

**"Comparative Epistemologies for Thinking China,"  
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**Oral History of Chinese Studies**

**Interview with Prof. Rudolf G. Wagner**

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*Let's start with your family background, early years and your schooling experience.*

I was born on November 3, 1941 in Wiesbaden near Frankfurt – a bath and retiree town with little industry that was made the provincial capital of Hessen to avoid the unruly masses in Frankfurt. Because of its marginality in terms of war resources it was not bombed. In fact I have a photograph of myself from 1944 sitting neatly dressed with some toys and an artificial smile in a photographer's studio, an image of utter normality one certainly would not immediately associate with that period. My father came back from the war in 1945. He was not a party member, but a number of uncles and family friends had been and were sent to the quarry to be de-nazified; so my father in his unending generosity took over the directorships of two different plants for a while, while the former directors were being cleaned of their past before resuming their posts. Then it turned out that he had misdiagnosed colon cancer and he died in 1948. So, as I have three older sisters, I was a total minority in that household of four older women. Each one of them had at least one best lady friend – makes eight – and each one of them eventually ended up having a male companion. This stacks the horizon with older people, where to get even a single word in at dinner, you had to be very quick, which explains my first stuttering and then developing an excessive speed in speaking. By profession my father had been a chemist and worked in physics also. He had been working in one of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institutes, which are now the Max-Planck-Institutes, with Fischer-Tropsch who had developed a way to make gasoline out of coal. For Germany, which has no oil resources, that was rather important. With his very young wife he went to Michigan in 1929 or 1930, where a Mr. Smith had set up a huge research group to do exactly the same thing – liquefaction of coal. Then came the effects of the banking crash and the research team was whittled down. I think my father was one of the last survivors; they came back to Germany in 1934. Before leaving they travelled through the United States, where my oldest sister was born. That means that the family had old contacts with the United States. These were kept throughout, mostly because my mother's sister had married the architect called Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus. They had left Germany already in the 1930s because the Bauhaus was considered a leftist and modernist enterprise and the Nazis were closing it down. They

first went to England and then Gropius became a professor at Harvard. Two of my sisters spent long times in Cambridge with my uncle, so there was a continuous American connection.

I grew up in Wiesbaden which was in the American sector after the war. Germany was divided into four sectors: the Russian sector, which then became East Germany; and an English, a French and an American sector. Living in the American sector meant kids would pick up something like street English, "Hey, Mister! Chewing gum!" My mother, now alone in charge of the four of us, did not have a very elaborate educational philosophy, but she had one strong commitment, namely, that whatever the kids were capable of doing and wanted to do, they should do and she was going to try to make it possible. Concerning me she asked various friends for advice, and they suggested to put me into a humanistic gymnasium where I did Latin and Greek, and opted for French instead of English because I assumed I would learn English anyway. So therefore, Latin, Greek, French and also some years of Hebrew were all on my bill. My sports were field hockey and some tennis. So I had a regular moderate bourgeois upbringing. We lived in a small rented house. I went to dancing school and I went through the regular antics of a young man going through puberty. But I developed from early on an odd habit. Although I did not know a single bookworm or scholar, I was very much into reading. My basic currency at the time was a series of books called *Rowohlts Deutsche Enzyklopädie* [Rowohlts German Encyclopedia], which is a series of book-length encyclopedia entries. Written by top scholars of the respective field, they offer a detailed introduction to some field of knowledge such as particle physics or the early Christian communities on 150 or 200 pages. They cost around 1,80 Deutsche Marks, and that was my basic accounting unit when planning to spend the little money I got from being a ball boy at tennis tournament. So, I was reading rather voraciously and this got me tagged in school and among my friends as someone who is just reading too much and then has the gall to also wanting to tell everybody about what he has read – that certainly did not make me a favorite among the girls. I mean, they liked me in a general sense, but my basic relationship with girls at the time was that of a brother-sister relationship (in which I had a great routine), a very safe affair.

The trajectory designed for me was to head for a middle-sized factory owned by the clan of my mother that was producing stoves, ploughshares and also had a foundry. The idea arose from a genetic oddity in the family: girls vastly outnumbered boys. My mother had three sisters, I have four sisters and two daughters – this is just how these things went, no idea why! The director of that factory of course had to be a man. At that time it was unthinkable that it would be a woman although a great grandmother of mine had actually been the founder of a huge industrial enterprise, the Eschweiler Bergwerksverein. Her husband had died and she took charge and expanded the enterprise. Nonetheless, the aunts of this extended family on my mother's side judged most of the few boys in my generation to be disappointments. These discussion took place at the annual meeting of the shareholders where some 180 people congregated at a fancy hotel, waltzed through the evening after the meeting and ate up their annual

dividend which was as well because the factory wasn't doing very well and the dividend was meager anyway. I was deemed less disappointing so I was eyed as a potential successor. As a consequence I spent parts of several summer holidays at the factory in Dillenburg to get to know some basics about the factory and its management, which actually served me very well in later times. I had no fear of numbers, learned to work with numbers above my 1.80 Deutschmark books, and acquired a confidence that I could handle money, even though I personally was not much interested in money and have remained sometimes obsessively parsimonious to this day.

I had early attacks of, how should I say it, a slightly exaggerated assessment of my own importance. An evidence for that is – I believe I was fifteen or sixteen years old – I decided that the German film industry was in a crisis and that the only person who could get it out of this crisis was me. So I decided to make the turn-around film. I wrote a somewhat soapy film script, and then started thinking about the money, the staff and the actors needed. I knew someone whose brother had a 16mm camera which he could borrow, and this settled the choice of the cameraman. I came up with the idea to finance the film material by offering advertisement clips to different brands. I then wrote to thirty, forty, fifty different companies with little proposals of such clips. Nearly all wrote back and said, "Well this is really a very nice idea", and some of the big brands wrote back and said, "Look, you know, we have specialist agencies who are doing our advertisement for us. But we send you a check of 200 Marks for your project" – because I had told them that the money would be used for the film. But I also got five orders from smaller brands. I was extremely cheap of course because I had no idea that agencies were charging 50.000 Deutsche Mark or more for a clip for which I wanted 500. By some chance, my mother had befriended Hubertus von Weyrauch, the man whom she eventually married. He was working for Agfa, the main manufacturer of raw film in Germany. Perhaps to warm up with his future stepson, he convinced his boss to give me 2000 meters of raw film for free. Now, a normal movie film needs something like 1200 meters, so 2000 meters seemed quite a lot. I did not know that normally you would shoot six, seven, eight times that length and then cut. Well, I now had 2000 meters of film and went to work. We had school all morning, but were free in the afternoon, apart from homework. I cast one friend as the lead because he seemed to fit the complex features of that character. Then we hung out in front of the girls' schools in Wiesbaden to look which girls might fit the female roles. We approached two of them and then like some real film producer I went to talk to the parents to get their consent. Quite some experience. Well, then my mother remarried, we moved to Cologne and that was the end of my film project. But it was a good experience of organizing things, talking to people and developing a kind of chutzpah to say "Ok, this is what I want to do, and I am now going to make it possible." This is just a little anecdote.

After the move to Cologne I got hepatitis. With six weeks in a hospital and two more months for recovery, the Cologne school said I could not move to the next level because they had never seen me. I had to repeat a class, which made me very angry. When I moved to Cologne they had by that time seven years of English and did not offer French

on my level. English also was to shortly end with a final exam. So I had catch up within a few months with their six or seven years of English. I had some American zone street English and I could basically communicate, but had never written a word in that language. In my first test in Cologne, I spelled “to be” as “to bee” because evidently the “e” was long. I thought the only way out of this scrape was to translate an English book. That would familiarize me with the spelling as well as the vocabulary and the grammatical patterns. The book had to be a thin paperback and should be available at home, so that I could just grab it and start. I went to the bookshelves and pulled out a thin paperback. I had never heard of either the title or the author, but it fulfilled my criteria. This was Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One*. So, I sat down and translated the entire thing in three weeks. That gave me a slightly bizarre entry into English, because it’s actually a satire on burial habits in Los Angeles, especially dog burials – so it is full of purple prose farewell speeches for beloved pops by burial undertakers in Los Angeles. At the end of this translation I could give a perfect speech in commemoration of a beloved dog; but many of the everyday words, I had never heard of. Anyway, the advantage was, after something like four weeks I had the basic vocabulary down to words for coffin decorations the teacher had never heard of. [laughter]! I survived the final test with a 2 [B] in the end, which is a pretty high grade. My English then took off very quickly but my language retained its slightly necrotic touch for many years to come. So, my first basic English is dog burial English. My second English is of course Mathews Chinese-English dictionary, because most of English I later learned and with which I expanded my vocabulary was by translating from Chinese with the help of the standard dictionary we all used. From then on I then was also able to elaborately communicate on Confucius and Buddhism – but still had no idea of many of the everyday words such as “broom.”

In my irritation about the school’s decision, I concentrated more on my own increasingly scholarly interests rather than on the school assignments. My first obsession was Greek tragedy. I think, I eventually knew Sophokles’ entire *Antigone* in Greek by heart. It looked as if I was heading to become a classical scholar. There was one very good teacher in that school who was doing close reading of Greek texts with us. One time he also discussed the meaning an intriguing Laozi passage with us, which he wrote onto the blackboard in Chinese: 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物. We lived perhaps five bicycle minutes away from the university. So, I thought, this is so close, there are all these specialists, why don’t I just audit some classes, to make up my mind what I’m going to study?

### ***How old were you?***

I was seventeen. As I was still into classical studies, I audited classes in archaeology, Greek and Latin studies. I gave Latin studies up very quickly because I considered its literature mostly boring, but also seriously considered other options. I thought, why don’t I become head of the European Union? There was Mr. Carstens who had been a high official working directly under Adenauer when the Treaty of Rome was negotiated that provided the foundation for the later European Union, actually he had drafted much

of it. Later he became president of the Federal Republic [of Germany]. Carstens had just finished his habilitation thesis and gave his inaugural seminar there. I thought this is my man! As like most in my generation I was and remained a committed European, I had already read a lot about European law so I was rather familiar with it. I went to him, told him that I was still in school but would like to audit his graduate seminar. He was a bit taken aback, but after checking whether I knew what I was talking about said that I would be welcome provided the seminar would not be overbooked by law students. There were four students beside me! That was the level of interest in European law at that time in among law students. I took a very active part in the seminar discussions because I felt that I was far better informed than the four others and I even wrote a long seminar paper [laughs], it was great fun and I learned a lot! But then these law people seemed very narrow-minded and backward and I could not see myself joining this crowd. So, I wasn't pursuing that any further, but still had not made up my mind. We are now in 1959-60, I was close to graduation. There was of course the option to head for this factory, which would have meant studying business administration or engineering. I had made an internal commitment that if there seriously was a need, I would sacrifice myself in grandeur, but I secretly hoped that one of my pretty cousins would marry an engineer. This in fact did happen – actually, two of them. And the two engineers they married promptly drove the factory into the ground. So that was the dead end of that. I probably would not have done any better as this was a middle-sized factory in a very traditional industry that was quickly consolidating with few big firms left.

A few words about the intellectual environment of that time: After the postwar boom years there was a shared feeling of alienation among Western intellectuals. Like many others I read existentialist philosophy, went to any Beckett play I could find, fell in love with Giacometti's sculptures, saw some of Bram van Velde's Tachisme, and then there was Zen Buddhism. Translations of Zen sayings were coming out such as [Wilhelm] Gundert's wonderful translation of such Zen koans, the *Biyen lu*, or Dumoulin's translation of the *Mumonkan*, *Wumen guan*, *The Pass With No Door*; Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* gave historical background, memoirs of people's engagement with Zen Buddhism came out as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and some people from the US had started to actually join Japanese Zen monasteries for a time so that there even was a handbook by Alan Watts how to go about this. As you see from my remembering all this so well, this quickly became my universe.

***How did you come in contact with the books? Were they around in your home or did your teachers start talking about them?***

No no, that was all home-cooked! I heard about some of these books after having seen one of them I bought or borrowed the endless others from the public or the university library. Thinking of what I would do after graduation, I did some rough calculation of the pros and cons. Greek studies will not do, because although classical Greek literature and philosophy are superb the body of texts is small, and a great number of excellent scholars have worked on every single line for centuries. The path to unplowed ground is

long and most of the students I had seen were planning to become high-school teachers rather than scholars. What about English studies with Shakespeare as the focus? There was the same problem, namely there is an overdose of good scholarship dealing with a small body of works. Hardly anyone worked on the contemporaries such as John Ford, but he also could not compare. The students in English studies also were mostly heading towards the high-school teacher profession. That was not my spiel either. By that time it was quite clear to me in my modest ways, that I would become a university professor. The only question was in what, are we going for mechanical engineering, are we going for Sanskrit, or are we going for ... I don't know?

***You hadn't graduated high school yet?***

No, but that I was heading towards becoming a professor was quite clear not only to me, but to about everybody around. People assumed that somebody who is that obsessive with reading probably is going to end up there. Actually, I had never met a scholar when I was growing up. My father had a scholarly background but I had seen very little of him because of the war and because one of the factories he ran afterwards was not in Wiesbaden, and still elsewhere he was trying to set up one for himself. So the first time I saw real life scholars was late in my high school years when I audited university courses. The first person with a serious scholarly interest I had met was this very stimulating Greek and Latin teacher we had in Cologne with his broad interests and commitment to analytical precision. So, Greek and English were out. To check German literature I went to nearby Bonn University to sit in some lectures by a very famous older scholar, but his approach seemed so antiquarian and he so full of his own importance that I was out of there very quickly. At the end of the day the Buddhist texts I had been reading in translation had presented, both philosophically and in the cryptic form of communication, the greatest attraction together with the greatest challenge because while they looked great, I did not understand a word which was their very purpose. I wanted to be able to read the originals. I had developed a strong affinity to Buddhism which in a way I have to this day. I even had a plan go to a Japanese Zen monastery for a year or two after graduation and before starting university. That was the only time in my life when my mother put her foot down. She had always said that I have to run my own life, if I got bad grades in school that was not her problem but mine. She never looked at my grades. But once I told her about my plan, she got concerned not about my mind, but my health. So she wrote to her sister, because Suzuki was a good friend of the Gropiuses and visited them often. Mrs. Gropius asked Suzuki what he thought about my plan and he must have warned that without the language, not used to just eating rice and living through cold winters without heat this would be a big challenge for a Westerner's health while it was not sure that I would reap the spiritual benefits I probably hoped for. As a result my mother was strictly against my going. As my own resolution also had to struggle with doubts and concerns, this tipped the scale. So, that was my young man's dream. I've actually always regretted that I didn't come back to that, because I still think I should have gone. Having relented on that point, however, I was free to study what I wanted, and this was Buddhist Studies. This did not exist as a discipline, only as a

specialty of scholars in different fields that were defined by language. The majority of Buddhist texts were not preserved in Sanskrit or Pali, but in Chinese and Tibetan. Tibetan was out, because I knew nothing about Tantric Buddhism and therefore had a low opinion of it. Japanese Buddhism worked with Chinese texts, so Classical Chinese would be best. In the background of my not even considering a focus on Indology with Sanskrit was that my only association with India at the time (and to a degree to this day, I must confess) is that you easily get the “Delhi belly” diarrhea. I have been in India only once, for a conference, and I was obsessed with avoiding Delhi belly during the entire week.

### ***Was Gropius a Buddhist?***

Walter Gropius had a great interest in Japanese things. He was good friends with Kenzo Tange, one of big stars of Japanese architecture, and also with Noguchi, the great interior decorator. He had cooperated with Tange, had been in Japan several times and he admired Japanese architectural features, which have a lot to do with Buddhist ideas. But the Bauhaus came out of a different philosophy as well as social commitment and aesthetic program. I'm not great fan of the Bauhaus “style”, I admit. But Gropius was a big name in architecture with huge projects to his name all over the world, and he was a wonderful, warm-hearted person. So it was quite natural that he should come into contact with many of the leading lights of the day.

Perhaps I should add a word about the very peculiar features of the mental universe of many young people of my generation growing up in Western Germany. One of the main goals of education in the American sector was to prevent a resurgence of nationalist thinking. During the 1950s, when I was in school, the Third Reich did not exist in the schoolbooks, history ended in 1933. But while we heard nothing about that side, there was a general enthusiasm among us for Europe, which was one of the reasons why I had this dream of becoming head of the European Union. To foster this kind of enthusiasm, De Gaulle and Adenauer had set up a Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk (German French Youth Organisation) to facilitate youth exchanges between Germany and France, so that kids would meet and befriend each other. Around 1956, I spent four weeks with this program in Avignon during the festival. We all spoke French morning to night and had classes on French history and literature every day. In the afternoon big actors such as Gérard Philippe and even the director of the festival, Jean Vilar, were coming to talk with us, and in the evening we went to the festival performances. I still remember that I had seen Brecht's *Mother Courage*, and I knew that Brecht had set up rigid performance guidelines which you had to follow if you wanted to stage one of his plays. We had seen Vilar's staging of *Mother Courage* and next day he came to talk with us. I had noticed that he had not followed any of the Brecht prescriptions. So with my pompous fourteen years I challenged him how amazed I had been that he had disregarded Brecht's directions. He looked at me a little bit surprised and then explained that I was quite right, but because Brecht's plays were still largely unknown in France, he had explained to him that introducing them with this very special performance style risked being

counterproductive. Brecht then had given him permission to stage it as he thought fit. Actually most of us became confident enough to open our mouths, mobilize whatever we knew, and boldly talk to big people whenever we had a chance. As to the European idea that became the hallmark of our generation. My own identity to this day is European rather than German.

Just before I graduated, the Nazi period entered history. Our parents – including my own – never talked about this period, their entire generation had decided to only “look forward” after 1945. For us this period was like an unmarked grave, there was something there, but we did not know what. And then, in the my last year at high school, the director of the school in the middle of the morning suddenly called everybody through the intercom to the big school auditorium. We all went, from ten-year old kids to those about to graduate who were around eighteen. We sat down, lights went out and a film was shown without further introduction – and that was the most irresponsible thing I’ve seen in my entire life. The film was Alan Resnais’ *Nuit et Brouillard, Night and Fog*, was a documentary about Auschwitz that included long footage from Nazi archives with Hitler being shown the industrial-style disposal of the corpses of people who had been gassed there. Kids in the auditorium started screaming, others were running out, our class of older students was sitting there frozen. That was our first exposure to the Third Reich. I guess a directive had come from the Ministry to show this film, none of the most older teachers who had lived through this period knew what to say by way of introduction and so they simply showed it without comment. Just a year later I think, the [William L.] Shirer book *Rise and Fall of Third Reich* came out in a German translation. There had been some small articles, I heard later, by German scholars before, but the first systematic presentation of this period was the translation of an American book. The confrontation with the horrors that had happened right where we lived resulted in an absorbing agenda for the postwar generation: “Never again!” Much of the political commitment of these youngsters – many of them became teachers for this very purpose – was to prevent anything like that from ever happening. These good intentions often prompted them guilt-trip school kids with a collective guilt for what their parents might have or might not have done and many kids were rebelling against this. I thought school students should definitely learn about this period, but I felt that this guilt-tripping was counterproductive.

Anyway, I did not go to the monastery, did not get a “Delhi belly,” but as I was set on Buddhist Studies, I went to Chinese studies as my major.

