modern one, and by a great era that appeared together with a great man in a work «so rich» and «so beautiful». For Feng Zhi, the people in Goethe's time «lived in the world of themselves, lived for themselves, while they belonged to the universe», yet modern people are «diametrically different», because «modern people lived for the collectivity, yet they are eternally lonely» (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 162).

In addition, Feng Zhi's favorite poem of Goethe's was also written in Goethe's later years. It is «Desire for Happiness» in the *West East Poems* (*West-oestlicher Diwan*, 1814-1819). «Death and Change» in this poem was regarded by Feng Zhi as 'The Ultimate Creed' (Letter to Bauer, 1934), and was used as the last line of the thirteenth poem, titled «Goethe», in this collection. In fact, this is the primary reason Feng Zhi studied *Faust* intensively, translated *Wilhelm Meister* after the war years, and became a true Goethe expert. The reason Feng Zhi focused on the later Goethe with such passion was to a great extent that he was at a stage of spiritual transformation in which he was attempting to transcend his former self, just as Goethe had done. In other words, after the 1930s, Feng Zhi was insatiable in his studies on the self nurturing by young Werther and German Romanticism, and he desired a Goethean regeneration: a new «death and change».

Nevertheless, in the 1940s Feng Zhi's focus on later Goethe was different from that in the 1930s. First of all, from the perspective of form, his understanding of later Goethe was no longer episodic sentiments, but the result of systematic study, such as his interpretation of *Reading Goethe*, published in 1948. What merits our special attention here is that among the five essays written by Feng Zhi between 1941 and 1947 that are collected in this book, there are four essays discussing Goethe's later works, one of them specifically titled «Goethe's Later Years».

Second of all, from an intellectual perspective, Feng Zhi's series of writings on Goethe was an attempt to present us a «complete Goethe», instead of the partial Goethe as presented in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or *Faust*. The essay «Goethe and Education of Man», published in 1945, had a significant discussion on this point:

歌德在中国并不是一个生疏的名字，许多人从郭沫若和周学普的中文译本读过他一部分的作品。但人们对于他总难免有两个错误的认识：有人以为歌德是一个享尽人

间荣誉的幸福者，因为他一生顺利，享尽光荣；又有人以为歌德是一个放荡不羁、缺乏道德观念的才子，因为一般人——尤其在中国——只就《少年维特之烦恼》与《浮士德》等一二部最流行的作品看歌德。前者的认识是肤浅的，后者的认识是部分的；都不是整个的歌德。(Feng Zhi 1999, p.82)

Goethe is definitely not an unfamiliar name in China, many people have read part of his work in Guo Moruo's or Zhou Xuepu's 周学普 (1900-1983) translations. Still, though, people inevitably hold two misconceptions about him: some think him blessed, one who has enjoyed everything the world offers, while others consider him a dissolute libertine. The reason for these misconceptions is that Chinese people come to know him only through his two popular works, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Faust*. The former opinion is superficial, and the latter is partial; neither of the two [represents] the complete Goethe. (Translation by the Author)

To say that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* cannot represent the complete Goethe is not hard to understand, but to say that *Faust*, a work Goethe spent almost his entire life writing, cannot represent the complete Goethe may be not be very convincing. But this is exactly where Feng Zhi's original insight lay and it is exactly why he was so concerned with the later Goethe and it attests to the richness of humanity.

In Feng Zhi's view, the reason Goethe is «the best example of human being» can be summed up by a sentence Napoleon said to Goethe: «you are a 'Man'». Precisely because he is a 'Man', Goethe «reminds us that he has blood, flesh, spirit, and soul»; and precisely because he is a 'Man', Goethe «reminds us that he is like other living beings, experiencing growth and change» (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 82). In other words, experiencing «death and change».

It is in this sense that Feng Zhi thinks that even a rich work like *Faust* cannot represent a complete Goethe, or is insufficient to fully represent the meaning of Goethe's life to the moderns. Any single interpretation of Goethe is a misunderstanding of Goethe, as well as a partial emphasis on a certain aspect of humanity, hence, it undermines «the education of man».