***So, here we are at the beginning of your Chinese studies. Could you tell a few words about the academic environment you were in, your advisors and your choice of research subjects?***

In Chinese studies, they were all doing the Confucian classics, some basic history with some more specialized such as Tilemann Grimm in Bochum who worked on Ming education. I wanted to take philosophy and comparative religion as my minors. At that time, comparative religion was only taught in Bonn and Göttingen. Because only Bonn also offered Chinese studies, that’s where I went. That was a rather disappointing



experience. Gustav Mensching's courses on comparative religion were more general and introductory and not very stimulating, because much of the generalizations seemed to have been made before there had been any detailed studies of the source material. Chinese Studies was not much better: the professor there was [Peter] Olbricht, who had written a single book that dealt with the postal system under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. But at the time I needed above all basic classical Chinese. I had sometimes wondered why he would say "very good" after somebody had evidently translated nonsense, and then I discovered that his hearing was largely gone. I then made up my mind to take things into my own hands and went through the Haenisch, our introductory textbook for Classical Chinese at the time, on my own. Modern Chinese was taught in a language school attached to the university, not in that Institute, but I was not interested anyway. After I had gone through the Haenisch, I assumed now I knew classical Chinese. To check I went to the library grabbed a large and fat volume with beautiful characters on the spine, opened it until I found something that looked like a beginning of something, put a dictionary to my side, and started reading. It said something like 如是我聞一時佛在舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園. The first phrase was easy, "thus I have heard," that was done in a few minutes and I knew it must be a Buddhist text because I had read this formula. The next three characters were saying something about the Buddha, but that is how far I got. After spending the next weeks going through the dictionaries trying to crack this riddle, I went to Professor Olbricht and told him that I had thought I would know classical Chinese after going through the entire textbook, but had concluded after my first foray into the real world that I did not. Could he please help me with my first sentence? He had a look said, that this was a Buddhist text, and that I had tried to translate transliterations of Sanskrit names in which the Chinese character had no meaning of their own. That option had not been in my textbook and I quickly saw that I could not even read Confucian texts with any degree of precision and reliability. I went back to a strategy I had used in the early stages of learning classical Greek, parallel reading. I stopped taking classes and read the entire *Lunheng* by Wang Chong, a tightly argued Later Han text, with translation. I read the Chinese sentence, tried to figure out what it meant and what the grammar was, and only then looked at Forke's translation. In the beginning the result was normally: wrong again! I then reconstructed from the translation how one gets from this Chinese text to that translation. Doing this over 800 pages, fourteen hours a day, had a wonderful impact, because suddenly I saw to what degree the meaning of these words depended on their context, that the grammatical function of many words as nouns, verbs etc., was not open but set, and learned a great deal of shared commonplaces and stock thoughts. This routine did help. I was now in my third semester. On the side I had also done two semesters of Japanese, because I needed to be able to read Japanese scholarship for my Buddhist studies.

Then I read Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* [*Truth and Method*] which had just come out, a book that became the fountainhead of "hermeneutics". This looked like an approach made for me. Next semester, I moved to Heidelberg to study with Gadamer. They had just set up a Chinese Studies institute in Heidelberg, with the very young Wolfgang Bauer as the professor. His big books were still in the future, but I was content

with a Chinese studies outfit being there as I knew that I had to do my Chinese Buddhist studies on my own anyway. What I had not expected is to see Martin Heidegger in Heidelberg, whose *Time and Being* I had read several times. Gadamer had been a student of Heidegger's, but Heidegger had been banned from university teaching after the war, because as president of Freiburg University in 1933 he had given some speeches that elevated the Nazis to a manifestation of being. He continued working and writing in this little village in the Black Forest as his international philosophical recognition was growing together with the controversy about his early politics. Gadamer looked for a way to have his students and Heidegger engage directly and as this was not possible on the university premises, he invited him every couple of months to his own house near Heidelberg up in Ziegelhausen. Some twenty students, docs, postdocs and assistant professors were invited, each time one or two would send a paper or chapter to Heidegger, and he would come and discuss them with the authors with the others as the audience. I was only a student in Gadamer's junior seminar, but one day after class he kindly invited me to attend these meetings. At that time I already had begun to find a new circle of friends with strong scholarly interest, among them Rüdiger Bubner, one of Gadamer's assistants, who later succeeded Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt. Heidelberg at that time was quite an interesting place with Gadamer in philosophy, Conze in history, Cizevskij in Russian literature, Uvo Hoelscher in Classical Philology, to name just a few. They attracted a lot of young people with scholarly interests; quite a few of those I knew at the time eventually became professors in Heidelberg themselves, such as [Jan] Assmann in Egyptology, and [Tonio] Hölscher in Classical Archaeology, [Lothar] Ledderose in East Asian Art History, Ruediger Bubner in Philosophy, and myself. We were about twelve students in Chinese Studies. Research interest was strong - I think four of them became professors. The Institute was housed in a rented apartment across the Neckar River; it had a kitchen, a bath, and also a tiny library. We all would show up around eleven in the morning, make our breakfast coffee and start working well into the night - everybody had a key. Bauer had come from Munich to Heidelberg; he went back often because the resources at the Bavarian State Library and the Munich Institute were obviously much better than ours. He was invited back the Munich three years later. With all of us working there together we got a lot of informal teaching from each other. There was an older student assistant, Horst Huber, who was working on a Pd.D. the Song loyalist Wen Tianxiang. His job was to buy books for the Institute and he was always looking for a good excuse not to work on his dissertation. As a matter of fact, he submitted it only forty years later. But he had encyclopaedic knowledge and he loved sharing it with us, so we all learned a lot from him.

### ***Who was in your group in Heidelberg?***

I had many discussions with the young scholars from other fields just named. Heidelberg was one of the very few places in Germany where one could study East Asian art history (Dietrich Seckel was the professor), so the sinologists and East Asian art historians were in the same group. With the art historians Lothar Ledderose, who succeeded Seckel, and Helmut Brinker, who became professor in Zurich, and sinologists such as Helmut Martin

– later professor of Chinese Studies in Bochum – we explored different textual and visual media with Martin bringing in folk tale research from his strong exposure to Slavic languages and literatures. I continued to concentrate on Classical Chinese and although there was a course in modern Chinese, I felt that would be a waste of time. Neither the Mainland nor Taiwan looked like a stimulating place for scholarship with the one being closed and the other was under martial law. We managed to read modern Chinese scholarship, mostly from the Republican period and some from Taiwan, but we hardly ever looked at the few PRC publications in the library, because their content ended up being very predictable. I couldn't say "hello" in Chinese, and I couldn't care less. Basically, I studied Chinese like one studied ancient Greek at the time. Most classicists did not speak the Modern Greek in either Dimotiki or Katharevousa, and most Egyptologists knew little or no Cairo Arabic. For us Chinese Studies was a field of Classical Studies, it was studied not as a living language but as a written dead language. This had consequences for our study. First of all, the tones of modern spoken Chinese only became a recognized feature during the 4th and 5th century AD. Before, Chinese words had much more complex endings and beginnings, so the words were much more diverse. With time these endings and beginnings were washed off and the only survivor of that were the tones of what otherwise looked like a very small set of one-syllable words for several tens of thousands of characters. As we were mostly reading earlier writings and had enough to do with the characters and their often huge cast of meanings, we cut the tones and pronounced everything in the same first tone to the great shock of our occasional Chinese visitors. When eventually I started learning modern spoken Chinese, I had to start from scratch in everything.

### ***So, we're talking year 1960?***

1963-65. After a while, Wolfgang Bauer very kindly proposed me for the Studienstiftung [German National Academic Merit Foundation]. They had a stipulation that one should study a semester or a year at a foreign university and I decided to go to Paris. Going to Paris in 1966 might sound like joining the revolution, but I went to a different Paris. By that time I had decided that I would do a PhD with a Buddhist studies focus. At that time we didn't do an MA or BA, but went straight for a PhD. Bauer accepted my topic – there was no one in Chinese Buddhist studies in Germany at the time - but because this was outside his field of interest and expertise, he said that he would follow the judgment of an external evaluation by [Eric] Zuercher in Leiden. I was quite alone with my work, but if you want to do something new, you have to take the risk. So Paris was my big chance because of the Bibliothèque Nationale and its collection of Buddhist scrolls from Dunhuang and above all because of Paul Demiéville. Demiéville, who by that time had already retired, was scholar with a range of knowledge and linguistic expertise across East Asia that one can only dream of and will hardly find anywhere in the younger generation today with their high degree of specialization. I went to him with the request to guide my reading of Chinese Buddhist texts. He was kind enough to meet with me several times during the next months to spend two to three hours each time poring over texts which I had prepared. It helped that I knew French. The Dunhuang manuscripts in

the National Library were in non-punctuated handwriting, and still way beyond my level. But I still went to the library every day, read texts in modern editions and tried to broaden my horizon of knowledge. I read through decades worth of the leading journals such as *T'oung Pao*, the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, or the *Journal Asiatique*. Happily I have a good memory and remember still quite a few things I read then. In short, I was in Paris in 1966, but had no idea of the political activity going on in town. As one my sisters was married in Paris, I often went to her for dinner, but otherwise my evening were spent in the basement of the Trocadéro where they showed old films. So 1966 Paris consisted for me of the Bibliothèque Nationale, visits to Prof. Demiéville, old films, my sister, and weekends in the museums. I missed out on the revolutionary Paris completely.

In the meantime Wolfgang Bauer had accepted an offer from Munich, so I moved there after Paris and started to work on my PhD. I had settled by that time on the topic, namely the early 5th century correspondence between two Buddhist monks, Kumārajīva from Central Asia, who lived in Chang'an in the north, and Shi Huiyuan the main Buddhist figure in the south, who lived on Mt. Lu. Kumārajīva had published a gigantic work of many hundred pages in the modern Taishō edition of the Buddhist canon, the *Dazhi du lun*, a treatise on Pāramitā, on salvation. This is a broadly learned text, which might have been compiled by Kumārajīva himself out of various Sanskrit and perhaps Central Asian sources, because nothing is known of a Sanskrit counterpart to this work. After Huiyuan had read it, he wrote letters with questions to Kumārajīva. These together with the answers they survived in a compilation, the *Dacheng dayi zhang* 大乘大義章. There was something odd with this correspondence, because somehow Huiyuan's second letter seems not to have understood Kumārajīva's answer to the first, and Kumārajīva does not seem to get the questions right either, in short this all looks like a blind and a deaf talking to each other. The main work to address this riddle, *Eon kenkyū*, *Studies on Huiyuan*, commanded respect because it came from an institution and a group of scholars of the highest caliber, namely a group led by Eiichi Kimura at the Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūsho (Institute of Humanistic Studies) in Kyoto. They saw the problem and suggested that the reason was the inability of the two Buddhist masters to communicate across a cultural divide separating China and Central Asia. I thought this was a cultural essentialization that was utterly unconvincing. Here you had two Buddhist professionals talking about particular Buddhological issues that had been addressed in a specific Chinese-language text, which one of them had written or compiled and which they obviously both knew very well. If indeed the correspondence was just a record of failed communication, it would hardly have survived! I started trying to figure out another way to crack that riddle, because indeed, something was wrong with the communication. The Kyoto scholars had done what everybody would do, namely to focus on the center, on what the two masters were saying, but the disconnect was so evident that a Buddhological explanation seemed impossible. So I dug up the silent assumptions guiding the modern reading of the correspondence, which was that this was a sequential exchange of seventeen letters. Perhaps something was wrong with this. How were these letters carried over the 1200 km between Huiyuan's Mt. Lu south

of the Yang-tse and Kumārajīva's Chang'an in the north near the Yellow River? By chance we know that the man who transported them was a 70-year-old general who had turned monk. The state of Hou Qin where Kumārajīva lived and the state of Jin where Huiyuan lived were almost continuously at war. During the time when these letters could have been written, the borders between the two were only open for six months. In the editing which we had, there were seventeen letters from both sides. Now, if somebody tells me that a 70-year-old monk travels 1200 km to and fro, seventeen times in six months in the fifth century, be my guest [laughs]! And then, I did something which methodologically was a really good thing, namely that – without formulating it at that time, but I would do that now – the first thing one has to do is, *get off the center and go for the margin*. If you go to the center, namely the non-communication between these two on which everybody has written, you don't get anywhere because it is completely over-determined. To go for the margin means that you go for a point that is least likely to be falsified because it looks trivial, and which might give you a handle to crack the central riddle. How do we check the number of letters? Every letter, in which Kumārajīva refers to a letter by Huiyuan, must refer to a previous Huiyuan letter. Each time Huiyuan refers to a letter by Kumārajīva, that letter must be earlier than his own. I then looked at these backward references and well, what is the minimum amount of letters from both sides we get? Three. They were later chopped up according to subject matter for teaching purposes; so what you have there in the seventeen letters is not a sequence; these are paired questions-answers from three long letters. And once you rearrange them in their original form, brrrup, it reads perfectly well: two competent people talking seriously about something they know! That result felt good, here you have the big stars of Japanese Buddhism, Kimura Eiichi and his group from the Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūsho, and this little fellow in Munich that is me managed to come up with a hard argument to solve a riddle with which they had struggled [laughs]! I still remember, when I had developed that argument and read through my reconstruction, and saw how things fit together, I was dancing through my room. These are the secret joys of the scholar, which are so very hard to explain! But my youngest daughter saw it, and ended up becoming a scientist.

Well, history didn't stop. We were now in Munich, the institute there was much bigger and much older, had more books, and there were two professors now, Herbert Franke, a stern and widely learned historian, who was instrumental in rebuilding Sinology in Germany after the war, and Wolfgang Bauer. In addition there was the Bavarian State Library as a back-up with its good Chinese holdings, so the research environment for Classical Studies was relatively good. We all had a key to the institute. If I needed a book in the morning four o'clock I would go over because I lived in the courtyard of the Bavarian State Security. They had a building just next to the State Library and in the courtyard was a small old house with one room on each floor, which they somehow had forgotten to tear down. A carpenter had worked there for many years, and when he retired, a student moved in. This student was also in the Studienstiftung, he got some stipend to go somewhere else and offered it to me, because all his close friends wanted it and he did not want to offend anyone of them. It was an ideal place, although sometimes

you suddenly felt observed. When you looked through the window you saw one of these policemen staring into the window probably wondering what I was doing there late at night.

So this was a very peaceful and friendly affair until early 1968. There was a fellow student in the institute called Hermann Josef Kogelschatz, who later became a professor in Tuebingen. He had an interesting history. Years ago, to get away from the draft, he had taken 5 Deutsche Marks from his mother's purse and hitched hikes southward until he got to Yugoslavia, where he became a mate on a ship that went from port to port with cargo. As this was getting tedious, he went to a Japanese Buddhist monastery, and as this was not the right thing for him either he had gone to Taiwan and decided to do something with his life. For a living he gave German lessons, but most importantly he bought himself a Chinese language primer and learned it by heart. Then he went out to the street and asked somebody in Chinese "where is the train station?" He would get a lengthy answer, of which in the beginning he wouldn't understand a word. Then he would say "Xiexie ni" (Thank you), would try to identify some of the tidbits he had heard, and then would go to the next person to ask: "Where is the train station?" (laughs) He made the entire citizenry of Taipei his unpaid teachers. And once he understood where the train station was, he would ask another question, and then another, and so on. People would start asking in return "Where do you come from?", and they would get in a conversation. The spoken Chinese he acquired in this way was out of this world. Then he went to the university in Taipei and audited seminars on Classical Chinese texts, acquiring a great routine in handling them. When Bauer brought him to Munich we were overwhelmed, his language skills were so much better than ours. He wasn't too much interested in argument and analysis at the time, but relished his great linguistic ease. One Friday evening in 1968, Hermann Josef Kogelschatz marched into the Institute with a leaflet, which was saying that the federal government was planning a change in the constitution to establish laws of emergency that would allow it to suspend all basic rights. A short while ago there had been the first ever large wild cat strike without union support in the steel industry. Our quick conclusion was that the government was panicking. We thought, they are going to change the constitution and next day they are going to impose the laws of emergency, - which was, you know, a very nice analysis, but sadly enough also perfectly off the mark. We had no idea about this constitutional change, we'd never heard of it, and then we decided that was shocking news, we go on strike until Monday morning to learn more about this. Over the weekend we tried to get together all the relevant information, but it turned out that nobody had an idea, there was nothing in the papers, nothing on the radio or TV, not even a draft of the proposed changes was available. We went to different student organization to see whether they would do something. It turned out that the SDS (Socialist German Students Union) existed, but when we went to their place, we found some fellows who were obviously deep into Marijuana consumption and had no interest in in any law of emergency. The Liberal Student Union told us to forget it because students in Munich were so conservative. The Young Social-Democrats were not interested either because their mother party was part of the government pushing for these laws. So by Monday morning,

we were all on our own. We decided we extend our strike to the next weekend to get more material together and produced our first leaflet ever, which was Number 1. Because we were from the Chinese Institute, we had to say something about that. Our headline read "Do you like Mao? It does not really matter, but the laws of emergency are coming" – just one page, not very specific. I was already something like twenty-six at the time, the oldest among our Chinese Studies group, positively antiquarian by the standards of these young kids there, but I started to get more actively involved. Within a week we had a much better level of information. Through some backdoor channels we got information that allowed us to stitch together a rather precise draft of the intended changes and then we produced an unbelievably over-documented four page leaflet that read like a scholarly article without the footnotes. It contained the basic information about the law, the government's plans how to pass it, and our brilliant analysis of its purpose, because there was no other explanation around. This leaflet became the main basis of information for everybody. As none of the big newspapers such as the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* was even near our level of information, friendly reports started appearing about the public service we were doing by getting the basic information out. This leaflet brought many more people on board. The ASTA in Munich, which is a body elected by the students to represent them, was in the hands of the Christian Social Union, the youth organization of the Bavarian branch of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and as the CDU was part of the government, the thought of opposing these laws was far from them. As this ASTA was rather well-funded, they could have done quite a lot. Being on our own we looked for alternatives. A labor union gave us packs of paper to print our leaflet; from one University institute we got an offset printer; a business company said, we have an unused offset printer here, if you want that you can use it - and suddenly we had three printing machines standing in the Institute. With our fifteen students and ever more helpers from outside the Institute was turned for a while into a minor industrial enterprise. We must have produced something like 120 000 copies of that four-page leaflet. I still remember the long tables where we were tacking the sheets together like in an assembly line (laughs). Soon enough, everybody in the institute started to become a public speaker and we started to move to bigger things. We started to mobilise other universities, other institutes. Then we formed a Fachschaft, kind of an elected student body in the institute, of which I was made the head, and we encouraged other institutes to do the same. Starting with the humanities, medicine, law etc. all followed pretty quickly. These student bodies formed a council, which acted a kind of a counter government to the ASTA and gave us a framework to discuss strategy and to mobilise. We were advocating a big strike against these laws of emergency and within perhaps two months all Bavarian universities were on strike, a development helped by the often very young students from our Munich institute traveling around and giving big speeches. It was quite a new experience for them. After many local demonstrations all over Germany all culminated in a huge demonstration in Bonn. The laws of emergency were passed with the required two-third majority. But then, nothing happened, no state of emergency was declared. We did no soul-searching about our claim; probably we actually had more trust in the government's not going overboard and hadn't taken our own claims all too seriously. We still were opposed to this constitutional change, but the

climate and information needed for a sober assessment of our reading of these laws was still a long way off.

I felt that the new students had gone straight into the strike after starting Chinese Studies so that they had not yet even learned the basics. That was not good, we had to do something, a short-term project that would let them learn how to write and pronounce Chinese characters and use a Chinese dictionary. We hit on the idea of jointly doing a concordance of all the characters in an important Chinese text with their pronunciations, that would teach them the basics and also would have a result. We had noted that there was no concordance yet for the *Laozi*. So, a *Laozi* concordance was the project. The young students were copying all the 5000 plus *Laozi* characters with some guidance from the older students, then they sorted them, learning in the process the radicals and their sequence in the Wade-Giles system. They then wrote the pronunciation which they had looked up in the dictionary onto the cards with the characters. The pronunciations were then typed with my manual typewriter in alphabetical order together with the page numbers where the characters appeared in the text, and in the end Bauer's very kind Chinese assistant inserted the characters after the pronunciations with his fine hand. In front we stuck a copy of the edition of the *Laozi* on which the concordance was based. And indeed, with a small subsidy procured by Professor Franke we published the first ever *Konkordanz zum Laozi, Concordance of the Laozi*. It had an immortal series title: *Publications of the Student Body of Sinology No. 19*. It is now in many libraries and many people made Xerox copies for themselves. I recall Harvard had bought the *Concordance* – of course, as they order everything. When the librarian saw the series title and the number, he wrote to us directly and asked for the other eighteen publications, assuming that they were all of a similar kind. Well, he got them; these were all our leaflets against the laws of emergency (laughs)! I wonder what he thought.

Other conflicts were brewing in 1968, as a movement against the Vietnam War started to take shape in Germany; of more immediate bearing, there were plans for a rather substantial restructuring of the governance of the universities; and, most shockingly there was the Soviet invasion to crush the Prague Spring in August 1978. I remember that people from our group came to my little house and threw a stone at my window; this was about three o'clock in the morning. "What's up?" I asked, and they said, "They went into Czechoslovakia." I still remember asking: "The Americans?" I was never a great friend of either East Germany, the Soviet Union or their political supporters in the West, but the thought of a Russian invasion in a friendly neighboring country had not occur to me although I had heard rumors about appeals from Prague to get support from NATO. That invasion was quite a shock. Some days later, there was a big demonstration organized by the labor unions. We wanted to make an appeal to join but did not agree with its blindly anti-communist message. Our quandary was to find a way to explain this invasion and ended up coining a slogan that must have made other people in this demonstration wondering for weeks thereafter what we possibly could have meant. Our slogan was: "Dubček ist Kommunist" with the emphasis on the rhyme ist/Kommunist. We tried to say that the Prague Spring was not anti-communist, but an effort to develop a more humane socialism. We were all for denouncing the Soviet invasion and praising Dubček, but Dubček, we said, was a Communist so the focus should be on the imperialist



attitude of the Soviet Union, not anti-communism. I still remember people looking at me puzzled, trying to figure out what that might mean. I long thought that both East Germany and the Soviet Union were bureaucratic and not very attractive enterprises, but after the Prague invasion I developed quite a strong critique of the Soviet Union as a power with imperialist ambitions.

As the ASTA did not seem too much interested in what we saw as the students' concerns, and as elections for this body were imminent we felt that for situations like this we needed the organizational and financial resources of the ASTA. So drew up a program and candidates list from our own little council. Our recent experience notwithstanding, we still shared the general assumption that many students chose Munich because the lakes were near for swimming and the mountains for skiing, but had little interest in protest politics. We thought we might get something like 20% of the votes. Well, we didn't, we got 75%. That was quite shocking, not only because we had misjudged the student body, but also we had now to form the new leadership and nominate the ASTA chair. The heads of our new Fachschaften were all senior students, most of them already pursuing their PhD. When we discussed who was to head this new ASTA, the key question was not who had the broadest political experience or who was the best speaker, but who was furthest advanced in his PhD. And that turned out to be me. Another consideration might have been that the entire movement had started in the Chinese Institute. So suddenly, I was head of the student government of the largest German university with at the time 40.000 students, and this without either of the two key qualifiers for such a role at the time, years of work in one of the student groups, and strong ideological interest.

***And you accepted to take over the ASTA leadership?***

Yes, after all I had agreed to be a candidate for the election. A brilliant speaker from German studies and myself had received the most votes, probably because we were also the best known. I now had to move into the unanticipated new role of a political leader. It started with giving a programmatic speech in the packed grand auditorium, the first time ever I had spoken to such a large audience. I remember little of what I said, but one scene everybody remembered for years. The acoustics in this hall were attuned to the relatively low speech tempo current in Bavaria. Competing with three older sisters, speaking fast had been my only chance to get a word in. I had stuttered when I was young because of an inability of my mouth to manage the flood of words streaming in, but had eventually overcome this by speaking extremely fast. So the big auditorium transformed, without my noticing because I was focused on what to say, into a huge echo chamber with the before last sentence crashing into the over next one and all of it being one big word salad that nobody could make head and tail of. Instead of bursting into applause for some thrilling statement I had made, the audience erupted after some four or five minutes into one collective outcry: LANGSAM! (SLOW) followed by a collective burst of laughter. After this I made superhuman efforts to speak very clearly and a bit slower. Next day, I marched into the student government building to take over

– and this was again something for which I was not prepared: the ASTA had an annual budget of some 300.000 Deutsche Marks plus a manager, a travel agency and six employees, in short we're talking about a major enterprise! First thing I did was to open the books to familiarize myself with the financial situation as if I had been appointed manager in our stove factory. In hindsight, this was a strange priority for someone supposedly coming in with a political agenda. The ASTA after all was not a business enterprise. Why not first check, for example, the number and quality of printers in the building? Well, this is what I felt comfortable in taking on, and so I did. And within two days I knew that the fat profits of carnival parties organized over the years in the name of the ASTA had disappeared into the manager's private account. I called him in and offered two options: to give the money back and walk out of here without further discussion, or I would fire him and go after him in the courts. He looked at the documents on my table and decided to walk out. There were problems too with the travel agency, but after this turn, things quickly improved. My deal with the manager saved us endless hassle and gradually the staff accepted my being fair and cooperated. But, as Mao observed in a poem, *the trees might want rest, the wind doesn't stop*. While this big strike movement against the laws of emergency went on that had now come to an end, the Ministry had moved to rewrite the university laws and strengthen the decision-making powers of the Ministry in the universities. This happened all over Germany at the time. The universities had been rather independent, and this shielded them from undue state interference, but one of the big problems was they are a collegial institution, and such institutions have difficulties reforming themselves. In a faculty meeting you cannot say, "Dear colleague, your institute, I hope you agree, should be closed and the jobs in there will go field XXX because China (or India, the US, Japan, the Middle East, comparative religion etc.) is the coming thing." Since the early 1960s, however student numbers had shot up, Munich had perhaps 8000 students then and now it had 40.000 with few new faculty. This was a totally different order of magnitude and required dramatic new measures that included setting up new universities fundamentally changing the old ones. During the struggle against the laws of emergency there was little conflict between students and professors, but once the new university laws were looming, the two sides started fighting. The Ministry said, the kids are fighting, the university is not able to manage, we have to go in with a firm hand to push these new laws through. In the limited arsenal we had at our disposal strike was the natural result so that during the year when I was head of the student government, we basically were on strike. With the scholarship focus shared by many of our group, we came up with a new strike format the "research strike" or "active strike" as we called it, namely: we occupied the institutes and did research there, in good part on the often troublesome political history of our disciplines.

My lack of political experience prepared me badly for handling such a drawn-out strike. We managed to secure the regular publication of two newspapers, one for the Munich universities, and one for the other Bavarian universities, but the frequent rallies often left me helpless. At the time we had the beginnings of anarchist groups who used rallies to smash things up. I certainly was no friend of this. My efforts to prevent things which I felt would hurt the students' cause often put me into an enormously complicated

situation. I remember a classic: Franz-Josef Strauss, who was then Bavarian premier and much loathed by students for his ruthless use of state power and murky corruption record, was to give a speech at the traditional meeting of his Party on Pentecost in a Munich meeting hall near a big square. We planned a rally of protest there. I went the day before to have a look at the venue. This meeting hall had huge glass windows on the front side, and on the square outside were piles of bricks from a torn-down building. I saw these bricks landing on these windows. With some apprehension I decided to call the police psychologist, told him that I did not want a stone throwing battle, and could he make sure that the police walled off these brick piles. So, you are a student leader and suddenly you not only “secretly” talk to the police psychologist, which for many would have been like talking to the archenemy, no, you ask him for help. In Munich, there had been riots in 1962 where the police had extremely overreacted, but after a public outcry they had hired a police psychologist and retrained the police to handle civil unrest with restraint. In the end you find yourself standing in the middle of a protest against Strauss and actively confronting some participants by shouting “Keine Steine!” (“No stones!”), which is not a very revolutionary slogan. I’m of a very bourgeois background and have no affinity to this kind of violent action (I was probably the only person in those rallies always wearing a tie), but I was very ambivalent about my own reactions there, being sure that I certainly would not qualify as a good revolutionary. Running the ASTA was a very, very hard year.

We are now in 1969 and still in politics. My student leadership year was coming to an end, but I still had not finished my PhD. Just so give you an idea of this job: you are in the office all day and most of the night, you have to coordinate with the team, have a constant trickle of people coming in and a big staff, you have a strike with one rally and meeting after the other; the articles for the two weekly newspapers have to be written and you end up writing ever more yourself, because the others weren’t good or were late. But all this 24-hour pressure notwithstanding, I still had to finish my PhD. Most of the analytical stuff I had done, I had, if you want, the “bamboo painted in my heart,” but very little was on paper. I made a desperate move to get out of the office for a few days. I sat from I think it was Friday morning to next Tuesday morning and wrote 180 pages without much interruption. I did not have to do cut and paste because I took one of these IBM Selectric typewriters with the golf-ball-shaped type head which had a correction function. After it had been accepted, the oral PhD examination was the next challenge. I had a minor in Political Science. My envisaged examiner was the rector of the university, a political scientist with whom I had been crossing swords throughout the year of this strike. When I asked him to be my examiner, he looked at me slightly amazed but then simply asked what topic I would suggest for the discussion. When I proposed Marx’s critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*, he directly agreed. In the examination he was perfectly fair, making every effort not to let the political controversies spill over into the scholarly debate at an examination. My examiners in Chinese Studies were my teacher Wolfgang Bauer and Herbert Franke. Franke had taken strong exception to the political visibility of the Institute in the strike, but he had already supported our little publication and now followed the same principle of leaving the political controversy out of the examination. Wolfgang Bauer indeed had sent my PhD to Prof. Erik Zuercher in Leiden,

and Zuercher suggested a very flattering Magna Cum Laude as the grade, the highest mark in the Dutch system. Bauer took that same grade name, which in Germany is the second highest. I confess that I felt I had made a strong scientific discovery with a creative research strategy and for some time griped about not getting the highest grade, but probably every PhD student has similar gripes and something I will talk about later made me forget it rather quickly.

Then – I still remember it as if this was today – I got a telephone call from Mr. Johnston. And Mr. Johnston, with an American accent, said something like, "I'm calling from London, Mr. Wagner, I would like to have a sip with you in the Intercontinental on Friday, is that possible?" I am sitting in my ASTA office with rebellious words flowing from mouth and pen, and here somebody wants to have sip with you in the poshest Munich hotel! I thought, well, if that isn't the CIA, I don't know what it is, and I said as if this was the most normal thing in the world "sure, it would be a pleasure." We agreed when to meet. But I went there (really) with two students as some sort of bodyguard, because I thought in this overheated politicized environment and thinking that I might disappear without a trace. Mr. Johnston was a lanky American, very friendly, and, literally, we had a sip and he asked what I was doing. I talked about the ASTA work and my PhD exams, but didn't even think of asking him why the hell we were sitting there at all. We were just sort of chatting like two gentlemen, when suddenly he got up and said that it had been great meeting me and that he had to catch his plane back to London. Off he went and I returned, not clear what to make of this. Next day he called and said he had happy news for me. The Harkness Foundation had decided to offer me a – very generously endowed - two year scholarship to go to any US university of my choice for research on topics of my choice. That was quite some news. I don't know who proposed me, I guess it was Bauer but he never told me and I never asked him because these are confidential things and they should stay that way. This scholarship from the Harkness Foundation had been set up as a counterpart to the Rhodes Scholarship. While the Rhodes Scholarship was to give Americans a chance to leave their –then still – backward universities to study for a while in Oxford or Cambridge, the Harkness family, whose wealth comes from Texas oil, decided to go beyond their traditional strong commitment to the performing arts and allow Britons to study for a while at the by now rather excellent US universities. Eventually this was expanded to include European Union candidates. There were just ten scholarships a year, but as with the Rhodes one had to be proposed and could not apply oneself. Well, I directly accepted Mr. Johnson's kind offer. Suddenly I knew what I was going to do after the ASTA year. When I asked him whether my girlfriend could join me, he assured me that was no problem, but additional funding would only be available if we were married. She was at another university, we had become engaged, but the prospect of marriage had been crowded out by all the turbulence around. But Mr. Johnston's offer did it. I called her with just a few minutes on my hands, told her the news and then out of nowhere asked whether she would marry me. (laughs) This must have been the most disappointing marriage proposal anybody has ever made! She burst out in tears on the other end and said she would call back (laughs). But eventually she kindly agreed.

My, or rather our, interest in research and scholarship rather than radical politics brought its own problems. At the time, the different ASTA were members of a national body. The meetings of this body were ideologically dominated the SDS, the Socialist German Students Union, a group that was trying to lead the entire organization to radical politics and hammered away at anybody standing in their way. There were endless political discussions at these meetings, and Munich was always a little bit on the bourgeois side and not very ideological. We had a wonderful theatre group in our student government named the "Political Forum." They were just emblematic of our attitude with their very bizarre and fun performances. But in these national meetings, we certainly were not the leaders.

Only many years later, I learned about the actual story of these laws of emergency, and it was very simple. The United States had told the German government – Germany still had limited sovereignty up to that date – that if they wanted full sovereignty, they had to make sure that they would be able to deal with situations of emergency such as an East German or Russian invasion via East Germany perhaps supported by some kind of an East German managed riot in West Germany. For this, the use of the Federal Army for internal conflicts was advised which was explicitly banned by the old constitution. Therefore, passing the laws of emergency was the condition set by the Americans for full German sovereignty. Nobody at the time had ever heard of that and it certainly was not made public knowledge. So, the cause for the uproar was just the government's failure to inform the public, and we filled the lacuna with our own shortcut explanations. On the side of the new university law things were similar. Neither the professors nor we students understood the actual dynamics driving this new law, and again, the Ministry simply proposed it and did not see any need to provide rational explanations to the public. We came up with our own explanation, that the only purpose of these laws was repression as they also abolished the student representations. Many professors hoped that these laws would restore law and order, which we read this as their wishing to preserve the old hierarchies. Of course quite a few might have wanted this and saw the critical students as their main enemy. In effect, the professors and we students neutralised each other while the bureaucrats in the ministry wrote the laws to increase their own decision-making powers and reduce the much-famed autonomy of the university. Both we and the professors were the idiots on the ground, blindly careening around in our own misunderstanding of the larger issues.

One thing I learned from these two big blunders in my understanding of political conflicts in which I had been involved actively and for extended periods of time: I don't qualify as a politician. I might know a lot about this and that but the nose you need to smell the hidden political logic of things even if much of the hard information is not available, I just don't have that. That is why I decided to stay away from assuming roles of political leadership. I have my political opinions, and will I try to live by them, but I was not going to go for any kind of political leadership. With this resolve I went to the United States in summer 1969.

***Just out of curiosity: Many Rhodes scholars become politicians. The scholarship you went on was kind of a vice versa thing. What was with other people who went with you to the states?***

Well, one fellow was in English literature, another one was in physics. When I was in New York in the office of the Harkness Foundation – they were extremely kind and helpful - I saw a paper lying on the table. It vicariously said what they were looking for: “Potential future leaders” it said. In a way, their selection of me has not been wrong because in one way or the other, perhaps not in the envisaged way, this is probably what I have become. From their newsletter I see the profile of the other fellows: Some of them are professors, some are in foundations, others are in politics, they are all over the place, but in one way or the other they are mostly in “leadership” roles.

In the United States, I went to Harvard first. We first lived with my aunt a little outside of Cambridge – my uncle had died by that time. During this first year I remember sometimes lying on the couch regurgitating and redigesting the previous year like a cow on the meadow. There had been so many high-pressure moments where you make decisions and you don't know are they right, are they wrong, is that idiotic, but your decision makes a difference and has an impact on many people's lives. I got to that role with very little of my own doing and it was quite upsetting and exhausting to relive that year and reflect on. Only after a long while my system returned to normality and I could fully focus on other things.

In the previous year, I had become active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. In Germany this war was not as much of a watershed as in the US because Germany - although evidently an ally of the US - was not militarily involved. As I was in East Asian Studies, I had started digging around whether I would find anything showing Germany – especially German universities - involved in supporting the American side. At the time we were not sophisticated enough to understand that these things work on different layers, so we were always looking for the smoking gun kind of thing such as a CIA contract. Nobody had yet realized that the financing of the Vietnam war was largely covered by everybody else's accepting the Dollar as a world currency, which allowed the US could run a gigantic deficit without having to cover it with their own economic activity. I was mostly interested in the way in which especially the social sciences and the humanities were involved in politics. The Harkness scholarship had a single stipulation: you had to travel through the US for three months (with a special stipend of course). We did that, and it was a wonderful trip, but if you look at the zigzag of our route, you will see that we touched all those places where students had stormed their presidents' offices, emptied their desks and published the Pentagon and CIA contracts concerning the Vietnam war which nicely (and surprisingly) often had really been stacked in there. On the day before we had come to Cambridge, the office of Pusey – he was then president of Harvard – had been stormed. On the day we arrived, you could buy copies on the street of these CIA and Pentagon contracts with various members of the Harvard faculty for consulting and doing research for the Vietnam War. This seemed to prove my hunches and I took these tidbits for indicators of a much wider involvement. I had bought a pack of these documents and that had given me the idea. Actually my

assumption was a quite overblown because the leading universities had mostly kept this involvement at a minimum, but that's how I saw it at the time. So, apart from visiting places such as the Grand Canyon and even going to Mexico City, we travelled to places where students had managed to get such documents and had published them. One had to go to these universities because there was no national center that collected these publications, and often they were sold out by the time we came and we had to make copies. I collected documents from all over the United States about the involvement of the social sciences, especially the Asian Studies people, in the war. At the time, I didn't write anything about it but I became active in exploring it after my return to Germany.

But once in the US, my main focus was again on scholarship. There was a Japanese Buddhistologist at Harvard, Prof. Nagatomi, who after having a look at my PhD suggested I should submit the first chapter in English to the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. This first chapter dealt with the structure of the correspondence by showing the implausibility of the earlier reading. He felt that was a neat solution for a much-debated problem. The Harvard Journal is a very fine publication. I was happy when the paper was accepted, and stopped fretting about my PhD grade. I made good use of my time in Cambridge to go to a great variety of lectures and seminars to expand my horizon. I had found that in the correspondence studied in my dissertation Huiyuan had been at crucial points expressing himself in a terminology and through patterns of thought that looked as if they were somehow connected to the *Zhuangzi* or *Laozi*. To explore this further, I started to look at 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. commentaries to these texts. The problem was that at that time there was hardly anything written about these works, which are associated with *xuanxue* 玄學, the "scholarly exploration of that which is dark," the term that was eventually used to translate "metaphysics." I had seen one important paper about Xuanxue by Tang Yongtong from the 1940s but it had been published during such an tense time and in an out-of-the-way place, that hardly anybody had used it. I felt, if I wanted to really get to the bottom of the impact of Xuanxue on the formation of the early stage of the development of a Chinese Buddhist conceptual language, I had to first do a specialized study and only then go back to Buddhist Studies. When considering who would be the main figure laying the foundations for Xuanxue the answer was easy, that was Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249).

### ***The one you finished working on a few years ago?***

Yes, in 1969 I started to work on Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary, which has by now resulted in a three volume study. When I began this work, I was pretty much alone; in Harvard and later in Berkeley it seemed that nobody knew a thing about Xuanxue, and while people were tolerant and friendly, I don't think anyone was greatly interested either.

When starting this research, I had great difficulty understanding Wang Bi's commentary as well as the *Laozi* itself. At the time there was no methodology of dealing with Chinese commentaries. Biblical commentaries had been denounced in Europe since the Renaissance as second-hand scholastic exercises that were useless for understanding

the *Urtext*. Even in the hermeneutic tradition people had been dealing with philosophers reading other philosophers and writing about them, but there were very few studies of commentaries on “classics” of the European tradition. Actually the denunciation and neglect of the Chinese commentary tradition is a derivative of the Protestant disdain for “scriptural” Catholic scholastic commentaries, but this is just an empty transfer into Chinese routines of something which has a very particular German or European background. So I basically thought, what I needed was to get away from a reading of these Chinese texts which assumed that there is a level field on which the modern scholar meets the raw and unmediated *Urtext*, because that is an ahistorical assumption. First of all, the modern scholar has read or heard of many translations before ever opening the book, second these translations themselves have already used and vandalised different commentators, who in turn have engaged with earlier commentators. These commentators often had vast context knowledge and had gained their prestige and transmission by offering a reading that was more convincing than that of others. Since early times these texts had always been read through a given commentary and I thought if you want to harden a reading of a Chinese classical texts as it was read in the Chinese tradition, you cannot cherry-pick and claim this is scholarship because you like this reading or the other of a given phrase. Instead I proposed going for a historically specific reading through one given commentator. That of course is a hermeneutic enterprise! What I set out to do was to read the *Laozi* through the Wang Bi commentary. That, however, presupposed developing a very complex methodology. Wang Bi is not offering a translation of the *Laozi*, but his commentary implies a certain understanding down to the grammar of a phrase, the meaning of words, and the separation of sections. Reading through his commentary, one has to reinvent the *Laozi* as it was constructed by Wang Bi. I had to spend a long time to learn how to handle this communication between text, commentary and myself, and to develop routines of verification and falsification for my readings. Actually tying the reading of the text to a particular historical reader, a commentator in this case, means that the fuzziness and vagueness which is characteristic of many of the modern translations of classical Chinese texts largely disappears. The assumption on which many translations operate - if you don't understand a phrase or the logic of a connection, it doesn't really matter because it's either the problem of the author being unable to think straight, or because it is unfathomable wisdom. None of these assumptions are supported by the historical commentators. For them the challenge was to discover the argumentative links that might have become invisible with the change in historical context.