For Feng Zhi, the richness of Goethe lies not only in the wide range of works he completed in his eighty-three years of life experiences, or his achievements in literature, art, science and politics. What Feng Zhi thinks more important is that «his assiduous effort (outwardly) is grounded in his unrelenting effort to maintain, inwardly, his self-restraint». From a dissolute, an oppression breaker, a freedom admirer, one who dominates everything with his passion, to a man who possesses something more precious than passion, a man with 'responsibility', a man of self-restraint, this is the true greatness of Goethe. And the point is, different from the emotional flooding of romanticism or those sagging middle-agers who suffered the

severe blows of reality, «every time Goethe restrained himself, he then arrived at a new stage and achieved new growth; every sickness brought new health, every painful love brewed new drink. Even in his old age, Goethe still showed no sign of decline or weakness» (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 84).

Feng Zhi's understanding of Goethe is, on the one hand, coupled with the change in his (Feng Zhi's) artistic view, and on the other hand, related to his understanding of the Faustian spirit.

Artistically speaking, Feng Zhi obviously sided with Rilke, so it is not difficult for him to accept the Goethean 'restraint' that was formed by the inspiration of classical art. According to Feng Zhi, «the value of art lies not in the flooding of emotion, but in the compression of emotion, it is not the eruption of volcanoes, but the endurance and tolerance of the sea. For the compression and endurance, we always need to make efforts to master self-restraint» (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 8).

The artistic 'restraint' is only one aspect; what is more important is the 'restraint' of self. This not only differentiates Feng Zhi and Zong Baihua, it also forms an interesting contrast with another advocator of the Faustian spirit, Chen Quan.

Chen Quan says: «What exactly is Goethe's Faust? First of all, Goethe's Faust is a man who would forever have an insatiable hunger for the world and life; secondly, Goethe's Faust is a man who never ceases to strive; thirdly, Goethe's Faust is a man who disregards everything; fourthly, Goethe's Faust is a man who has abundant emotion; and fifthly, Goethe's Faust is a romantic man» (Chen Quan 1940). Chen Quan's generalization seemed to unfold five dimensions of Faust, but in reality, all five dimensions can come down to one single core idea: that Faust is an insatiable and romantic man.

This reminds us of another of Feng Zhi's summaries of Faustian spirit, as quoted from *Book of Changes*: «As Heaven's movement is ever vigorous, so must a gentleman ceaselessly strive» (p. 219) and reminds us of two metaphors Goethe often used: one is a snake peeling off its skin, and the other is a phoenix rising from the ashes. However, for Feng Zhi, Faust is not only a 'romantic man', and neither is Goethe.

On the contrary, Feng Zhi gave special attention to the important characteristics that are the opposite of the 'romantic man'. The first characteristic is 'pragmatism', which is an important aspect of Goethe's spirit and which is embodied in Faust. For Goethe, it is unimaginable for a young man who aims to pursue philosophy that he cannot keep his desk clean. In *Faust II* he mocked the philosophical idea that 'self' could create everything (Goethe 1999, pp. 272-278). Correspondingly, in *Wilhelm Meister* he praised highly the down-to-earth handicraft. The unadorned handicraft and the sublime spirit complement each other; the man who values practical labor is in no sense comparable to the 'romantic man'. However, Feng Zhi also pointed out that the value Goethe puts on pragmatism is

not meaningless, because he always held in high esteem «things that are uninvestigable». Overall, «though man's power expands day by day, there are always in this universe things that are beyond human power: revere these 'mysteries'. Goethe abides by this all his life» (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 85).

Secondly, Feng Zhi doubted negation. His lecture «On the Demons in Faust», delivered on the occasion of the «Literary and Historical Conference of Southwest United University» in 1943, discussed this question further. Given the fact that people read only *Faust I*, while neglecting the abstruse *Faust II*, Feng Zhi claimed that Goethe was not unaware of the meaning of negative spirit to life, and that he surely believed that) 'doubt of everything' and 'overcoming the self' are the embodiment of the spirit of ceaseless strife. However, Faust's doubt and negation is dramatically different from that of Mephistopheles. Faust's doubt and negation stems from 'reaction', whereas Mephistopheles's stems from 'nature'; Faust's reaction is temporary, while Mephistopheles's nature is long-lasting. (1999, p. 39) More importantly, Mephistopheles, as a cynical, 'modern devil', a *Schalk*, intends to lead people into nihilism in the seemingly reasonable romantic reaction against the 'time of reason'.