One of the biggest problems in the study of the Wang Bi Commentary was again the question of center and the margin. If you go to the center of the *Laozi* – the *Dao* and the *De* and all these big notions – suddenly you have 180 translations, thousands of articles and they all wallow in the same fuzziness. Some of them might be right or they might be wrong, but it cannot be proven either way. One of the main problems was that often it was unclear how a given Wang Bi comment got to its reading of a *Laozi* phrase. I noticed that Wang Bi's writing shared a feature with the *Laozi* text, parallelisms. The *Laozi* has a lot of parallel sentences which are mostly followed by a non-parallel statement that looks like an overall summary. The standard modern understanding of such parallelisms



according to the translations was that the same thing was said twice with different words. Now, once formulated in this brutal manner, it's evident that this not a very strong proposition. It is even very implausible given the high value set on terse expressions of complex issues in these texts, not to mention the bulkiness of bamboo strips and later the high cost of paper. This stylistic feature in the *Laozi* and Wang Bi looked like what I would today call the margin, because little work had been done on it and solving the problem how Wang Bi read these parallelisms might be the way to an improved precision of the overall understanding of his reading. As most of the analyses of the *Laozi* actually cannot figure out what to do with these parallel phrases, they tend to base their conclusions on the non-parallel one. They actually are not entirely wrong there because these phrases indeed often are general statements. So I decided to solve the riddle of these parallels. There are some rare examples in the *Laozi* where the structure of these parallels is clear and explicit, namely they are interlocked in an A-B-A-B sequence with the first and the third, and the second and the fourth belonging together. This is evident because they explicitly refer to each other through key terms. But most parallelisms in the *Laozi* have no explicit references and in other early texts the explicit "open" parallelisms also occurred in an A-B-B-A form, so no mechanical application was possible to the inexplicit "closed" parallelisms. This looked like a promising technical and falsifiable rather than a "philosophical" and unfalsifiable way to solve a major riddle. In one "closed" case in the *Laozi* where the connections between the parallel statements were particularly hard to fathom, Wang Bi helped out by simply quoting the first line of this stanza as his commentary of the third and the second as that of the fourth, indicating that he read this as an A-B-A-B sequence. A check showed that about 60 per cent of the chapters in the *Laozi* had such parallel style segments, I developed a hypothesis that Wang Bi saw "interlocking parallel style" as the basic writing pattern of the *Laozi*, and emulated this writing pattern in his own style. The beauty of such a hypothesis is that it will be in the wastepaper basket in five minutes if it does not hold, because if things do not fall into place when reading the *Laozi* this way, the hypothesis is falsified. But if, once you start reading and arranging the line connections in this way, things fall into place and the entire line of argument of the *Laozi* as presented in the commentary becomes clear, this is a form of verifying the hypothesis. To get to this hypothesis I had to spend long months unlearning the standard routines of handling the *Laozi*, and many more long months to go through all the details. Happily the hypothesis got ever stronger as I found that this was not just Wang Bi's idiosyncratic reading but that the *Laozi* in fact used a writing practice already widely shared during the Zhanguo period although he made the most systematic use of it. In other words, Wang Bi's reading made a serious scholarly contribution. This hypothesis was also very economical. Once it was verified, I didn't have to read the 180 translations anymore (laughs)! That's the pleasure of going for the margin. If you find a basic flaw in the mainstream approach and come up with a way to overcome it, you can be very sparing with your footnotes. From that moment on, I was again in a familiar situation, like with my PhD: a bit alone and taking on a long and prestigious tradition of reading and interpreting the *Laozi*, but with a solid handle to crack a major problem. This was only the first step, because now the question was what rules governed these parallelisms

which were always anchored in antonyms, and whether this stylistic form together with the non-parallel general statements provided a formal platform for an implicit philosophical argumentation, and if so, what this argumentation was. The great advantage was that I now was able to understand in great detail and with – I hope – great precision how Wang Bi read the *Laozi* so that I had a good base for the analysis of Wang Bi's own philosophy. In this entire exploration of one historical text through its reading by a historical commentator my study in Heidelberg with Gadamer helped a great deal. When we got to Berkeley a year later, I felt I was well on my way with the Wang Bi project.

### ***You went to Berkeley from Harvard?***

Yes, after some nine months in Harvard and the long travel through the country we got to Berkeley in 1970. Although the university, like Harvard, had a strong Chinese studies faculty and a wonderful library, the environment in town was quite different from Cambridge with lots of hippies, alternative culture, and grass being openly sold on the streets. I had missed the train again, feeling somehow too old to join in this lifestyle. But in one way I engaged with this Berkeley experience. One day I read a sentence by He Yan, who was the prime minister in Wang Bi's time and actually an admirer of this young genius who had not reached twenty and was already famous for his comments. The sentence was: "If you eat the *han shi san* 寒石散, the cold mineral powder, not only are all your deceases cured, but your mind opens to clarity." The text continued that after this discovery of He Yan's, who was a model of style, beauty, power, and intellect at the time, everybody was taking this powder,

Well, you read such a statement in Berkeley at a time where you can't walk across the street without somebody offering you one concoction or the other, and people you talk to sometimes swooned off in the middle of their own sentences, you have a feeling of déjà vu. (laughs) I could not help it but do a little detour around my Wang Bi study and explore this drug and the lifestyle of these famously brilliant early third century intellectuals. I looked around and found that this drug had been in wide use for the next 900 years up to the Song dynasty; and then it got really, really interesting because there was a good source: in the 10th century, a Chinese doctor had gone to Japan to become the physician of the Japanese emperor. He had written a summa of Chinese medicine, the *Yishimpō* 醫心方, and this had an entire chapter on this drug. It contained not only the recipe but also long excerpts of handbooks with advice for family members of the men who took that powder. What do you do if the stoned fellow is flipping out, his jaws locked, unable to swallow the wine that has to go with it? Mind-boggling in the description of the side-effects! Obviously, large parts of the Chinese elite continued to take it. If someone had a bad trip, this only showed his lack of sophistication but was no proof that this powder was dangerous. I have strange liking for very concrete – and you couldn't beat this one. The result was an endless article, "*Lifestyle and drugs in early medieval China.*" It came out in the major European journal for classical Chinese studies, *Toung Pao*. I had written it in German rather than English as a silent (and certainly unnoticed) protest against the American politics in Vietnam. In hindsight this was just

dumb because now five different people have translated pieces of it, after all German has stopped being a second language China scholars tend to know. None of these translations have been published as far as I know, but most scholars working on this period have bitten their way through it with curses for me in their lips, it's quite a famous piece because it came right at that time. It ends, I might just remind you, with a stern warning to the reader not to try it! (laughs) A couple of years ago, however, a woman wrote to me from Mexico saying she had tried it but there was no effect, whether there was something wrong with the recipe? That was my major publication during that Berkeley year. I also started reading on contemporary politics, but I basically did my Wang Bi research. I remember an important walk with my wife up on the fire trail around Berkeley. She was studying Russian literature and this Wang Bi business was far away from her interests. However, I had invited her come with me to a long walk for a purpose. I warned her that I would talk to her for about two or three hours explaining the foundations of Wang Bi's ontology. She could ask whatever question she wanted. She kindly agreed to be the friendly listener, and that outline became the blueprint for the overall argument and logic of my later Wang Bi work.

***When the Harkness Fellowship ended, you returned to Germany?***

We went back to Germany in late 1971, settling first in West Berlin where my mother and my stepfather now lived. By that time I had been granted a Habilitationstipendium, a habilitation stipend from the DFG, German Research Foundation. Although I knew that Herbert Franke was very critical of my work in the ASTA and the light this shed on the Chinese Studies Institute, I had of course asked him for a letter of reference because I was certain that he would, as a matter of professional ethics, be as fair as possible. As I got the stipend, he must have supported it but I was also aware that the year in Munich probably had its price when it came to a professorship. I confess that this never bothered me. I somehow assumed that it was unlikely that I would starve. After our return to Germany, however, I felt something had to change. I now had the third stipend, but I was married, our first daughter had just been born, and I felt that I had to do something in real life and not run around with stipends. I also –wrongly - assumed that habilitations were a thing of the past and therefore did not feel the need to push hard to finish my Wang Bi work.

The Institute of Chinese Studies at the Free University of Berlin had been through long years of “revolutionary” struggle. The students there had “overthrown the authorities” and had come to an agreement with the university leadership to have from now on an exclusive focus on the PRC. There were two problems, one that there was already a modern China specialist in the Political Science Otto Suhr Institute at the university, Jürgen Domes with a China outfit of his own that also had a small modern China library; and second that sinology education in Germany was focused on traditional China so that there was no pool of available candidates. They convinced the leadership that Jürgen Domes with his Taiwan connections was too anti-communist to qualify, but then had to settle for a scholar whose “modern China” focus had not gone beyond the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Happily enough for them, he kept his word to support the modern China focus.

The Institute was housed in the old villa of a famous boxer, Max Schmeling, which had become the property of the university; it was a very grand building with a little park, but rather dilapidated. With the new PRC focus, the Institute had an opening for a job of assistant professor. I applied to finally earn an honest living. I didn't know a word of Modern Chinese and I did not pretend that I did, but I did read scholarly Chinese, especially of the Republican period. As for PRC Chinese, I had a hard time with the unfamiliar modern jargon, and felt that the *People's Daily* with its many binomials and endless repetitions was far too verbose (laughs). But, because of my interest in the interaction of the social sciences with politics I had also started to look into the history of Chinese sociology, so I knew at least something. As a matter of fact I ended up writing some forty entries on Chinese sociologists for a big handbook. The other applicants, I was later told, were avid readers of the German-language version of *Beijing Review*, had credentials as leftist political scientists, but didn't know Chinese. In its unfathomable wisdom the selection committee decided that I was the only one with a serious anchor in Chinese Studies, so I got the job and threw myself into reading voraciously about the PRC for my teaching, but still felt comfortable with reading only, not speaking. I started off teaching courses on the history of the Chinese social sciences and on the development of health care in the PRC.

Since I had come to Berlin I also had been looking for people with whom to share my knowledge about the involvement of the US social sciences in the Vietnam War. I came in contact with students from a "League against Imperialism" which organized many Vietnam War protests. It turned out to be a "mass organization" set up by one of the Maoist political parties that had emerged from the student movement. I wanted to live my political commitment without assuming a leadership role and thought solid but committed scholarly articles could be my contribution. Following a suggestion from some of this group, I actually set up a scholarly journal with others of a similar interest. It was to offer scholarly competence in a broad range of fields including especially the sciences to support the Vietnamese liberation struggle. It was of course called *Befreiung* [Liberation] and had the grandiose subtitle *Wissenschaft im Dienst der kämpfenden Völker Indochinas*, science in support of the fighting peoples of Indochina. The "in support of" was to talk back to a science in support of the US side of the Vietnam War, but of course it contained its own tensions. A full run of that journal is kept in the Heidelberg Institute of Chinese Studies, because I wanted to make sure that students interested in my earlier activities could see for themselves. The journal was started with the assumption that the Vietnamese would give us specimens of, for example, plants destroyed or soil or contaminated by Agent Orange that was used by the US military to defoliate forests suspected of providing coverage for the Vietcong. Our people would try to figure out scientific ways to solve the problem and perhaps get money together to implement the solutions. The journal would publish scholarly articles, which would give more background – but it originally also had this practical purpose. This purpose was never realized. We had assumed that the Vietcong were in charge of the struggle in the South, but it turned out that the FNL's international relations as well as their local strategies were very much run by the Communist Party in the north. The Vietcong

representatives in Paris, which I met several times, were open for a cooperation, but the North Vietnamese, who were in charge there, definitely were not.

After the end of the Vietnam War came a time of disillusionment. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 gave a heavy blow to our sunny assumptions about the righteousness of the Vietnamese Communists and FNL in their struggle against the US because obviously they were not beyond installing client governments in their neighborhood. As the Soviet navy was known to be interested in using the huge warm water port of Danang that had been built by the Americans, we saw a continuous expansionist strategy that had begun with the Prague invasion and was now pursued by allies such as Vietnam to counter the Chinese efforts to gain influence in the region through an alliance with the Pol Pot government. In this context I co-authored an article on Cambodia which has disturbed me ever since. The article was written together with Karlheinz Kotte, who knew the region well because had spent long years in Vietnam in a church-sponsored development project. The article highlights the flaws in the binary logic we were using at the time. None of the reports about mass killings going on in Cambodia had suggested a plausible motive. I had seen in translations from the official Phnom Penh radio repeated appeals from the government to stop the killing, so these killings did not seem to be part of an official campaign. The reports about them on the other hand were coming from people with a strong pro-Vietnamese agenda of their own such as Wilfried Burchett or from sources we distrusted because they were associated with the CIA. Like many Southeast Asia specialists in the US and France at the time, we thought and wrote that these massacre reports must be propaganda. The article pointed out the problem of the missing rationale, but then offered the dumb conclusion that because there was no visible rationale it had not happened. Because the Vietnamese invasion was wrong, the logic went, it followed that the Cambodian side had to be right. However, we got hold of ourselves rather quickly. We thought that developments under Pol Pot disqualified his government with its remaining bases around Angkor from being the anchor for a possible Cambodian independence and came out in support not of some other revolutionary, but of Prince Sihanouk. I must say that I still have not seen a convincing explanation of the reason for these killings. One of them might be that no one in the Cambodian leadership seemed to trust the others because there were former members of the presumably dissolved Vietnamese-led Indochinese Communist Party in leadership positions who had remained loyal to Vietnam. Hun Sen, who became the (much reviled) strong man in Cambodia after the invasion to this day, was one of them.

Although I never became a member of Maoist group I mentioned, there were points of agreement with regard to international politics beyond the opposition to the Vietnam War, and this was mostly in terms of the assessment of Soviet Foreign policy as expansionist and aggressive. This had been articulated by Deng Xiaoping in 1974 in a speech at the United Nations that outlined the "Theory of the Three Worlds." I thought that this was a good analysis of contradictions in the world and that events even in the middle of Europe increasingly confirmed the basic assumptions.

The journal now redirected much of its attention to the tension between the two superpowers that was growing in the middle of Europe with both sides arming for a local showdown, the US by stationing middle range nuclear missiles and even short-

range nuclear artillery shells on this side and the Soviet Union massing tank armies in Eastern Europe. We were connecting with people from a much wider political spectrum than before who shared this assessment. This included East European dissidents, Maoist groups, but also politically often conservative military specialists thinking about unconventional forms of defense to ward off this threat from Europe. I even got visits from the Chinese ambassador in East Berlin.

When Brezhnev came to Germany in 1978 and was invited to give a speech in Chancellor Schmidt's hometown Hamburg, our editorial board decided to join a protest rally against Soviet policies. The Hamburg police banned a demonstration and ordered the managers of the city's meeting halls not to let us rent one. But to avoid having many thousand protesters on the streets with unpredictable outcome, the police president eventually agreed to let us have the meeting in a big tent in a park. We had to race to find a company to set it up on one day's notice! I ended up chairing this meeting of some four or five thousand people where former Soviet general Grigorenko, the student leader Rudi Dutschke, the Hungarian dissident and writer Miklós Haraszti and others were giving speeches. The journal was now coming out with articles from prominent European intellectuals such as the novelist György Konrád from Hungary, the co-author, among other works, of *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, a book about the attraction of socialist state structures for intellectuals, who after Germany's unification became head of the Berlin Academy of Arts, and we had lively exchanges with a broad range of East German dissidents such as Rudolf Bahro, the author of *Die Alternative* (The Alternative), a book written in the East after the Prague invasion that tried to map a way for a fundamental restructuring of East German society to reduce the leadership's leeway.

The growing tension between the powers in Europe had its effects on the ground. And at that time the only people in West Germany talking about German national unity were the Sudetendeutsche [Sudenten Germans] and, perhaps once a year, Franz Josef Strauss. The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats had basically agreed to eliminate the unification mandate from the constitution. They already had agreed to East Germany becoming a member of the United Nations and ambassadors had been exchanged. The two states solution was accepted as the price Germany had to pay for the Second World War. While in West Germany unification was not a topic, there was a very strong groundswell in East Germany to articulate uneasiness about the Soviet domination by talking about the two Germanys as naturally belonging together. All this changed on November 13, 1976 when Wolf Biermann, a singer from East Berlin who was not allowed to perform or publish his songs there was permitted to come for a performance to Cologne in the West. To circumvent the East German ban, he had for a long time made tape-recordings of his songs in his kitchen in East Berlin, the tramway was going outside, every five minutes one heard it dingle, dingle, dingle coming by, but these tapes were circulating all over East Germany, everybody, not just young people had them. The Cologne concert was broadcast live prime time in German TV, but because it had been inserted into the program at short notice, many people had missed it. After the TV station was flooded with calls to re-broadcast, they did so prime time on the next evening, an unheard-of event in Germany! The evening was a turning point in German

history. Many of Biermann's songs dealt with the German division and because he was banned in East Germany and also critical of much in the West, his credibility as a leftist supporting German unity was high so that he took the sting out of the notion that any such discussion was "revanchism." I myself grew up in the West, knew of no relatives in the East, and considered myself (to this day) like many in my generation primarily European rather than German. There was no real emotional bond, but we felt in this superpower confrontation we might have to also rethink the relation between the Germanys as they were at the heart of it. A little later, I believe, the Maoist group I mentioned, which had grown into a rather important body, announced that struggling for German unity should be considered an important "united front" in the anti-hegemonic struggle. I still remember the groan in the audience at the Free University when one of them first explained. While China had recognized both German states, it had maintained that they basically belonged together. This certainly played a role in the considerations of this group. Rumor had it that they started to actually develop an underground branch in the East.

Our journal was one of the first on the left in West Germany to take up this issue of the two Germanys long before this was anywhere on the political horizon of the media or the government. Sure enough, it landed us with charges from some mainstream media as well as organizations associated with the Social Democrats that we were reviving "revanchist" policies after West Germany had finally accepted the results of World War II. Soberly speaking, neither our little journal nor Wolf Biermann's grand evening or the Maoists shift in policy had any big role in bringing about German unification. This was consequence of events such as the implosion of the Soviet Party that were well beyond anything anybody had anticipated. But these articles, events, and shifts were important indicators of shifts in the mind-set of people who had grown up with the grand resolve to prevent a recurrence of Nazism and were now proposing to disentangle this goal from the Soviet policy to establish control over Eastern Europe. So much for politics.

In 1977 or '78 my job was about to run out. Tenure track did not exist at the time and I could only go "up" to a professorship elsewhere or "out" and leave the university. I had not written out my Berkeley talk on Wang Bi. I had most of a habilitation thesis in my head, but there was little on paper. When I noticed that habilitation continued to be a requirement for a professorship, I went back to Wang Bi, and in a first step published my analysis of Interlocking Parallel Style as I was writing out my habilitation which I submitted a year later. This was a grueling year.

By now we had two daughters, my wife was training to become a teacher, things were tight and ends had to be met. I got on my bicycle and went to the Sender Freies Berlin [Free Berlin radio station] where I vaguely knew one graduate from our Japanese Studies department. I hoped to become a freelancer for their university-focused programs, and I had brought a first manuscript. I had no idea how to present something on radio where people might come in in the middle of the broadcast and had basically written a scholarly article. The radio staff had a birthday party with some Champaign in their heads. I shortly told my friend why I had come and gave him my draft. I still remember him sitting down have a look. Suddenly tears were coming out of his eyes and

the then he burst out into uncontrollable fit of laughter. He started reading it aloud to the others, with the same effect. That was a very sobering experience for my good intention to earn a living. But he was very kind and invited me to come in for a session where he would teach me how to structure such texts. I followed his advice and very soon the station was willing to take all the thirty or forty-five minute broadcasts I came up with. Although the research and the writing took a lot of time, I had a great time because I could live out my diverse interests. In the beginning they had professional speakers to present my broadcasts because they felt I was speaking too fast. One day the speaker was sick, and I stepped in. Because I knew my text and spoke in a lively manner, they from then on let me read my own broadcasts. Happily for my financial well-being, many of my programs were rebroadcast elsewhere in Germany or Austria.

To give an example of these dozens of broadcasts, I had read something about the dietetics of scholars' life. As we all know, the physical maintenance of a scholar's body is quite a challenge. Scholars have concentration problems, they constantly sit, they have flatulence, and they can't sleep. The first scholar living this new kind of pure scholar's life outside a monastery routine was Marcilio Ficino, the founder of the platonic Academy in fifteenth century Florence. He wrote a detailed and very pragmatic handbook for the maintenance of the scholar's body and mind, what one should eat and what not, how air should be, how Saturn was causing depression, how to get to sleep. As this lifestyle was spreading, many later authors wrote down their own observations and recommendations. Down to the late 18th century they were all written in a kind of easy kitchen Latin. In the nineteenth century the enlightened scholar-entrepreneur turned up who was doing gymnastics in his spare-time and looked with disdain at the withered "feudal" bodies of the past with their built-in bow. Reading these handbooks and writing about it was not only great fun but also prepared me for a wonderful study I then never did, namely about the bodily effects of the Chinese examination system and the strategies to manage them. My program was broadcast on a late Sunday evening and two days later I got the ultimate postcard. A taxi driver wrote that by a chance he had switched on this program, had listened with a mix of fascination and disbelief and had turned down two calls to avoid being interrupted. I liked that. Many years later I took up this program for a radio lecture series and a scholarly article.