Feng Zhi further pointed out that Mephistopheles's negative spirit cannot understand the positive power of man, i.e., the pursuit of the impossible. He eulogizes darkness and nihilism, and sees everything as meaningless, the world is nothing but only 'emptiness' and 'nothingness'. Therefore, he cannot understand «the small difference between bestiality and humanity». He presumes that he has seen through the world and becomes insensitive to worldly things; he mocks all valuable and valueless things. As Goethe sees it, Mephistopheles's thinking and doing is a picturesque reflection of a «time of presumptuous cleverness» (18th century). On the positive side, it is «an age that esteems reason», as reason liberates people from all kinds of misconceptions that hinder progress; on the negative side, it circumscribes the range of human activities, excluding passion and understanding. It necessarily follows with negation, though not healthy negation. On the contrary, just as Goethe said in his *Chromatology*, it is a contentment of self-condescension, a rejection of everything that cannot be immediately arrived at or grasped, because of which people lose their reverencing attitude, lose their deep, profound inquiring interest in things, and lose their tolerance for fruitless efforts and patience for slow evolution. They have only the evading, observing attitude and spirit of partial negation. «This spirit occupies the heart of a clever man, and it will often destroy every effort, every construction and magnitude, leading to a state of eternal degeneration» (Feng Zhi 1990, p. 35).

Thirdly, Feng Zhi foresaw the coming of collective life. In Feng Zhi's view, the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century in which Goethe lived was a time when individualism prevailed. But, through the intuition of a poet, Feng Zhi sensed «the coming of the

collective life» (p. 85), which contrasted sharply with the Romantic Movement and the spirit of the time. This collective life has a vivid description in *Wilhelm Meister*. Although Feng Zhi translated only the first book of the trilogy of *Wilhelm Meister*, with his wife Yao Kekun 姚可昆 (1904-2003), it is also his only translation of Goethe's long piece of writing. Feng Zhi considered this masterpiece as important as *Faust*. In it, wrote Feng Zhi, «Goethe dealt in depth with a question that would be key to creating an ideal future, that is, how to educate man» Meanwhile, Goethe also proposed «a typical image of new man that fits the collective work: man that knows clearly his own business and concerns himself only with the welfare of all humankind» (p. 86).

Therefore, whether it is the Wertherian Goethe that «returns to the innocence of childhood», or Faust as the «symbol of the Sturm und Drang period» acting with «infinite pursuit and passionate emotion» (Chen Quan 1940), they cannot represent the complete Goethe in Feng Zhi's mind: that is, Goethe as a 'Man'.

Later on, Feng Zhi fell ill before he could finish his compilation of Goethe's Chronicle. But there is no question that he was trying to present us with a complete Goethe, and at the same time he was hoping to reflect, through this effort, his own deficiencies and the spirit of time. While his contemporaries were focusing on the importance of young Werther, he warned us to pay attention to the later Goethe; while others were cheering Goethe's philosophy of action, he alone pointed out the other aspect of Goethe's spirit, namely, the spirit of giving up, desistance and self-restraint.

### 3 This is a Permanent Song: You Should Give Up

The later Goethe of Feng Zhi is not a Goethe losing vitality and killing emotion; and the desistance Feng Zhi understands is not passive restraint and avoidance.

In *Goethe in Later Years*, written in 1941, Feng Zhi said that, if we should use Goethe's words to conclude his own life, then the following letter written in 1782 is the most appropriate:

人有许多皮要脱去，直到他有几分把握住他自己和世界上的事物为止。你经验很多，愿你能够遇到一个休息地点，得到一个工作范围。我能确实告诉你，我在幸福中间是在不断的断念里生活着。我天天在一切的努力和工作时，只看见那不是我的意志，却是一个更高的力的意志，这个力的思想并不是我的思想。(Feng Zhi 1941, p. 72)

Man has to peel off many layers of skin until he is capable of positioning himself and the things in this world. You are quite experienced, but I hope you could find a resting place and a working position. I shall

honestly tell you, the happy life I am living is a continual desisting from life. Every day I am pushed to work conscientiously, not by my own will but by a will of a higher power, the thinking of which is not of my idea. (Translation of the Author)

This letter may not be one of the most remarkable among the many beautiful letters written by Goethe, but it revealed a core concept of Goethe's life philosophy: *Entsagen* (Desistance). More importantly, this desistance is not simply self-circumscribing, but rather subordination to «the will of a higher power», or reverence for «un-investigable things».

Because of this, Feng Zhi thought that no matter how pathetic these words – resign, giving up – may sound, they always have a positive meaning in Goethe's works. The reason is that, for Goethe, «the richer the emotion, the stronger the power of self-restraint; these two are counter-active, and eventually they merge and shape a classical Goethe» (p. 74). This is, on the one hand, a choice, and on the other hand, a choice. As to the former, *Faust* expresses that choice most accurately in the scene «in the drawing room»:

你应该割舍，应该割舍！  
这是永久的歌声  
在人们的耳边作响。  
它在我们整整一生  
时时都向我们嘶唱。  
(Feng Zhi 1999, p. 73)

You should give up, should give up,  
This is a permanent song,  
Lingering in people's ears.  
It keeps singing to us,  
Throughout our lives.  
(Translation by the Author)

In a sense, desistance is a response to the 'permanent song' and an answer to a permanent calling; if there is no such 'restraint', there must be disastrous consequences. Just as Goethe himself said: «if I continue to be so self-willed, I'm afraid I'll destroy everything».

However, for Goethe, this kind of self-restraint obviously is not merely an instinctive reaction to certain external conditions, nor does it stem from the helplessness of life. Here, Feng Zhi cautioned us against the influences of Spinoza's philosophy. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe confessed that his desistance and Spinoza's philosophy were related. He said that desistance was a response to the calling of «the accidental events», and at the same derived from our bodies, our social life, customs, habits, wisdom,

philosophy, and religion.

Feng Zhi specifically analyzed what desistance means to Goethe in *Trilogy of Passion*. In the summer of 1823, before he wrote *Trilogy of Passion*, Goethe, aged seventy-four, fell in love with a nineteen-year-old girl, Ulrike. This brief love gave Goethe fresh life, and he wrote an immortal poem, «Elegy». In the poem he wrote «the togetherness, separation, the world after separation with Ulrike, and the mirage on the sky, all of these come down the core of poetry, namely, the highest ideal of love» (my translation). What concerned Feng Zhi most was that, throughout this difficult test, Goethe restrained himself and did not fall victim to desperation. After the raging mind was pacified, Goethe once again succeeded in accomplishing a difficult yet revelatory condition of desistance.

The key, Feng Zhi pointed out, is that this was the last desistance in Goethe's life. In 1824, when the fifty-year memorial edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published, Goethe was asked to write a preface for it. At this time, «the long-gone song rang itself again», and the love affair with Ulrike the previous year crawled into his heart again. More importantly, the love and separation with Ulrike was to a large extent connected with Werther's destiny half a century before. To remember the unforgettable past, Goethe wrote a mourning poem «To Werther». To Goethe, the separation from Ulrike was in a sense the last goodbye to his young days in the Sturm und Drang period.

For this reason, *Trilogy of Passion* begins with «To Werther», which marks an emotional blossoming, continues with «Elegy», to mark the disillusionment of love, and ends with «Atonement», to mark the final reconciliation. After listening to a performance by the famous pianist Szymanowska, Goethe wrote his last poem. It was a three-stanza poem, and in it Goethe expressed his ultimate happiness in overcoming all his pain:

情欲带来痛苦！——谁来抚慰  
这损失惨重的窘迫的心房？

[...]

蓦地，音乐驾着天使的翅膀飞来，  
亿万种乐音在空中交织、回荡，  
深深渗入了人的灵魂

[...]

宽慰的心儿只是战栗地感到  
它还活着，还在跳动，渴望跳动；  
真诚地感激这丰厚的赏赐，  
它乐意将自己奉献，一改初衷。  
它感受到了——愿永远永远！  
双重的幸福，在音乐与爱之中。

(Yang Wuneng 1999, pp. 314-315)

Erotic passion brings sorrow, who will comfort the distressed heart  
that suffered great losses?

[...]

All of a sudden, the music flies near with the wings of angels,  
Thousands of musical tones mingles and lingers over the sky,  
And deeply penetrate into people's souls

[...]