At the time, I was still editing the journal, was writing my habilitation, took care of the girls, taught my courses, and now had to do the heavy research and light writing for two or three such broadcasts a month. This was quite heavy work and I learned to work without warm-up time, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, and coming back two hours later and continuing without a hitch. To finish my habilitation (some 800 pages) I did not join my family for two summer holidays. My daughters are holding this against me to this day.

During the last months of my assistant professorship a big political controversy erupted: this Maoist organization had decided to compete in the Berlin local elections. They had a rather strong foothold in a part of town called Kreuzberg. A children's hospital there had been closed although a great many Turkish families with lots of children were living there. This party had quite a few doctors among its members, and they set up a free clinic in Kreuzberg. Eventually they called on independent Berlin intellectuals to support



them in the election. Together with a number of others I signed a public appeal. Going to a bookstore today, listening to the radio or TV, looking at some leading universities and research institutions, and even some ministries, I still see many of the signatories' names. Otto Schily for example, a lawyer who later became Federal Minister of the Interior was among the signatories. If I recall correctly, this party got a respectable 18% of the vote in Kreuzberg. The Social Democrats under Willy Brandt – I was actually good friends with his son, a historian - had introduced a law banning everybody associated in any way with a communist organization (of whatever color) from state employment, whether gardener or professor (“Berufsverbot”) to forestall what some student revolutionaries had announced as a “long march through the institutions.” Signing this appeal had been a way to protest against this law, but, of course it was now applied to those of us who worked in the state sector. Sure enough the Ministry ordered the Rector of Free University of Berlin, Prof. Eberhard Lämmert, to throw me out. I wrote to the sinologists I had come to know, explaining the background and asking them to support me with letters to the Minister. Paul Demiéville in Paris, Erik Zuercher in Leiden, John K. Fairbank in Harvard and many other international scholars all wrote stiff letters protesting against this kind of political disciplining. I was and am deeply grateful for this. Sadly, none of the German scholars did. I doubt whether any of them supported the “Association for the Defense of Freedom of Scholarship” (Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft) then headed by none other but the China scholar Jürgen Domes, an organization that had been set up to alert the authorities if someone associated with a leftist organization was applying for an academic job. Maybe they felt that as I had cooked this soup myself, I might as well eat it alone. Because my contract eventually had only three more months to go, the University did not fire me, but simply let it run out.

In early '78, I had noticed from the *Shanghen Wenxue*, “Literature of Scars,” and the discussion on the “meaning of life” in the Chinese Youth Paper with its many readers' letters from young people that there was some dramatic change in the PRC. I also had trouble reading some of these letters because I had never seen the kind of vocabulary they used. This vocabulary definitely was out of my narrow range of scholarly language and political jargon. I therefore had bought myself a Walkman, from Harvard I had brought a set of tapes for self-study of spoken Chinese, and from then on I used every free moment such as riding in the subway to learn the tones, repeat the pattern drills and develop the basics of an active modern vocabulary. I had pushed for opening a job on modern Chinese literature, and the Institute had hired Wolfgang Kubin. The two of us got along very well, and we decided rather quickly, by late 1978, to organize a conference on post-'49 Chinese literature. This topic had been only addressed once before, when the *China Quarterly* had organized such a conference in 1962. I had some background because I had by that time already written a long backgrounder on some post-'49 PRC novels (Ding Ling, Cao Ming, Zhou Libo and Liu Qing) for a handbook on modern literature. Our application with the German Research Foundation went through and the conference was held in September 1978 with scholars from different parts of Europe, North America, New Zealand and Japan attending. There were no participants from the Mainland or Taiwan, because there was no scholarship to speak of. We jointly published the conference volume with most of the papers, which also included my study

on the “Cog and the Scout” as the basic models for the functions of PRC literature that had been developed during the 1950s.

In a fortuitous follow-up, one of the participants, Robert Ruhlmann from Paris, then invited me to join a conference organized by a Paris foundation, which was to deal with the literature of the Yan’an period. It was the first time I encountered PRC “scholars” (in fact these were mostly literary bureaucrats), and I was not impressed. I normally knew by now beforehand what they might say on a given topic. I myself presented a study on the connection between Xiao Jun’s *Bayue de xiangcun* (*Village in August*) and Fadeev’s *The Nineteen* ([Huimie in Chinese](#)), a Soviet revolutionary novel. As I became immersed in PRC literature, it became ever clearer that a “national literature” approach failed to bring out the dense transcultural entanglement of about every piece written, and that one key element would be to acknowledge and deal with the interaction of Chinese works not just with the West, but with Soviet literary works. The studies for these two conferences convinced me that what I would now call transcultural studies was the right approach. At the time this approach was not even within sight of the beaten track, and this little piece was still innovative enough for the PRC context thirty years later that a translation Chinese translation was published there.

In the next fortuitous link, one of the participants in this Paris conference was Edward Gunn, an assistant professor in Cornell whose fine book on Chinese literature in Shanghai and Peking during the War was just coming out. He must have put in a word for me because around Christmas 1979 someone called me whose name I couldn’t understand and who had tried to reach me with a wrong number that had landed him in a Berlin bar with dubious music in the background. It turned out to be a very distinguished scholar of English literature, M. H. Adams, who kindly and surprisingly offered me to come for a year to Cornell University as a Fellow in the Society for the Humanities. That was very kind because I actually had no job. By now I had submitted my habilitation, the external reviews were very positive, the law to forestall the long march through the institutions did not apply to academic examinations, and the faculty passed my habilitation. Technically speaking, this qualified me for a professorship in Germany, but that was a very distant prospect indeed. There were no open positions at the time, and I was a candidate “with problems.”

So we moved to Cornell with the kids.

### ***[Excursion into biogas in China]***

In late 1979, I had visited China for the first time as a tourist with a group of friends. In Shanghai I had wanted to buy new literature and found a *Xinhua Shudian* bookstore. I had not paid attention to the bookstore’s subtitle, which was *jishu shudian*, technical bookstore. I went in and was confronted with a new and unexpected universe. Instead of leaving to search for a Xinhua bookstore with novels, I stayed – all these handbooks, how you make an axle for a tractor, how you build a wall, each costing five or ten cents, fascinating! I had read something about biogas in China and because this was all I knew in this domain, decided to look for handbooks about it. I bought some dozen little handbooks on biogas and related techniques at a total cost of today perhaps one Euro.

They were all from different provinces and were written for technical cadres to overcome a wide variety of doubts and apprehensions and introduce biogas use in the villages. I came back and wrote a little article on it for our journal. At a conference in Berlin I chanced to tell somebody from the GTZ (German Technical Cooperation Agency) about my biogas excursion. At the time they had a program called, *Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries* where the GTZ was to be the middleman facilitating transfer of adapted low-level technologies between developing countries. It would assess their potential through a study and then make them available through handbooks in local languages. He directly asked me to write a summary of my handbooks, which I was happy to do because he agreed to pay me some 5000 Deutsche Marks (~2500 Euro). That was not the end of it, because the GTZ decided that this was indeed what they had been looking for. They set up a trilateral Indian-Chinese-German research group to investigate the political, technical, economic and social parameters of the uses of biogas in the Chinese countryside. I was the Sinologist in there; the others were soil scientists, engineers and biologists. I thought I had some understanding of the situation in the Chinese cities because I read much of the new fiction coming out, but I had no idea about the countryside, and now I was traveling for weeks through the Chinese countryside from Sichuan to Zhejiang to Jilin with these fifteen people plus Chinese staff from the Biogas Office in the Ministry of Agriculture! This was field research, which I had never done, and it had to be largely based on interviews with speakers of local dialect, for which my Chinese even more inadequate. To prepare I developed a strategy – this might be a good strategy for anybody doing anthropological field research in China of the first time: I made a dictionary of some four hundred technical key terms related to biogas used in my handbooks, and then learned them by heart. Most of them consisted of so many characters that the tones (in which I continued to make endless mistakes) and even the dialect did not really matter as long as one controlled the context.

My strategy was very simple: if my interview partners talk freely, I will not understand a thing, my passive Chinese is too weak. So I proceeded to ask questions that could only be answered with a “yes”, a “no,” or a number. (laughs). The moment they were talking about their baby having diarrhea, I was out. This allowed me to gradually compile a record of the number, type, functionality, and sustainability of local biogas digesters that was to prove crucial for the overall assessment of the contributions of this technology. I also brought a small copying machine: the local technicians, who turned out to be very capable, had no idea what happened in the next province, they had only their local little handbook. So I invited them to my room to have a look at my collection. They were greatly interested and I made copies of the designs and technical information in which they were interested. I never asked for reciprocity, it came on its own. They shared with me local records, knowing that they would get them back next morning. So gradually, I developed a clear idea of the spread and distribution of biogas as well as the – very political - history of it. For the wet agriculture south of the Yang-tze, biogas digesters were ideal because they not only saved fuel by producing gas for stoves and lamps, the anaerobic digestion also produced a clean wet fertilizer. For the North’s dry agriculture biogas was ill-suited, people did not even know how to carry the sludge to their fields and lack callouses on their shoulders. But the decision to popularize biogas nationally

had been made by the Politburo (!) on political grounds. Two options had been discussed: the small biogas digester type developed under Zhao Ziyang in Sichuan already during the Cultural Revolution, which was linked to the individual household and strengthened it economically; and the collective compost heap of the model commune Dazhai in the north, which was sealed with mud and fermented inside. No biogas was harvested here, but the result was a dry fertilizer suited for the dry agriculture of the north. Politically speaking biogas digesters strengthened the individual household, compost heaps the collective. The peasant head of Dazhai was still in the Politburo, but after the end of the Cultural Revolution and with Deng Xiaoping's return to power the halo of the collective agriculture was gone. So the Politburo decided to go all-out for biogas digesters, which had the consequence that the north had to popularize them only to see them fall into disrepair.

Here you have a classical case why it's useful to go for the margin and not for the center: you want to know about Politburo struggles, go for something like the uses of biogas in Chinese villages and you end up exactly in the Politburo, and this with a source type that suffers little from distortion. Another insight had to do with communication in the PRC. At Zhejiang Agricultural University, someone mentioned that in Chongqing in Sichuan in the Southwest there was a *Zhongguo Nongye Jishu Zhongxin*, a Center for Agricultural Technology. I had never heard of it and said to the cadre from the Ministry' Office for Biogas Administration that I wanted to fly there next day because it would have relevant information for our project, could he please help me get a flight? I knew things were not that easy, but the lesson I got was worth it. He told me that to make this possible, he would have to contact his Biogas Office in Beijing, which would contact the Ministry of Agriculture one level higher. The Ministry would contact the Sichuan Revolutionary Committee, which in turn would contact its Science and Technology subcommittee, which then would contact the director of this center in Chongqing. After the latter had agreed, the process would go reverse. This would take about four and a half weeks, and by that time we would have left China. So from this marginal request I get a new fact based understanding that in the PRC horizontal communication is forbidden and only vertical communication is permitted. I believe that by 1980 hardly a China scholar had made this point.

Even my assumption about importance of transcultural interaction even in outlying fields was confirmed. Biogas had appeared the first time in the PRC, I found out, in 1957. Somebody from Anhui Province who studied in East Germany had seen East German state farms using semi-submerged 1500 cubic meter biogas digesters. They had a single opening on which sat a pump equipped to shred the straw that went in. These big biogas digesters were connected to diesel engines and satisfied the entire energy needs of the state farms in question. Upon his return, he applied to his People's Commune for permission to try this out. They in turn asked the Anhui provincial science committee for permission, and this decided to which give him 2,5 sqm plot of land for two months to try it out. He reduced the 1500 m<sup>3</sup> to half a cubic meter, filled it, sealed it off as good as he could, and after a few days methane gas actually came out. This is Great Leap time, and the provincial leadership picked it up as an example of the creative energy of the masses, made a small-scale model, and sent it to the *Exhibition of the Achievements of*

*Great Leap Forward* in Wuhan, where Mao Zedong sees it. He says: “*Puji!*” (Popularize!) Twenty or thirty digesters of some 300m<sup>3</sup> are built and filled with agricultural waste and excrements to run diesel engines with it. The diesel engine started, ran for a few minutes and then stalled, because they did not know that a small amount of diesel oil was still needed. That was the end of it. As they did not have those pumps, there was no way to get the stuff out again, and I actually saw one of these industrial ruins filled with 20 year old inaccessible unspeakables. The problem of the fuel shortage persisted; however, there was a continuous lack of fuel for cooking, light or loudspeakers. During the Cultural Revolution they restarted in Mianyang in Sichuan province on the individual household level with small 5 or 6 cubic meter digesters with Zhao Ziyang as the province’s boss providing political cover. This gave a new lease of life to biogas use in China. As fascinated as I was in unearthing the GDR entanglements of this history, as stunned I was two years when I learned about the degree of my blindness. We had spent several weeks in Mianyang, which we knew as the “world capital” of biogas. I had wondered at the time about the well-stocked bookstore in such a backward place, but what I learned only later was that our “world capital of biogas” was also main site of nuclear research in China.

I learned to greatly respect these village technicians. They presented their work completely unfazed to two dozen foreigners including the father of Indian biogas use with his white *mundu* and long beard. One saw the importance of individual leadership in these villages. Here, every house has a biogas digester, they’re functioning, and they’ve not collapsed. You cross a brook one hundred meters away and you’re one hundred years back. When eventually we presented the results about the north/south divide and our assessment that survival rates in the north were low and in the south acceptable, the Minister of Agriculture who was present confirmed this cheerfully and mentioned that they had done their own investigation half a year before. No one had ever mentioned this to us. I eventually wrote an article in the *Tropical Agriculturist*, *Tropenlandwirt* summarizing the results, probably the only time that a Sinologist published an article there. Sadly I never had the time to publish the full report I wrote for the GTZ.

### **[Cornell]**

The fellows of the Society of the Humanities at Cornell have their offices in the house of A. D. White, the big 19<sup>th</sup> century atheist who was the first president of Cornell University. Cornell was radically secular at a time when most US universities still had strong religious affiliations. It is a combination of a state agricultural school set up to train upstate New York farmers and a private university with the humanities, social sciences, sciences and medicine. I mention the Agricultural School because of its fantastic collection of a million or so insect specimens which was to play a role for me.

I had come to Cornell with the plan to write a book about the new PRC literature appearing after 1978. The Wason Collection, the East Asian Library, was a wonderful library but they hadn’t been quick enough to realize that a flood of new literary journals had started coming out in the PRC and they hadn’t subscribed to them. That was the

quick end of my plan. I had, however, earlier agreed to write a college handbook type entry, on the *Tai ping Tianguo* [Taiping Heavenly Kingdom], and in my frustration I started working on this. Mr. Wason, who had started the East Asian library at Cornell that is named after him, didn't know Chinese, but he collected every shred printed in Western languages on China during the 19th century. When I discovered Wason's collection bound in some one hundred and fifty volumes, as well as the Chinese-language sources and modern scholarship the library had bought later, I knew that conditions for this work were optimal. But like *Laozi* studies, Taiping historiography is an industry, and the PRC had developed a thick and unified master narrative for this "revolution" that had left a deep imprint in Western scholarship. It made these Taiping into a peasant revolt against the landlords and imperialism, and against the Manchu as representing the first, and colluding with the second. But while they were anti-Manchu, nothing in the record indicated that they were anti-landlord, and they always referred to the foreigners as their (Christian) "overseas brothers." Something was amiss here, and to summarize this unified nonsense for an article would waste a precious part of my youth. In a good hermeneutic manner, I tried to figure out what the Taipings themselves thought they were doing. This was easy: at the heart of their enterprise was the vision of Hong Xiuquan. This vision, however, had been completely discarded as either the raging of a madman or the disguise of a revolutionary to get followers. The neglect of the role that this vision played in guiding the Taipings looked like the shared flaw in the available scholarship, the margin right in the center. And that led to my next moment of dancing in the middle of the night: I saw in the report about the Taipings from a defector to the government the drawing of the strange headgear of Taiping kings. It was inserted to help government troops to identify them if they caught one. It was four in the morning, I had gone to the office because I had been brooding about this vision and could not sleep, but seeing this drawing I remembered that it exactly fitted the description of the headgear of the old man with the big belly and the long blond beard – god – whom Hong had described in the protocol of his vision. Were they translating the symbolic fixtures and actions in the vision into the real thing on earth? Once that hypothesis formed, I was flooded with evidence from the most unexpected corners supporting it, and this is what got me dancing in my office at four in the morning, because this is a process that in the humanities counts as proof of plausibility. I wrote an entire book on the role of religion in the Taiping rebellion in, I think, 4 months! What happened then was one of the great experiences in my life. I had not written a thing about the Taiping, I was a total nobody in this field, and now I challenged widely shared assumptions and proposed a radically new reading of the Taiping War. Perhaps there were sources I had not read or arguments I had not seen that would disprove me? So I sent the manuscript to Frederick Wakeman in Berkeley, whom I had shortly met but who certainly did not remember me, and brought it to Paul Cohen in Harvard, whom I had never met. Instead of dismissing my argument as that of an unwelcome intruder, both reacted with great generosity. Within two weeks I had a long letter from Prof. Wakeman that started off with words of praise I don't dare to repeat, followed by many pages of detailed comments on things that needed fixing, and an offer in the end to see to the publication of my manuscript in a Berkeley series. Meanwhile I had been invited to Harvard for a talk and went to Paul

Cohen's office in the Fairbank Center, introduced myself, bombed the manuscript on his table and said, according to his recollection, "I'm here till tomorrow evening, it would be nice if you found time to read it." The next day he had indeed read through the manuscript and told me he thought the evidence was convincing. I had heard much about the pettiness with which scholars guard their territory, but my experience with these two scholars, who became good friends later, showed me the best side of our trade. The Taiping book indeed came out in Berkeley; it is in open access now, [http://www.leibniz-publik.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb00054805\\_00001.html](http://www.leibniz-publik.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb00054805_00001.html). The fellowship stipend from Cornell was enough to support a single post-doc, but I came with a wife and two children and needed some supplementary income. On my biogas tour in China I had also bought the handbooks on integrated pest management in China, which had gained much attention internationally, and the GTZ had signaled that it was willing to spend money on a summary. My problem was that the insect pests in there were mostly mentioned with their common and not their Latin names, but there only was an English-Chinese etymologic dictionary but none the other way around. This is where the entomological collection came in. I would go to the very kind curator and would describe the life-cycle of the insect, the plants it fed on, and the chemicals or bacteria used to control it, and she would suggest one or two candidates. I would then check in my reverse dictionary whether this got me to the Chinese name I had read. A story then reached the Chairman of the Entomology Department that there was a strange German in the Society of the Humanities who was supposed to write a book on post-Mao Chinese literature but was always hanging around in the etymology collection. After carefully checking during three joint lunches whether I knew what I was talking about, he actually invited me to give a lecture. In 1974 scholars from this department had gone to China and had written a very naive and enthusiastic report about integrated pest management in China. They had not looked at any Chinese language such as the *Kunchong Xuebao*, the Etymological Journal, or the early handbooks. I was rather blunt in my comments about their report in my talk, but they took it in stride and we had a friendly and lively discussion. So much for my excursions into field research, history of techniques, and science. I think it's important not to stop when your sources lead you to an area where you know nothing. One normally can work one's way in if that is necessary. In fact, this is what I'm doing here now at the Cluster all the time. I'm suddenly confronted with a text written during the Delhi Sultanate, about which I might never have heard, but about which I have to know enough to anchor an argument. So I just read anything which is around, and ask a specialist where I get stuck. That includes technical and science things. As a matter of fact, I think it would be really useful and good if this type of history of techniques would attract more scholarly and especially sinological interest. There is now fantastic collection of Chinese handbooks on agricultural technology at Erlangen University. I just sent them my biogas materials because that is where people are likely to look for them.