The soothing heart tremblingly feels that  
It still lives; it is still beating, and is longing for beating;  
Sincerely grateful for the generous boon,  
It changes its mind and is glad of self-devotion  
What it feels - it wishes forever!  
Double happiness, in music and love.  
(Translation of the Author)

The most important act of desistance by Goethe brought forth a greater harvest. In the last ten years of his life, Goethe finished the crowning work of his career: *Faust II* and *The Wandering Years of Wilhelm Meister*. Doubtlessly, it has something to do with the life attitude he took after suffering the profoundest desperation, as he became an old man working in loneliness, yet was still ceaselessly striving. Feng Zhi thus summarized: «In his lonely old years, desistance and working have become the dominant principles of Goethe's life. To him, working is more like duty and responsibility than a mere self-consolation» (p. 79).

For Goethe to conclude his later years practicing desistance and working is very reminiscent of Feng Zhi's studies on Rilke in the early years of the 1930s. Endurance and working were important principles for Feng Zhi's personal spiritual life.

However, as the starting point of Goethe's last and most meaningful new beginning, the year 1823 is simply Goethe's «year of destiny». While for Feng Zhi, it meant more than exploration of individual spirit. Feng Zhi reminded us repeatedly of the relationship between this last resignation and Helen's tragedy, and that with the last two scenes of *Faust*, Goethe was implying something (Feng Zhi 1999, pp. 74 and 79-80).

Regrettably, Feng Zhi did not have the chance to discuss it systematically. It was not until the late 1970s, when he came back to Goethe, that he picked it up again. Interestingly, the essay titled «Analysis of Helen's tragedy in Faust» was actually the earliest essay Feng Zhi wrote in his series of essays on Goethe. It was written in 1979 and published in 1980. It is a little bit surprising that Feng Zhi had not forgotten the question he had considered forty years before.

At the end of Goethe's Later Years, Feng Zhi said, if Faust is the most appropriate symbol for Goethe's life, then Faust's soliloquy on the high mountain, after the deaths of Helen and their son, can best represent

Goethe's mood. In act IV of the second part of this tragedy, Helen's clothes transformed into a piece of cloud that raised Goethe to the high mountain of the north. On the high mountain, Faust said:

Der Einsamkeiten tiefste schauend unter meinem Fuß,  
Betret' ich wohlbedächtigt dieser Gipfel Saum,  
Entlassend meiner Wolke Tragewerk, die mich sanft  
An klaren Tagen über Land und Meer geführt.  
(Goethe 1949, vol. 3, p. 304)

在我的脚下望着寂寞的最深处，  
我慎重地踏上这些山顶的边涯，  
脱开我的云彩的负载，它轻飘飘  
在晴朗的日子，引我度过陆和海。  
(Yang Wuneng 1999, pp. 314-315)

Looking down the deepest loneliness under my feet,  
I stepped prudently on the edge of the mountaintop,  
Releasing the colorful cloud that is burdened by me,  
It floats lightly and leads me to cross the land and see in sunny days.  
(Translation of the Author).

Watching the cloud as it flew away and merged into the sky, Goethe, having lost Helen, felt the cloud:

把我内心里最好的东西随身带走 (pp. 314-315)  
And took away the best things in my heart.  
(Translation of the Author)

According to Feng Zhi's analysis, this is «the death of beauty, the disappearance of love», but, he soon added, what the disappearance and death left is anything but emptiness (Feng Zhi 1999, p. 79). If that is not emptiness, what is it then?

Is it lament for the impossible union of romantic Faust and classical Helen? Or is it a passionate eulogy for the spirit that forever pursues the impossible?

#### 4 A Song of Youth in the Old Age

The tragic plot of Helen in *Faust* is very simple. And the answers Feng Zhi was after are not complicated either, as they are simply the answers to the questions: «how did Helen come into the scene? How is her marriage with Faust? What did the marriage generate?» Readers who are familiar

with *Faust* should know that these three questions were respectively dealt with in the three scenes of Act III of *Faust II*.

But, if we put Feng Zhi's answers to those questions against the background of the debate over classicism and modernism, we can see a far richer and more thought-provoking spiritual vision. Feng Zhi's detailed analysis presented Goethe as one who advocated endless striving and compromise and desistance in the tension of the relationship between ancient and modern.

Clearly, Helen's reappearance is Goethe's attempt to revive ancient spirit in the modern world. But Faust has nothing to do with Greece. Faust was born out of the «folklore story» in the 16th century and he was a purely northern product. Why would Goethe have this northern figure connect with ancient Greece?

Feng Zhi's answer focused on two aspects. The first is that the element of ancient Greek in Faust is to «be consistent with the overall spirit of Faust». In other words, to Goethe, it is not sufficient to present Faust as the modern spirit, as a symbol of progress; Faust, at the same time, should know the path to return, to go back to ancient Greece three thousand years ago, where Western civilization began. The other aspect is that Helen's appearance in *Faust* is the result of Goethe's wish to create beautiful things in poetry.

Even so, what Feng Zhi learned from Goethe's creating of Helen was not always the expectation of perfection; he focused more on Helen's own paradox. This paradox consists of two aspects: one is the contradiction of beauty and virtue, and the other is the contradiction of beauty and wisdom. From this paradox, Feng Zhi further claimed that Goethe actually did not hold an affirmative attitude to the Greek spirit, unlike his contemporaries such as Winkelmann, Schiller and Hoerdlin. At least, the Goethe of the later years doubted that spirit. Looking at Helen's story, her appearance did show the sublimity of the beauty and magnitude of the Queen, though the effects of which were expressed through the chorus, which means it is a collective opinion instead of individual judgment. Feng Zhi did not think this. In his understanding, Helen herself in this tragedy felt more and more uncertain about her own fate, she could not tell if she really existed, and she realized from the very start that she was both liked and disliked.

Based on this observation, Feng Zhi made his conclusion: although Faust in this period of his life was desperately desiring and passionately pursuing Helen, even to the extent that he would not live without her, this does not necessarily mean that Greek beauty is truly like what Winkelmann called «noble pureness, serene greatness», nor does it mean that as long as you wish to realize classical beauty, you can actually get hold of it (p. 80).

Is that really true? If it is true, then why would Faust pursue inaccessible beauty? Do Helen's hesitation and doubt really mean Goethe has lost faith in classical beauty? Is it merely a «fantastic dream» to try to revive the ancient spirit in a modern world?

In his analysis on the marriage between Helen and Faust, Feng Zhi came back to his considerations on the spirit of ancient Greece. If Goethe's expectation of the regeneration of the Greek spirit is in the form of the reconciliation of classicism and romanticism, then what Feng Zhi saw was the utopian meaning of this reconciliation. Originally, the name Goethe gave to this tragedy was «classical and romantic fantasy drama». In Feng Zhi's interpretation, the place Acadia where Faust and Helen were united was emphasized. Acadia is symbolic, as Feng Zhi said: «Acadia is a place that people can never arrive at, and even if they did, they would feel bored, and they would either die 'happily' here, or come back to the real world» (p. 122). Then, can we say, was Feng Zhi against the seemingly 'unrealistic' union of classicism and romanticism? The answer is definitely no.

Just like Goethe, Feng Zhi was also mournful for the deaths of Helen and Faust's son Euphorion. He even thought that the long songs sung by the chorus at the end of Act IV are more a eulogy than mourning. In his view, this not only makes the mindless and commonplace chorus change their tone, it also creates a resounding «song of youth» out of that fabulous chanting (p. 116). Feng Zhi's approving attitude was fairly obvious.

Therefore, Feng Zhi did not completely disapprove the union of classicism and romanticism. It should rather be said that he was putting himself in the profound contradictions Goethe presented. On the one hand, he hoped to get back to reality in the fanciful dream Goethe created. He hoped to return to the battle on the sea, to the experience of the pain of ordinary people, or to the war of liberation in Greece that Byron took part in. In short, to return to these actual realities. On the other hand, he was deeply moved by Faust's spirit of «desiring the impossible». For Feng Zhi, it is tragic that Euphorion goes forward and meets his death, but this resembles Faust's own character, so it is reasonable that he is Faust's son. And Faust's pursuit of Helen, though it is a utopia in a sense, it is exactly this perseverance that makes numerous miracles in this world come true.