***[Harvard, Berkley and back to Germany]***

I had no idea what I would do after the year in Cornell, but again a conference provided a fortuitous link. Jeff Kinkley from St. John's in New York had invited me to a conference on Modern Chinese literature. I presented a study on Liu Binyan's stories written during the Hundred Flowers period and after his recent rehabilitation. Merle Goldman, who had written on Chinese intellectuals and the Party as well as edited a book on May Fourth literature was among the participants. When I was in Harvard in 1969-70, we had not met because I had worked in the Harvard Yenching library and still has little interest in 20<sup>th</sup> century research. But she must have liked my paper, because shortly after my return to Germany Harvard invited me to come as a research associate. Basic financial support, no teaching, no administration, too good to be true, so back I went and worked on *Inside a Service Trade*, the book on the Hundred Flowers and post-Cultural Revolution literature that was eventually published by Harvard. Later I got into close contact with two of the writers whose work I had analyzed, Wang Meng and Liu Binyan. I had recurring discussions with Wang Mang about my reading of his story "The Loyal Heart" (Youyou cuncao xin). In the beginning he was adamant that my interpretation was unfounded. It is a story told by a barber working in a provincial government office. It deals with the political background of the demonstration in April 1976 after Zhou Enlai's death. I had argued that "barber" was a metaphor and had shown that it was frequently used PRC cartoons since the 1950s. The barber there did both, embellishing his – always male – customer and cutting down the outgrowth on his head. That, I argued, is basically what PRC literature was supposed to do, embellish the appearance of the leadership and do some mild criticism. The title of my book *Inside a Service Trade* was referring to this story, because the barber, who himself has no power, serves the men in the leadership who have. Many years later, I met Wang Meng again when he gave a talk at Harvard. He came there not as a Minister anymore, but as a self-proclaimed steadfast old communist. Afterwards at dinner he suddenly said – he obviously finally had read my article or a translation of it – that my analysis this barber metaphor was well-researched. My own interest in such works, by the way, does not hinge on an appreciation of their literary quality, but on the impact they had in China. There is a division of labor here, and an author definitely is not in control of the reading of his or her story, and this even more so in the tight political environment of the PRC.

While in Harvard, I one day got a call from Berkeley inviting me to come for three weeks and do whatever I want. It had no idea what this was about, but I agreed. Five days before I went they wrote to me saying that there would be a regional meeting of the Association of Asian Studies where Fred Wakeman was to give a talk on the Mao Zedong memorial hall. Would I be the commentator? I did not know much about it, but had heard a talk by Lothar Ledderose about this hall in Germany and had a foggy memory of having seen in Cornell in the *Architectural Journal* (Jianzhu xuebao) a detailed article on the symbolism of that building. Prof. Wakeman's paper was well argued and based on a huge harvest of Chinese press reports, but it had one lacuna – the political symbolism going into the building wasn't there. Harvard did not have the issue of this journal, so I rented a car, drove to Cornell, copied that article, and read it in the plane to San Francisco. We were two discussants, each had fifteen minutes, after the proper praise for the painstaking work that had gone into the paper, I offered as a small supplement a



guided tour through the symbolism of that building. I saw Fred Wakeman, who after all was one of the top modern China historians at the time, getting distinctly uneasy. To make things worse, the second discussant got up and said he would forfeit his time as discussant so that I could continue. So here I was, talking for half an hour about the lacuna in a paper by a leading scholar who had gone out of his way to improve and publish my Taiping book, and this in front of his colleagues and students! To top it all, I gave him after my talk my copy of this article in the *Architectural Journal* so he could use it for the publication version of his article. As a matter of fact, I had no intention whatsoever to be provocative, but I had found this decoding of the symbolism of a building a fascinating exercise and went for it with gusto, oblivious of the possible human cost – including that to myself. After I got back to Harvard it turned out that Berkeley had invited me to look me over – without telling me – for the position of a “Research Linguist” at the China Center, another paradise position where you do your research, sometimes give a talk, but don’t teach, don’t administer, and get paid. Without Fred Wakeman’s agreement, they would never have offered it to me, but offer they did, and that has remained for me a constant model for disregarding personal feelings when it comes to evaluating scholarship. Many years later as I was pushing Fred Wakeman’s wheelchair at night through a courtyard of a San Diego hotel where an AAS meeting was taking place we talked about my discussant’s speech, which he remembered all too well. “You should have warned me” said he, laughing, and we went to the bar to have a glass. After a series of recurrent crises, my marriage had crossed the breaking point. I missed my daughters but as their mother wanted them both with her, I stayed on in the US and saw them only on visits. A chance of a professorship in Hamburg did not materialize and I went as a research linguist to Berkeley in 1984. Again there was a stimulating research environment with a great library and innovative scholarship. I started getting apprehensive that in Germany young scholars did not have comparable library resources. It was a joyful time also for another reason. After my marriage’s collapse, I had met a wonderful young lady in Cambridge who later became and still is my wife, Cathy Yeh. She was writing her PhD in Chinese literature at Harvard – happily enough I did not teach there so she never took a course with me, which would have been the end of any romance. In Berkeley, I finished my *Inside a Service Trade* and worked on a study of the “new historical drama” of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which eventually became the book with the amazingly boring title *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, a title I had chosen because I thought the content was interesting enough. I also spent much time in preparing an English language version of my Wang Bi book. This was not simply a translation. I had noticed that the “Wang Bi” text of the *Laozi* was not the text Wang Bi had used, and that early quotations from his commentary also differed from the received version. I therefore set out to fulfill a youthful dream of mine, to cover the whole ground from a critical edition through a translation to an analysis. As my Taiping book came out in 1984, I ended up on the top of the list for a professorship in Zurich, but then I never heard from them again. When I asked the chairman of the committee what had happened, he told me that an article had appeared in the leading Swiss newspaper *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* about the University’s shocking plan to hire a “German Maoist” (name followed) as full professor. The Swiss higher authorities got the

hint, and selected the third person on this list. I learned later that a Swiss China scholar claimed to have alerted the newspaper of this impending disaster, and, strange as this might sound, I have built a little altar for him in my soul. Had I gone to Zurich, I would not have met my lovely wife! So these things take their strange turns. I later had very friendly exchanges with this scholar without this ever being mentioned. As a matter of fact one might make a case for the Zurich decision. The outgoing professor had been from the Netherlands, and perhaps it was time to appoint a Swiss scholar, which is what happened.

As I was happily working in Berkeley and was publishing a lot on modern literature and politics as well as late nineteenth century intellectual history – our Journal had quietly died; things were moving behind my back of which I was totally ignorant and which have to do with the Sputnik. The Russian Sputnik launch in late 1957 had set off a general panic in the United States and elsewhere that behind the Iron Curtain things were happening the West had no idea of. So suddenly, like mushrooms, China research institutes and Russia centers were sprouting all over the place in universities and think tanks in the US, but also in Germany, England or Australia – together of course with richly endowed programs in science and engineering that eventually landed an American on the moon. But now, in about 1986, the people appointed then were retiring. In the meantime, however, funding cuts for universities had made academic careers unattainable and unattractive. As a consequence there was worldwide drought of people for senior positions. So out of the blue, in 1986, I was offered, within a few weeks, chair positions by the Australian National University in Canberra, the University of Sydney and Heidelberg University as well as an associate professorship at the University of Chicago. As I was travelling around thinking I was negotiating, the decision had already been made. My daughters put their foot down that I should come back to Germany, and Cathy would not even go with me to Australia to have a look.

### ***Starting in Heidelberg and development of the Chinese Studies Institute***

In Heidelberg I told the chancellor Mr. Kraft straight away that we did not have to negotiate whether I come or not, because I would definitely come. The question was, however, what the University had in mind. I had spent three days checking every corner of the little institute there and now asked him in a phrase, which became notorious that they could of course continue to have a sinological “Würstchenbude” (sausage stand). In this case I would fly back to the US during the semester breaks for research and to prepare teaching material. That would be fine with me, but they also could opt for having a professional Chinese Studies institute. The chancellor was not a fast speaker, but had a strategic and very fast mind. “And-what-would-that-mean?” he asked slowly. I must have then talked for an hour or two to map the necessary steps, chipping in numbers here and there. This was my first offer in Germany and although I had other offers, the German retirement benefits were pretty good so they could feel on the safe side with a modest offer. I thought I might get as much as 80.000 Deutsche Mark, which would have already been more than anybody I had heard of in the humanities getting on a first offer here. Then Chancellor Kraft, who had taken detailed notes while I rattled on,

and who had already agreed to a second full professorship and various other additional positions, said that if he understood me correctly, I needed something like 450.000 Deutsche Mark. I said "Yes" very quickly.

The University was willing to invest in Chinese Studies and trusted that I could manage this. That cannot have been an easy conclusion. I had heard in the meantime rumors that because of my past political involvement making the offer to me had been very controversial already in the faculty. It seems that eventually the Committee members read my Taiping book and agreed to push for my appointment. A lot of letters of protest, signed as well as anonymous, had been sent to the Ministry, which was part of a Christian Democratic state government, but, well, the offer had come from there. The official who received me in the Ministry for negotiations knew me because he had been a law student in Munich in 1969. He came in with a fat folder saying that these were the letters they had received protesting against my appointment. Then he added a phrase that stuck with me because in my political horizon I had not expected someone in a conservative Ministry to say such a thing, although that they offered me the job was clear sign that this is indeed what they thought. "You know, we here in Baden-Wuerttemberg are liberal," he said, "we are not interested in this kind of stuff." Then the telephone rang and he said he had forgotten another appointment and would be back in ten minutes. He left the folder on the table. I sat there, looked at that folder and asked myself whether I wanted to know who had written these letters. And I directly decided: No, I am not interested. These people probably think they are doing the right thing, let them swallow their own spittle. When he came back, I thought he had at quick look at the position of the folder on the table, but I don't know whether he had left it there by accident, intentionally, or to test me. I had hoped to convince the Ministry to match the funds given by the University, but this was a bit over the top. The University, however, went along during the next years, approving even very sizeable sums. We came to Heidelberg in 1987, and I started to revamp the curriculum to strengthen both the classical and modern fields, and develop the basics of a professional Chinese Studies library as I had used and enjoyed it in the US.

As the Cold War came to an end in '89, the thought occurred to me that my generation had, as bizarre as this might sound, enjoyed the benefits from it. Looking at the generation of my father, I know he would have envied me. War, inflation, economic crisis, fascism, war, cancer, death, that was his life, while I grew up in a peace that might have consisted of a stalemate, but it was that stalemate held and allowed me to live out my interests to the fullest, which included agitating against the two powers as they tried to end the stalemate with a victory that would have devastated my world.

In 1991, I did something of which I still don't know what to think about. Two colleagues in our faculty had been recipients of the highest German academic honor, Leibniz Award. Both worked in fields with many scholars. Compared to their fields, Chinese Studies was minute; I was still the only Sinologist professor in Heidelberg. No matter whether I might have deserved it or not, there was nobody in the faculty who knew my work and the field enough to even consider proposing me, and the Chinese Institute could use a big input of money. I went to our dean, explained this to him and said that I thought I should be proposed for this Award. He was a bit taken aback, one does not do that, but in

the end and without my being aware of this, the faculty proposed me. Fred Wakeman and Rod MacFarquhar (Harvard) later told me that they had been asked for evaluations by the national selection committee for this award, and it seems that both came out strongly in favor. Several colleagues told me that Eberhard Laemmert, the former President of the Free University, who was in the selection committee, had called them to get an idea what the German sinologists thought about my work, and he too must have decided to support me although I had several times challenged him in interviews for the radio on controversial issues and he had only been saved from throwing me out by the impending end of my contract. In short, whatever grievance these scholars might have had with me, they all rigorously put it aside and tried to give an unbiased judgment on the scholarly merits. A year later, I was in Berlin at that moment, a newspaper called my mother to find out where I was. I called them back but when they told me I had won the Leibniz Award, I thought it was an error because there are so many people called Wagner. Luckily, they were right.

The idea of the 1.5 million Deutsche Marks coming with this Award is to allow the recipient to focus on his or her own research for five years and hire someone else to take over teaching and administrative duties for that time. But I had set my mind that what was needed in the German environment was an institute which could sustain advanced research in Chinese studies. That meant putting the money into the institute and that's what I did, every single penny. But to compete with the Harvards or Princetons with their continuously high budgets and many professional librarians, we had to be cunning. They bought in the PRC for export prices, shipped by air, and had high cataloguing costs. I replaced their librarians by going there every year and selecting the books myself, buying for inland prices, shipping the books as bulk in containers, and having them catalogued with a green dot at the entry in the Harvard printed catalogue. The first three steps were a success, we ended up having the books on the shelf for not even ten percent of what Harvard was paying, but the last was a disaster, because many of the new books were not in that old printed catalogue. So we soon switched to develop one of the first on-line catalogues with Chinese characters with the prospect of eventually being able to download entries made elsewhere, because we used the Library of Congress Dewey system. Indeed this last option has now become a reality. The second element to increase the visibility of the Institute was developing special collections, and the Institute became soon known as the place with one of the richest collections of microfilms and reprints of newspapers and periodicals published in China, and with a unique collection of Chinese films and music recordings, and a few more such collections coming later. The third element was going for digitization, which at the time was just in the beginning, especially for Chinese materials. As young researchers were starting to write on these sources, the Institute also became known internationally as a scholarly hotspot for certain fields of research.

The University had not anticipated all aspects of this development, but when the library burst out of seams and we had new staff to accommodate, it went into crisis mode and made a bold move to buy half a street length of houses for us to move there. Then the Leibniz money came to an end. I had a fateful encounter with then woman chancellor of the university, Countess Hagen, at a fish monger's in town. At that time, the Ministry was

sharply cutting budgets. When I asked whether she could fund the further rapid development of the Chinese Studies library, she stiffly reminded me that they had bought half a street with four buildings for us at a cost of fifteen million, had put new furniture in there including moving shelves for 150.000 Deutsche Marks, but that now they had to cut their budget every year by five to fifteen per cent. There was nothing she could do. Walking from the fish monger to the Institute I felt we could not stop here and decided to look for outside funds. It occurred to me that I had heard that Mr. Beitz, the former manager of Krupp and now head of the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Foundation, had been instrumental in opening up China for German industry and had a strong China interest. So I wrote to him, saying that I did not need money for a research project for which it was easy to get funding, I needed 1.5 million to develop a digital environment for Chinese Studies that would be of use far beyond Heidelberg. Six weeks later I got a positive answer. That was quite wonderful.

In a way, you see there is a lot of coincidence and luck involved. That's why I'm telling you all these anecdotes. This is not some kind of a grand super-strategy of a powerful giant; this is just a helpless little professor who is broke and says, "Where can I get funding?" and has a bold idea, why don't I write to Krupp and say, "I don't want research money, I want institutional funding which I'd get from nobody else. The DFG is not even allowed to give me that." You can say that keeping the big goal in mind while playing it by the ear as we went on is what let this Institute grow. When I came there, there were some 15.000 books, one professor, two assistants and two language teachers; and if you look at the place now, we are crossing 200,000 books plus vast amounts of digital resources, five professors, one junior professor, four assistant professors, two librarians, two IT specialists and several dozen research associates and a huge computer lab - that's quite a little development! And all of this is set to move together with the South Asia Institute into an entirely new Center for Asian and Transcultural Studies. That of course is not simply my merit or that of my successors, who continued in these tracks, it evidently has a lot to do with the attention China has been getting.

All this also comes with a price. I had spent much of the 1990s to get this institute going, and you see it in my publication record. Just twenty-two articles and no book between 1990 and 2000, but then finally my three Wang Bi volumes and other works came out. Also our development provoked quite some unfriendly comments from other institutes in Germany. We somehow managed to get all this money, and my comments about sausage stands did not go down well either because people actually had made their own honest efforts. If you look at the resources of the institute, it is clear that they are not focused on anybody's particular research interests, least of all mine, but on an attempt to spot future fields of research and prepare the resources for research on them. Happily enough other researchers have helped to enrich the library with special collections, Prof. Barbara Mittler built this music library; Prof. Mueller-Saini developed vast holdings of Chinese schoolbooks - so we have several collections nobody else has. The idea was to provide a research environment for people to come and make use. People do come, but the way from Toronto still seems to be shorter than that from Cologne or Trier. For many resources such as the Digital Archive of Chinese Studies, the Chinese Scholarly terminology database or the Heidenc database of late Qing and Republican period

encyclopaedic works of new knowledge we have online access; and we have very actively supported the development of CrossAsia databases at the Berlin State Library. The Heidelberg institute, which was not even, mentioned in a survey of European sinological institutes in the early 1980s now this is a major European center with good international visibility and a sizeable research presence in different fields. Altogether one has to say that without everybody – teachers, student helpers, administrative staff, the university leadership and administration – chipping in, nothing of that would have been possible and I think collectively there is some cause for pride.

***Could you talk a little about your students, the research areas of your students and the influence you had on your students and through your students on the development of Sinology as a field?***

When I came to Heidelberg, this was a very small institute with very few teachers and the focus was on classical Chinese. The problem was that I was not satisfied with the precision level of much work in Classical Chinese studies – not just in Heidelberg but all over the place. Still to this day I'm not very satisfied. Of course that's also a kind of a Sinological disease: Sinologists always doubt others people's translations. I've spend much time and energy trying to help students to reach a level of precision in their understanding that makes their translation into something they can base an analysis on. One of the rather brutal claims I made to provoke students was that their underlying problem was "racism," namely an assumption that precise thinking is not the strength of the Chinese. So, if these texts are muddy, fuzzy and diffuse, it's not the problem of the translator, it's the problem of the original. Actually, translations even in very prestigious books by famous people often read as if the text came straight out of a madhouse without the translator seemingly having a problem with that. I always liked that argument, but I can understand that it was never popular with the students (laughs). One of the techniques I used to alert students to the problem was to give them a piece of a published translation without the Chinese text and ask them to mark the mistakes. I do this myself as a form of training. In the beginning they most probably thought I had gone mad, but gradually some picked it up, learned to also spot the places in their own translations that must be wrong, and then went back to the text to see how they could do better. The main thing was to shift the underlying assumption and proceed from the understanding that Chinese authors actually made great and generally successful efforts at developing a cohesive argument. But this is not everybody's pair of shoes. I remember that my teacher, when I suggested that he had failed to identify the meaning of an important legal term in an autobiography which he had quoted in a talk he gave in Heidelberg, simply remarked "tigers don't hunt mice," sinologists go for the big picture, not the petty trivia. In contrast I tend to go for the bigger picture by exploring all the mice I can catch.

But, altogether, with the energy of people who had been there and who came new into the institute, the institute very quickly developed a very lively spirit, which in turn attracted bright people and high-quality students, who developed their own good projects. In the beginning I was teaching practically alone, so I taught across the board

from classical Chinese to issues in modern society. Then Susanne Weigelin came so that we had a second professor with a modern specialty who also had an assistant so we could divide up teaching a little especially as she pushed for the “Propaedeutikum,” an intensive course in modern Chinese at the beginning, and managed it.

My greatest joy was the formation and work during the 1990s of two research groups, one dealing with Chinese commentaries, the other with newspaper history. From my Wang Bi studies I had a long-term interest in Chinese commentaries and that had something to do with the precision of translation. A classical text is not just a text, which has its own identity; it has a reading history and was read even grammatically different in different periods and traditions by different commentators. Since the first or second century AD all readers read Chinese classical texts with and through a commentary, but as already said, there is little Chinese research on the Chinese commentarial tradition. One of the things I set out to do was restore the credibility and legitimacy of the commentary as an integral part of reading classical texts, and to explore the individual achievement of the commentary in constructing a unified meaning for a text. I taught quite a few courses on different Chinese commentaries. This is all part of my basic hermeneutics: to restore historical readings. After a while people started writing their MAs and PhDs in that field. That became such a mess with my seeing them individually every week or so to talk about the particular commentary they were working on. So at one moment we decided that we should meet together – because the problems we had of reading a text through a commentary were very similar. It’s very hard. The commentators normally don’t translate the text, they just gloss words and comment phrases and you have to extrapolate from these indications how they must have understood the text. You have to reinvent the text through the commentary. That’s a very complicated process because you have to go through a double self-denial. The first is to take the commentary seriously, the second that your spontaneous reading of the main text is largely irrelevant, you have to become the running dog of that commentary, articulate for him how he actually would have translated that text. The commentary research group, which grew to twelve or thirteen people, had neither external funding nor an institutional existence, but we certainly had a very intense open-end meetings going on over a long time. We met every two weeks, one prepared a text which was sent around, and then we would sit together sometimes until midnight, sometimes until ten, and were going through that prepared text line by line guided by the student, junior scholar, or myself, whoever had been in charge of selecting and preparing it. That person normally was working on this commentary for an article, their MA, PhD or habilitation, so he – I think this group consisted only of men – normally knew more about that particular commentator than anybody else in the room. However, nobody walked out of that room with the same translation in hand with which he had walked in. This was a very creative and also a very demanding process. It’s pretty hard on the ego because at some level it also involved competition: you have worked a long while on that commentary, you present your translation and then it gets torn apart and you walk out with a text barely recognizable compared to what you had originally suggested; that was true for pretty much everybody. But it was also a fantastic school because everybody learned at least the basics of extrapolative reading. Happily enough, we were able to

invite some very fine PRC scholars to come for a semester to do research and co-teach courses with me, such as Wang Baoxuan 王葆琰 from the philosophy institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or Peng Hao 彭浩, the director of the Jingzhou Museum near Wuhan, who had edited the *Laozi* bamboo texts from Guodian. Out of that came several dissertations that put people onto their careers in scholarship or elsewhere, such as Joachim Gentz who is now teaching in Edinburgh, Michael Schimmelpfennig at Australian National University, Michael Plempe who is now a Buddhist monk in a monastery in the Black Forest, Johannes Kurtz at the University of Bahrain, Herrmann-Josef Röllicke who went on to work at the Japan culture institute in Dusseldorf, or Alexander Meier in Urbana-Champaign. They wrote studies on the Confucian tradition (Gentz), poetry (Schimmelpfennig), on classical as well as Zen Buddhist commentaries (Meier, Plempe), and historiography (Kurtz). While these studies also put Heidelberg on the map as a place specializing in this area, they might have been too much linked to a very German hermeneutic approach quite apart from being written in German to generate a shift in classical Chinese studies internationally. That was only a little different for my Wang Bi study, because that came out in English and it was quite widely read and used even for new *Laozi* translations. Eventually even a Chinese translation was published. This translation, done by Yang Lihua, a philosophy professor from Peking University ended up being a very demanding enterprise. It is a work written by a German in English, and dealing with the way in which a young man in the early third century C.E. read the *Laozi*. Then this entire package, my reconstruction of Wang Bi's *Laozi* text, my translation of the commentary together with the way in which the commentary constructed the main text, and the historical and philosophical analysis, was translated into the modern Chinese vernacular. Professor Yang and me spent months together every morning for hours when I was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin working on this translation line by line and I am very happy with the outcome. On a self-critical note I have to say, however, that I have been singularly unsuccessful in getting the people in this group to publish their work quickly. Practically everybody rewrote their Ph.D. or habilitation from scratch for publication although these were all pretty good and I had suggested to publish quickly with minimal changes. But off they went, spending years on end to rewrite, and sometimes translate into English with some never coming out in print. Maybe my personality didn't really do them any good, I don't know. So much for the Text and Commentary Group.

The second group grew out of an interest I had developed in late Qing newspaper and journal publishing. Originally I had taught courses on this material to help students start into classical Chinese with easily readable classical texts in late Qing narrative and documentary style, not the often elusive language of *Lunyu*, *Mengzi* or *Zhuangzi*. Among the courses I offered were some on the *Dianshizhai Huabao*, the Illustrated Paper published by the *Shenbao* Company since 1884. I taught two courses on that. Students were interested in this format which combined illustrative image and a short text. We read these unpunctuated texts together, they were not a very easy to read, but that was obviously popular reading during the late Qing. Students started writing MAs on aspects of this paper. I also started research the early *Shenbao* newspaper and taught a few courses on it. The effect was that a second informal and unfunded group with some



seven, eight, or nine students and scholars started to coagulate, all working on the late Qing press. As we also had biweekly meetings, I spent a full day every week to prepare and attend one of these sessions. I tried to do my preparation as well as I could but because the others did just that and came in there prepared to their teeth while I was doing all sorts of other things such as developing the library, getting funding, teaching – so my state of preparation was often miserable. Sometimes I was presenting and because I didn't have enough time to carefully prepare, they tore me to pieces with gusto. It was a good experience for them to see me suddenly losing my footing. This group, most of the members were women, was more successful than the other group. One reason was that many classicists had a hard time establishing context. But the pre-nineteen hundred Chinese press, which was then basically a foreign-managed press – like the *Shenbaoguan* that was run by an Englishman – tied in with the strong focus on late Qing developed by John K. Fairbank and his students who had dealt with late Qing politics and society in a number of very fine publications although nobody dealt with newspapers. The Chinese master narrative of Chinese newspaper history started with Liang Qichao because they considered everything before 1900 just cultural imperialism that did not deserve any study. On that side, we had little competition, but we had a different kind of problem: quantity. If you want to make some broader point about a newspaper, you have to decide how to anchor it. Most newspaper histories in the West and in China are written by insiders, “50 years of our newspaper ...” and the like, and they generally rely on secondary information about ownership, influence, politics and agenda with the actual news and editorial articles playing a marginal role. The standard simplistic argument is that once you know the owner you know the interests the paper serves. Once you go for the actual news and editorials this story rarely holds, and if you research the individual background of journalists documentation is often hard to come by. The *Shenbao* is written in unpunctuated late Qing documentary style. After a while you read faster and faster but it takes you a year until you get a basic routine even to punctuate! And if you have a plan to read five or ten years worth of this paper you might as well check into the madhouse. The available studies, however, would just quote a few anecdotal lines and then conclude from the foreign ownership and an occasional editorial against someone recognized in the PRC as “progressive”, and no further discussion was needed to prove its reactionary nature. We wanted to find different ways to deal with it, but we hadn't much experience. There was Anderson's *Imagined Communities* with its claim that such an “imagined community” was formed by everybody reading the same paper for breakfast – which is neither true nor makes sense. Many years ago, around 1963, when I read Habermas' *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, Structural Change of the Public Sphere*, I thought this is a kind of book I am going to write on China. I have yet to write it, but I edited a little volume moving in that direction – *Joining the Global Imaginaire* –, and am reminded every couple of days by my wife to please sit down and be done with it. I must have written some 1500 pages of detailed studies, some of which I published, but I still don't know how to go about this book without ending up with a multi-volume encyclopaedia on an unknown fellow called Ernest Major.

The members of this made impressive careers. Andrea Janku who did a very fine study on the relationship between the rhetoric of the *Shenbao* editorials and the late Qing examination essays is now a senior lecturer at SOAS in London; Natascha Vittinghoff (Gentz) who wrote a very fine sociological study on the first generation of Chinese journalists, is now a professor in Edinburgh. Journalism was not an established profession yet, but rather a new career into which some literati were moving. She substantiated a very convincing argument that the social networks of these journalists moved from the traditional local connections to national professional connections; Barbara Mittler, who is not a professor here in Heidelberg and a Director of the Cluster Asia and Europe, wrote her *Shenbao* book on the tension between a Western medium and the Chinese environment and the strategies developed to make the two compatible. Nany Kim wrote a very fine study on the depiction of odd, bizarre, mysterious, spooky events in the *Dianshizhai Huabao*. This illustrated paper had always been used as a source for the social history of late Qing. All the other stuff, such as the miracle stories, which make up a big part of that journal, were simply disregarded because they did not fit that focus. She did exactly the opposite and focused on these discarded stories. Julia Henningsmeyer - she is the exception because she didn't go into scholarship - wrote a very fine study on the use of foreign iconographic elements in the illustrations of the *Dianshizhai Huabao*, doing a wonderful job locating these foreign sources down to individual clothing styles of men in Western advertisements. Cathy Yeh, who already had her PhD from Harvard and is now a professor at Boston University, contributed a very fine study on entertainment papers. Most have continued working and publishing in this and related fields. They benefitted from the development strategy of our library, which built up good microfilm holdings of newspapers which few other libraries at the time had. The effect was also that people came from all over the world to Heidelberg to use that collection, which led to many forms of cooperation with the Heidelberg graduates. People in modern Chinese studies today associate Heidelberg very much with this research focus. That was certainly crucial to put Heidelberg on the modern studies map. We established contacts with the Institute of Modern History at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and I remember being very proud as these brilliant young women with their fluent spoken Chinese were presenting their research on a field the Shanghai scholars had never touched. They were quite impressed. Xiong Yuezhi, the director of that institute, came to Heidelberg and we taught a course together (in Chinese). Later Wang Hui and Liu Dong from Beijing and Zhu Weizheng from Shanghai also came to work here and co-teach courses with me on late Qing and modern China. This gave students a first-hand experience of some of the most interesting developments in PRC scholarship. Later, a similar research group formed after I had taught a course on Chinese propaganda. A number of fine studies came out of this such as Nico Volland's work on propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, Mareike Ohlberg's on PRC overseas propaganda and Wei Shuge's study on the KMT overseas propaganda in the context of the Sino-Japanese conflict, which she finished at Australian National University. To none of the students in these two groups I had ever suggested a topic for their thesis. I always thought having the ability and level of knowledge to come up with a problem to be handled in a thesis is the key marker whether someone has reached the stage to write

such a thing – and it makes sure that writing it is not an alienated exercise in doing your advisor’s bidding. I also have often accepted students who wanted to write on topics for which I had no specialist knowledge because I thought the topic was good and relevant, there was no real specialist in sight, and they were promising students. I tried to overcome my own inadequacy by starting to read a lot on their topic so as to be at least an acceptable sparring partner, and by getting a second reader from somewhere in the world who was a specialist in the given field. An example is Barbara Mittler. She wanted to do a Ph.D. on contemporary Chinese music and politics in Oxford where she had received her Master’s degree, but they turned the topic down because they did not have a specialist. While my knowledge of the history of twentieth century Chinese music certainly was negligible, I had worked a lot on the links between twentieth century Chinese politics and other arts such as drama and fiction. So I accepted her, but there was a hitch. The libraries in the music institutes in Heidelberg and elsewhere had nothing beyond the Bosphorus, in short we had nothing for her to work on. But she knew that there was Mr. C. C. Liu in Hong Kong, who had for the last thirty years collected in his apartment every score, record, program sheet or review he could get on contemporary compositions by “Chinese” wherever they lived. She went to Hong Kong and helped him to organize what must have been quite a mess, and in exchange was allowed to copy all of it for the Institute. With these sources in hand, she wrote a great Ph.D. and the institute ended up being one of the two places in the world where you can do this kind of study. As she is now a professor here, she has made sure to keep the collection up to date and to greatly expand it by also including what you might call vernacular music. There were quite a few similar cases of transfers such as Vivi Wagner who came from Munich to write a great study on the PRC “administration of memory” through the organization and control of its archives, but in terms of also benefitting the Institute, Barbara Mittler’s work was quite unique.

Work with the students doing advanced studies sometimes also was difficult, most often with those coming from the PRC. Many of them certainly were bright, worked hard and wanted to get things done. The problem was that they came with a PRC master narrative in their heads which covered about everything and which had become an unquestioned truth because whatever they had been looking at in the PRC – schoolbooks, TV, or scholarly work – was basically recycling it. After a while here, they would notice that many parts of this master narrative were consistent with the CCP propaganda line of the time, but had very little historical base. But that often was not the moment when they got out of the cage of inherited opinion, flew into the sky and did great things, but they seemed just getting stuck in nowhere and ended up asking me what they should be writing on. That was very sad and was an experience which many other institutes in other countries have had as well: that you have very promising Chinese students who just can’t get their act together to open up their minds, take a fresh look and push for new things. This was not just an issue with developing some grand and bold argument, but with the very basic of reading classical Chinese texts. They came with the assumption that they of course understood what these texts were saying and that foreign Sinologists – especially those whose modern Chinese was full of mistakes like mine – most likely did not. In fact their rough and quick understanding of a classical

passage is often quite good, but once you want to know what exactly the text is saying, which characters are verbs or nouns and what are the grammatical connections, and ask them to translate into a modern language with definite grammatical markers, they would not be able to come up with a satisfyingly precise result even for texts in something like a classical vernacular, and they would continue to remain on this level. If one is unable to come up with accurate readings of the original materials so that the analysis lacks foundation, why should one be called a Sinologist? Although, I must confess, things actually are not that simple. As a student I was reading studies on earlier Chinese Buddhism by a German scholar. He published a lot of translations where there were so many outright mistakes and where the relationship between the translation and the text was so loose that you often had trouble identifying what phrase was being translated, but then, he would come up with surprisingly accurate conclusions! How he got there I never understood, and it is certainly not something one can teach students. I can't really tell whether I was responsible for male and female students with a similar level of enthusiasm, energy, intelligence and potential ending up so differently along gender lines. I am no fan of psychologizing, but with my father dying early and no brothers, the education from three older sisters plus my mother and then two daughters – not to mention my two marriages - might have made it easier for women students to stand the stress of dealing with me. That was the students.

***If you allow me one question out my personal interest: As your student, I was always very interested in the political things, contemporary politics – political ideology, political economy, also the historical drama – and I remember that some time during my studies, I was wondering why you were not doing more in that direction. You came from the classical background and you kind of dug into everything, and this combination of classic and modern is so relevant in order to help understand Chinese politics today. This is something we lack in Germany basically, we don't have much real fundamental understanding of Chinese politics and why things work the way they do. So, I was always wondering why you were not more pushy, not more promoting this topic. Maybe because of your previous political engagement, I don't know, but this was always my personal question.***

What I find challenging and extremely interesting and which I have also tried to teach in the classes you mentioned on ideology and politics was how to develop strategies to handle what is fashionably called “esoteric communication.” That's a methodological problem for which I don't have a fully developed overall methodology, because this is not something you can handle with a few well-wrought phrases. Decoding this kind of text is a practice you largely have to learn by doing. You remember what we did in these courses, we were always reading sources – literary or political - and then we were boring into them trying to decipher the “esoteric communication” by figuring out what political agenda they did fit, how they did so, and how prove that fit. There is one study that went to the very bottom of this, and I'm still very proud of having been involved. A young woman student, who now has a big job in the Asia business of a German electric engineering company, developed a basic premise in discussions with that PRC published

writings on a given topic from a given time would be guided by a master text from the political authority that in many cases was not published. The question then was how to get to this master text short of bribing somebody or stealing it. She developed a strategy of fishing out the key rhetorical fixtures, including the sequence of certain arguments, from a large sample of published materials on the same topic (in this case WTO accession) from two different time periods. From these overlapping points she tried to reconstruct the core features of the master text and its changes over time. At the end of her analysis, she actually stuck out her head and stitched together what she saw as the key elements of the master text and its changes. We can actually test the reliability of this method by taking up things from the 1950s, doing this analysis, writing up the core features of the master text and eventual changes, and then check, because in many cases these master texts (as a rule some internal speech or directive from a high leader) have by now been published. I have done such test runs several times and I'm rather confident that this is a pretty good method. She did that on the blind, she didn't have a text to prove it. The only thing you could use as a proof was essentially to turn around and assume, that if this really is the master text and these are the changes of it coming at such and such a date, and then go to articles not in your sample and check whether they follow the same line. That is what she did and it confirmed her argument. That is the type of thing I'm really interested in. I have little interest in the factional politics of the PRC center, because there is so much speculation, so much is constructed on the basis of political science understandings of factions and networks that have little connection to China, and there is such a strong disregard for the importance of ideology among political scientists working on China. Esoteric communication is also the form in which challenges to the master narrative might be articulated, the platform being mostly history, and the format drama or the historical essay. In a class on historical drama, we once read and saw a recording of the post-Cultural Revolution play *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu* 曹操與楊修. For the students it was quite thrilling to decipher a new and very critical take on Mao Zedong's (via Cao Cao's) attitude towards intellectuals, but for me the problem was that after my two books on prose and drama this all had become too predictable. To check myself, I once asked students to select some PRC literary texts from different times between 1949 and 1983, wipe out source information and make sure that there was no reference within the texts that would give the date away. I then tried to date these texts based on my knowledge of the shifting master narratives of that period. I think I was off at a maximum of three months. That is not intellectually interesting. You can say it's very egotistic because the students might have benefitted from more of it. That's true, but I'm in Chinese studies for the intellectual challenge and fun of it, and my do-good impetus is there on the level of developing the research resources and challenging the students and that led me to never to teach the same course twice because I would not learn anything and would get bored, and the students would notice and lose interest.

***Cluster Asia and Europe***

Heidelberg has an older Asia related center, the South Asia Institute, the largest of its kind in Germany, which also has a very fine library. A bit over ten years ago, a chance offered itself to link the two to become part of an even larger enterprise, and this is where we are now, namely “Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context’” as it is so grandly called. For the first round it had the subtitle “Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” and for the second “The Dynamics of Transculturality.” This is quite a gigantic enterprise, especially for the humanities. The original impetus to organize a competition for such “Clusters of Excellence” came from the Green Party side of a Social-democrat/Green coalition government. After years of cuts, people in the universities, which in Germany were practically all state universities, were in a depressed mood with little drive for innovation. The “excellency” competition designed by that government and eventually carried out by its successor that was led by the Christian Democrats tried to energize this depressed academic crowd through an open competition where all applications, whether in Nano-technology, particle physics or the humanities were competing on a level field secured by referees from outside Germany to avoid bias. The Clusters would run for five years with a funding of around seven million EURO/year each. When none of the first outlines from the humanities and social sciences here in Heidelberg seemed to be getting off the ground, Axel Michaels from the South Asia Institute and me jumped in at the last minute and developed this project with its focus on the transcultural interaction between and within Asia and Europe. To draw in scholars focused on Europe, we later asked a modern historian from the Europe-focused History Institute to join us. The project took a critical stance towards the nation-state default mode prevalent in the humanities which de facto was also characteristic of the social sciences; it went beyond a comparative approach with the unavoidable randomness of its selection; and it defied political correctness by focusing on a deeply incorrect word, the “asymmetries” in transcultural interactions and their changes and shifts over time. That was a high-risk enterprise, and we were advised to avoid treading on everybody’s toes. But this is the project we submitted, and to our delight and shock, we made it, and made the extension, too, after a few years. Without using the term or even being very conscious about it, this transcultural focus had been at the heart of most of my work since my dissertation. The Taiping book is addressing the link of this movement with the (Christian) Second Great Awakening, most of my literary studies deal with this angle – Liu Binyan’s emulation of Ovechkin, Wang Meng’s of Galina Nikolaeva, Xiao Jun’s of Fadeev –, and my studies of the role of foreigners in the Chinese public sphere did the same. The main problem for me was never whether I already was a specialist in these related fields, but whether I would notice the pointers and would be bold and daring enough to go wherever the leads in the material wanted me to go – down to biogas digesters in East German state farms. To give an example, in a scene in the Cultural Revolution film *Juelie* (Breaking with Old Ideas), on which I have been working, a politically middle-of-the road teacher points to a book on the table before him as his authority for questions of pedagogy. There have been quite a few papers in the PRC on this film, it got an entry in a global film handbook published in the US, but because of a “China-focused” approach, no one paid attention to this and followed up. Well, the book is the Chinese edition of *Pedagogy* by Kairov, a man about whom I knew

nothing at the time, but he turned out to be the pope of Soviet education theory since Stalin's time. *Pedagogy* had been made into the standard manual in all teacher-training institutes in the PRC during the 1950s and early 60s. From a Cultural Revolution perspective, this Russian name signaled "revisionism." The book is contrasted in the film with a book in the hand of the true revolutionary, the 1958 collection *Comrade Mao Zedong on Educational Work* (Mao Zedong Tongzhi Lun Jiaoyu Gongzuo). So, through this little window of the title a big question comes up, namely what was the role and symbolic value of Kairov for Chinese audiences in 1974? This led into a fascinating excursion into the guiding thoughts of pedagogy in China during the 1950s and 60s. Once you start this excursion, however, you quickly notice that you are completely alone. The studies on the history of Chinese education might have a general phrase about the importance of the Soviet specialists, but there is nothing of a quality and detail in available scholarship that would allow you to just put a footnote there and continue with your argument. And this is not an exception because in many cases the transcultural interactions do not go from mainstream to mainstream, but from margin to margin from where they might end up in the mainstream.

This transcultural focus for me is more than a simple scholarly interest, but a disregarded universal fact. There actually is not a single thing on the table in front you, in your belly, or in your mind, which, if you just look careful enough, hasn't a very strong transcultural element in it, down to the paper and the ink with which you write or the smart phone with which you record our conversation. But at the same time people are obsessed with their cultural identity, "our language, our culture." While this is understandable and actually is also a great source of creativity, it also has a lot of dreadful fallout as we see it at present all over the place.