Surprisingly, Feng Zhi explained the contradiction of this tragedy with «romantic irony». He said, this kind of technique was seldom employed by classical writers, but was widely accepted by German romantic writers: «they make the full play of their imagination, creating an ideal wonderland, and when the wonderland attains perfection, the moment that it is farthest from reality, the author would make a sharp change and destroy the wonderland through one person or one event». In this sense, Faust's desire for the impossible and his attempt to make the impossible possible is his act of creating «an ideal wonderland»; and Metermorpheles' derision and mockery is his action of «destroying it». For this reason, Feng Zhi held, different from the opinion of many others, that Faust is not a book of anti-romanticism; on the contrary, it is immersed in romantic spirit.

Moreover, judging from Goethe's other dramas and novels, «the elements of romanticism outnumber those of classicism or realism». This conclusion obviously differs from his judgment in the 1940s.

All in all, was it a reconciliation that Feng Zhi made to solve the paradox of classicism and romanticism, or did he never give up his «ideal wonderland», of which he himself was doubtful?

## 5 The No-Way-Out Predicament

From the fragmentary accounts of Goethe in the late 1930s, to his working and thinking on Goethe in the late 1940s, Feng Zhi, forty years later, picked up this topic again in the 1980s. It is pretty clear that the later Goethe is not just Feng Zhi's preferred reading, but also an organic, integral part of his series of self-reflection and endeavor. Through Feng Zhi's presentation of Goethe, we can better understand his own paradoxical life choices.

Some researchers declare that Engel's evaluation of Goethe, that he was «sometimes a great man, sometimes a minor one; sometimes a reactionary, mocking and cynical genius, sometimes a prudent, contenting, narrow-minded, mediocre man» (1971, p. 256), in a sense «could be used to describe Feng Zhi in the 1950s» (2003, p. 190). This, without doubt, is a very significant connection. Feng Zhi, who entered the literary field by the influence of German romanticism, was also caught up in the different spiritual dimensions and sought tirelessly over the decades to become a 'complete man'.

Feng Zhi confessed that Goethe influenced him in three ways: «affirmative spirit, idea of metamorphosis, and the unity of knowledge and action». The reason Goethe's thinking in his later years became the reemerging subject in Feng Zhi's accounts of Goethe, is that Goethe's thinking provides him with theoretical grounding as well as practical methods.

And one concept contains these three aspects: resignation. Feng Zhi was fascinated with the idea of desistance as early as the 1930s, when he was still studying Rilke, and later as he focused on Goethe it became his resurgent subject. As to his overemphasis on desistance for the later year Goethe, on the one hand it presented another important aspect of Goethe's spirit, one which is totally different from that in the Sturm und Drang movement, and on the other hand cast doubt on the 'forever upward' progressive modern spirit represented by Euphorion.

From the literal meaning, it seems to be hard to connect desistance with 'affirmative spirit'. However, Feng Zhi accurately points out that, for Goethe, desistance is not giving up your will, it is subordination to a higher, a beyond-self will. In a sense, Goethe's fruitful harvests or even the rebirth of his life are based on his giving-up of his emotional self and on

his spiritual self-restraint. Moreover, it is not so only for Goethe, as Feng Zhi in the years of national crisis also benefited considerably from this spirit. Because, for Feng Zhi, desistance doesn't mean to take the world as meaningless, or to give up responsibility and succumb to reality and self-degeneration. On the contrary, it means to take on duty and responsibility in one's work.

In other words, this positive spirit, connected with resignation, is a worldly, optimistic life attitude. And this life attitude emphasizes the 'joyous rebirth' coming from the 'painful death', like snake and phoenix, which peeled themselves again and again, in order to «get rid of the old self and embrace a new self; and to be worldly is to take the responsibility of life. It needs not only the transformation of thinking, but also the connection of thinking with action. Using the ancients' words, it is the "unity of knowledge and action».

In the process of reading and researching Goethe, Feng Zhi transformed himself successfully from a lonely, meditative poet to a social activist, educationist and well-known writer in the government of a new regime. But what Feng Zhi had not expected is that the conclusion he derived from his research on Goethe came out less ideal than he thought it would be. On the contrary, not long afterwards, he was faced with the same problem we find in Helen's tragedy: «'ideal wonderland' is indeed beautiful, but it cannot escape the destiny of being 'blasted'».

Might it be that he was moved by Euphorion's brave, romantic behavior, and had to admit that it is an inevitable death?

Feng Zhi lived a longer life than Goethe, but he did not seem to be able to escape the predicament Goethe was faced with in his later years.

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