When helping to write the Cluster application, I was prompted to articulate the implications of a transcultural approach for myself on a more general level even though I tend to keep my nose rather close to the ground, not least because there is so much empty jargon flying around. The real challenge, however, came once this Cluster had been approved. On the management side things were comparatively easy, but here you had a huge research program within an institutional environment set up for a totally different purpose. Transcultural studies needs cooperative work because you get best results if you pool your knowledge and analytical skills, but you cannot submit a multi-authored PhD, and a jointly authored book or article tends to be sniffed at by hiring committees because it is not clear who had which share. You emphasize transcultural linkages and the disciplines around you operate on assumptions such as that there is a "German history" or an "Indonesian literature." Finally, you are competing for the best minds with the established fields, and because they are established, the paths of relative job security they seem to offer are attractive to young people, for whom it might seem a bit foolhardy to throw in their lot with a transcultural approach even if they came to the conclusion that its explanatory powers were superior. Altogether, I am very happy that this type of transcultural research found a home and got to an altogether different order of magnitude in this Cluster, where I continue working now after being relieved of the burden of being one of the directors. Even institutionally the Cluster managed to make a dent. Ph.D. theses with a transcultural focus are now accepted by most institutes, we

have a MA program in Transcultural Studies that has become the most sought-after MA program in the humanities and social sciences here, and a transcultural focus has become a marker of the University's overall perspective. But as I see from my own practice of scholarship, there is still a long way to go. I am used to working alone and rather spend the extra time to get into a new field than join in a team working together, mostly because the information and analysis from other domains which would be needed for the research I am doing would be as much outside the mainstream there as my own focus is here. But while I am rather sure that this is something one can and has to learn, it is probably too late for me.

I think there is a little bit of a political agenda in this Cluster. I don't want to overdo it but I think that an increased and broader understanding of the fact that transcultural interaction is actually the lifeline of any culture – not just the last twenty years but throughout history – might be something that could change people's attitudes towards people with other languages, habits, beliefs or skin color. Of course transcultural interaction is not just happy exchange, it takes on many and often unpleasant forms: war, for example, is a very strong engine of transcultural interaction; or, if you look at the new tracings of mitochondrial DNA, which is only transmitted from mother to daughter, suddenly you're able to track population movements separated by gender and you discover the huge number of women ending up – through abduction, war booty, trade, exchange - up to five thousand miles away from where they were born, but of course they bring their knowledge, skills, practices, taboos – you name it – along, and you are now able to ask questions about gender in transcultural interaction although the way how it came about might be abhorrent. The Mafia of course is engaged in transcultural exchange of money-laundering schemes as much as the Indonesian Muslim preacher setting up a mega-church shopping mall after having read about Pentecostal establishments of this kind, the Peking student in 1989 putting on a white headband he has seen in a TV broadcast of protests against apartheid in South Africa, the Zika virus getting a ride from Brazil to Florida, the urban planner in a South Chinese city setting up a pedestrian zone in the middle of town, or the Front National emulating Donald Trump's election strategies. These all are forms and pathways of transcultural interaction, some of them not very charming, but this is how things go in this human world. I just hope the Cluster wins another round to deepen its impact and routinize some of the practices necessary for effective transcultural studies among the younger generation.

Perhaps in my old days, I myself am going to do a bit more to spread this understanding of transculturality in society as we are moving in Germany, Europe, and US and worldwide into a phase where priests of identity and authenticity increasingly claim the public ground as the fragility of our natural and political environment deepens.

***And maybe also more of a general public debate?***

That's what we've been discussing. Some people have been saying that we should go to Brussels and talk to the big politicians here. That is a possibility, but we don't have handy prescriptions, our job is to provide a knowledge environment that provides



decision-makers and the public with an orientation. The platform for this would be public debates, writing for schoolbooks, museum exhibitions and the like. The Cluster has made some moves in this direction such as an exhibition at Reiss-Engelhorn Museum in Mannheim on Cultures of Disaster.

As to myself, I sometimes tell myself that I should bring order to my house before my brain goes or I go altogether. I have quite a few book-length or nearly book-length studies lying there which are seventy, eighty, ninety per cent finished, but because the last stretch is just hard work and often no really fun, I always moved to the next project before finalizing and publishing them. My feeble efforts at clearing out my desk had unexpected results! The piece I'm just trying to finish on late Cultural Revolution films was a twenty page paper ten years ago. Now, it is nearly 400 pages after I have already spent some time trimming while people are breathing down my neck to please get to work and finish my book on Ernest Major, the British founder of the first big Chinese-language newspaper *Shenbao*, because nobody else feels at ease to take up that subject, on which I have been working on and off for decades. Hovering behind the scene are two books that are still in the first draft stage, one promised to Peking University where I gave the Hu Shi lectures and the other to Fudan in Shanghai where I gave a similar lecture series on a different topic. As Deng Xiaoping once said so wisely, "If you sit on the loo, do it and get out!" But the moment I sit down to get at it, something new pops up. Just a few weeks ago, somebody from the PRC wrote to me that they wanted to translate my book on the historical drama. I was quite amazed because it certainly does not follow the mainstream PRC narrative about these pieces. But the fall-out from this will be that for X-mas I will get the Chinese translation draft and then can spent months which I don't have to correct it.

***What was your involvement in academic debates on China and Chinese studies, theoretically and practically – especially concerning human rights, but also involvement in policy and consultation, and risk analysis on China in public and private sectors? Concerning the human rights issue, I remember you that you invited some interesting people to Heidelberg and we had very heated discussions with Chinese co-students.***

In Germany, the practice is totally absent which is very widespread in the Unites States and little bit less in England, namely that there is an easy come and go between academia and the political center. Government leaders here are fundamentally disinterested in even specialized research from the academic side. Even in critical situations they hardly ever invite people from academia for discussions. I don't know of a single professor from Chinese or Japanese Studies in Germany who had moved into a government position. This divide is rather hard and hardly ever crossed. I remember on the government side one single occasion – this was shortly after June 1989 – when the foreign ministry wrote to five or six of us to come to Bonn to discuss the prospects for China. This has never been repeated and, soberly speaking, sinologists actually do not have a special window into the Chinese future. I mean, in China even the past, as a

Frenchman once remarked, is hard to predict. Once upon a time, the Christian-Democrat prime minister in our state here was traveling to China, but rather than asking a sinologist to accompany him, he took a professor specializing on India with as an advisor him probably because he was considered close to the Christian-Democrats. The second element: I have given interviews in various media and have published some articles in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or in other newspapers, because I consider it a public duty if they asked me for an article or interview. But the papers basically don't draw on scholarship. The notion to ask a Sinologist when something happens in China is just not around. They think they know enough themselves. There was one exceptional occasion when Gao Xingjian got the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is a good friend, he had been directing one of his plays at our Institute here in Heidelberg, where we had earlier done the world premiere of his *On the Other Shore*, Bi'an. When he got the Nobel, he was largely unknown to the German press, so they called around and Wolfgang Kubin and me each wrote something; but this is what happens in crisis moments, when they are totally in the dark. The same is true for German TV or radio, they sometimes call, but it's actually more often the BBC, the Deutsche Welle or some Chinese program.

There was once a study done by the German Bundesrechnungshof, the federal accounting office for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the Ministry co-finances with the city of Hamburg the Institut fuer Asienkunde in Hamburg, which is now called GIGA to provide up-to-date information to government and business leaders. They wanted to know who in government actually was getting and using the IfA journals and newsletters published. The answer was that they were getting them, but were not using them because they had their own sources for information. Here in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg we have the same thing. The state has close relations with Jiangsu province, but to my knowledge none of the Baden-Wuerttemberg academics has ever been involved in the planning or execution of these exchanges. They were completely run by the government and the cities. That's German tradition and it has its own advantages. First of all, scholars might help with providing general orientation, but they have little to contribute on actual policy. What after all do they know on matters of city-to-city cooperation? I think China scholars should do more to make this orientation knowledge publicly available.

Sinologists all over the world also have not been very good at giving reliable assessments of actual events and future developments. One of my own efforts in this direction is an exemplary flop. After the Tiananmen events in 1989 I spent quite some time writing an extensive article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* analyzing the Chinese political situation. I actually had been in Peking in late May and June 1989. I wrote what about everybody China scholar thought at the time, namely that China was moving now into a phase of grate political instability; you had a split center, and the probability that the new Party head Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng would find common ground was very low. At that time, I later noticed, one single scholar got it right, a Japanese colleague, but I consider this the exception that proves the rule. He said the deal was going to be that Li Peng would get control over building the big dam on the Yangtse River and that Jiang Zemin, who came from Shanghai, would get the electricity from the dam for Shanghai rather than it being delivered to the upstream towns who needed it as

badly. He neither knew that Li Peng's daughter was managing the dam, nor that Jiang Zemin's son was setting up a big chip factory in Shanghai, but he got it right and Jiang Zemin later even told a story that he himself had been part of a group in the leadership discussing how to end the occupation of Tian'anmen – which was a way of saying he had been involved in the military crackdown and therefore would not use the participation by others as a cudgel to beat them down. So, my trust in my own capacity to predict political events is low. I had seen that in earlier times during the student movement, it is just not a skill I have, so my motivation to publicize my opinion on actual events in China hasn't been very strong.

One must also say that I am not well-known among the German public because I basically write in English and publish mostly in the United States, because this is now the international language of Chinese Studies in which most of the important studies are written and where there is the best critical context. I published one book in German with translations of PRC stories accompanied by introductions, but that was many years ago and it certainly did not become a bestseller. People are not familiar with my work and many think I'm actually American because we speak English at home and this is also the Cluster's language.

On the human rights side, my basic attitude is to be willing to talk to everybody, regardless of whether this is a government minister, a spy, a dissident, a professor, or a Falun Gong member. I'm a Sinologist, my responsibility is to get information from everybody, and that's exactly what I'm doing, on that point I am totally ruthless. That has been rather helpful because in that manner I was able to put together information from very different sources. If you look at the material we are archiving in the Digital Archive of Chinese Studies to keep it accessible even after it has been taken down by the PRC Propaganda Department or is disappeared from some other source, you will find no unified political line guiding the selection. And that is the point. If students go into Chinese studies with an agenda, even a human rights agenda, that is a no-starter if it blinds them for things that don't fit their assumption. I remember interviewing a student who had been proposed for the Studienstiftung [German National Merit Foundation], a very bright young man who was a member of Amnesty International. He had said in his CV that he had been working on China and human rights. I said I appreciated his engagement but would like him now to give us a speech representing the Chinese propaganda department to defend the Chinese human rights record in the United Nations Committee of Human Right." It took the poor fellow something like one and a half minutes to get over the shock, the co-interviewer rolled his eyes, but then the student took a deep breath, changed his body posture and even the voice with which he delivered it changed to the drawl of a routined cadre, and he came up with exactly the line the cadre would have presented! For me that was the sign that he was clearly qualified for this Studienstiftung and he got in. I think that is what one has to learn as a young scholar as much as for other jobs. You have to be able to understand the logic of the opposite of your own opinion and belief.

***For me personally, this is one of the most important things I learned from you when I was studying here. This, and making the "educated guess." When I was working in***

***international relations, the “educated guess” proved to be the probably most essential qualification.***

It's very kind of you to say that and I'm happy to hear it. To put it in grand terms, understanding the “counter-text” is essential in my analytical thinking, namely, the realization that every statement is made against the background of others with which it disagrees, partly agrees or which it modifies. In most cases these counter-texts are not made explicit, they are assumed to be present as context in the reader's mind. The problem is how do you identify this counter-text as in most cases you don't share the intended reader's context. One good indication of what the text is rejecting is a higher positive weight given to certain elements within a statement. This allows you to gradually identify what the text is arguing against, which in turn might have been fully articulated in an unmentioned other text. Once you understand the counter-text, the text before your eyes becomes twice as precise, you have double evidence. You also have a good context. In historical study this is even more important because the transmitted record is so thin.

A second gain comes from getting the underlying assumptions. Trying to figure out to teach this, I once in the early 1990s stuck up a sign at the announcement board of the Institute in the middle of the long summer break inviting everybody who was around for a meeting I called THINK 1. Some twenty people showed up. I wrote “15 billion” on the blackboard, and explained that this was what Volkswagen had decided to invest in a car plant in Changchun, which would start producing some 300 000 cars a year fifteen years later. They should treat this number as a compressed file, and decompress it into a science fiction story about China in 2010 that was present in the heads of the VW board members and on which they based this decision. I still recall them looking at me with the firm conviction that I had suffered a heat stroke. After a while during which I failed to come to my senses, one student said “there have to be roads for these cars” – at the time none of the big roads criss-crossing China now was even planned. That broke the ice, and within minutes a major brouhaha broke out with everybody adding gas stations, insurance companies, garages, and bank credits to our science fiction story. I then asked about the political projections contained in the story, and we discovered with some amazement that the VW board had concluded that the Chinese Communist Party would still be in power and be able to maintain the order and stability without which this factory would not have a market and Volkswagen might not be able to get its profits out, and that the Board had come to this assessment at a time when the Soviet Party was just imploding and most sinologists expected the same thing to happen soon in China. Decompressing this simple number brought out the far-reaching assumptions and projections on which the decision was based. We were all quite proud of ourselves, looking forward to a THINK 2. Now making an “educated guess” presupposes a quick grasp of the underlying assumptions and projections as well as understanding what someone is implicitly talking against. I think that the two together can provide something like a three-dimensional understanding of the complex context in which statements are made, especially in the overcharged Chinese environment.

Coming back to my relationship with the Chinese state and human rights issues - as I said, I talk to everybody because that is my professional role and I refuse to have this right curtailed. In June 1989, I happened to be in Beijing. I was in a way part of that story. In the early morning at six of June 4, I rode with my bike to the Muxudi crossing on Beijing's West side and found the street full of blood. That's part of my experience. Some two or three years later, the Swiss Foundation for Human Rights wanted to give a prize to Ding Zilin, the woman scholar from Renmin University whose son had been killed that night and who had since tried to get together a list of the people who had been killed that night and to connect with their families, many of whom did not even dare to mention their loss. That list was eventually published in Hong Kong. The government had put Ding Zilin under house arrest so that she was not permitted to come and receive the award. The Foundation called me to ask whether I would be willing to talk about Ding's work at the ceremony. Of course I agreed and gave the speech in her honor. Would this result in my being denied visa to attend conferences in the PRC? There was only one answer: I couldn't care less; that thought did not even cross my mind. If the Chinese government declares me to be an unwanted foreigner as they did later for a while, that is fine with me. If you even start thinking about what the other side might do, you're basically killing yourself. When I was the first time in China around 1980, there were very few foreigners there. By chance I met some of them, people who had been involved at home in these new Maoist organizations and were now working as foreign specialists in Peking. Talking to them was an important experience for me. Every one of them was in a highly conspiratorial mode. All of them had somebody up in the Politburo to whom they had a direct thread so that they had access to inside information and could use that connection if there were problems. All of them somehow had become part of this double talk, which is very common in China where you look at the face of the leaders to find out what you can or should say. I made up my mind right then: I will go to China and do what I think is right, say what I think is right, and I absolutely don't care what the reaction of the other side is. I'm being polite, I'm being cooperative, but I'm absolutely blunt. For some reason about which I'm not entirely clear this seems to have led to the assessment that somehow I'm this blunt speaking German with his bad spoken Chinese who doesn't know manners but who is a friend of China. Maybe I became a friend of China when I was still an assistant professor in Berlin. As I told you before, we were talking in the late 1970s about cooperating with East European dissidents in some kind of a united front against the superpowers, especially the Soviet Union. During that time the Chinese ambassador in East Berlin, who had nothing to do there - he was quite isolated there and probably was bored stiff - came several times to West Berlin to my place or to invite me for a lunch. He was amazingly well informed down to minute factions in the already rather small Free Democratic Party in Berlin and would ask mostly about my understanding of German attitudes concerning the Soviet Union as well as about emigré groups from the Soviet Union living in Western Germany. Because our journal published articles some of these groups considered interesting, some loose contact existed. When I actually asked one of these groups whether I should give their contact data to the Ambassador, they were very eager, so meeting probably came about. Perhaps these visits have made me a "Friend of China" for a while. That tag must have

stayed with me for quite some time because in hindsight it seems that I was doing and saying things which I might not have gotten away with without it. To give some examples: After June 4, 1989, we were still in Beijing. The German embassy strongly suggested that we should get out because with all the military driving around the streets, things actually looked quite dangerous. (We actually had kept a diary for the entire period, which was later published). But as we still had a few days and there certainly was much to talk about, we invited several dozen friends and acquaintances for a glass of wine. Among them were people who had been active in the political arena during the preceding weeks and months, foreigners including journalists from the BBC and other services with long China experience, and academics. People were yearning for a chance to talk and exchange experiences and opinion after the traumatic weekend of June 4<sup>th</sup>, and I later gathered that quite a few contacts for media interviews were made there. At the time, the civil administration of Beijing was still inexistent, even the *People's Daily* hadn't reappeared yet, but I doubt that the meeting of so many people including many foreigners in our private apartment should have escaped the notice of some branch of the authorities, but nothing ever happened. This is one example. A few years later, I believe in 1992, I was invited to an international conference in Beijing on Guo Moruo as a "giant of world culture" (really, that was in the title!). I was one of the very few foreigners to be invited because I had written about some of Guo's plays, although I doubt the organizers had actually read any of it because there was no Chinese edition. My talk - delivered in rapid and faulty Chinese - described Guo rather bluntly as something like an intellectual courtesan, above all making sure to please the patron, which after 1949 was mostly Mao. That was not very flattering or polite characterization of a "giant of world culture." After I had finished I remember thinking, well, that's probably just it. I now go back to my hotel room and a then young man will come knocking at the door, asking me to get my belongings, then bring me to the airport and send me off with a short "don't ever try to come to China again." I did go to my room, and then indeed a young man came, and as I was turning around to pack my suitcase, he said, "I'm coming from the president of the Academy of Social Sciences, he wants to invite you for dinner." The conference ended with a very Chinese feature, a final "evaluation" of Guo Moruo's contributions. As Guo had contributed to literature, history, paleography and archaeology, different groups of specialists sat together to form a judgment. I was amazed so see how critical they all were - only the paleography group came to a very positive assessment - and heard several people refer to the talk of this strange foreigner. I kept being invited and quite a few of my studies were translated into Chinese. Perhaps it is not the "friend of China" tag, but just the magic carpet on which all foreigners are flying in China; generally, the worst that can happen is to be thrown out. While that is a privilege with some background in the role of foreigners and foreign powers in China during the last 150 years, I think it also comes with the responsibility not to play the opportunistic game of avoiding to say things that might grate the ears of the authorities, but show that intellectuals can take stand and say what they think clearly and politely, but also without compromises. In many cases one might actually articulate what many of our Chinese colleagues might have wanted to say themselves. Of course this stance is challenging in some fields. I know that especially colleagues in the social sciences are

sometimes fretting about saying anything that might irritate their Chinese hosts, because they are afraid that their field research possibilities will dry up. In my field, the experience had been the opposite: There is a slot in China for this kind of a straight-talking red nosed yellow-haired fellow who is knowledgeable about the country. I found that people trusted me and were willing to talk straight, although they sometimes would take me to an extremely loud bar to do so in order to avoid being overheard. My only direct and extended contact with the Chinese government was with Wang Meng, who happened to be the Minister of Culture in the first half of 1989. We had met earlier when he was still just a writer, and I now called on him to ask whether he could help me get into the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, which was mostly closed at the time. I had written a long study on it but had never been inside. He must have felt this was a rather bizarre request during these hectic times, but sent me with two of his secretaries to an exclusive tour through the building.

In 2009, my applications for visa to attend scholarly conferences in China were suddenly refused. I did not really care much because the harvest from most conferences in the PRC is largely coming from the pressure you put yourself under to prepare a paper. But when the Mercator Foundation organized an exhibition on the Enlightenment in the National Museum in 2011 and invited me for a conference that was to be held in conjunction with this exhibition, I felt this visa refusal was getting ridiculous, especially when accompanied by official Chinese assertions about the importance attributed to scholarly exchanges. When I got no answer to a letter I had written about this matter to the Chinese Ambassador in Berlin, I did something which in the US would be normal, but in Germany I had never heard of it, I wrote to Mr. Westerwelle, then the German Minister of Foreign Affairs. It was more a symbolic gesture for my own peace of mind, and did not expect an answer. But two days later, I had a note from an Under-Secretary of State asking for more information. The Foreign Ministry then talked to the Ambassador about my "case". The Embassy had thrown my letter into the trash, and now wrote whether I could please resend it. Then they asked me to come to Berlin for an "interview". I actually went, and then learned that there was a suspicion that I was "soft on Falun gong." I told them that I was a sinologist and that meant that I was talking to everybody, to the Minister of Culture, Falun gong members, Chinese military men, gangsters smuggling people out of China with fake passports, the director of the *Xuanchuanbu* [Propaganda Department], and even to them there in the Embassy. That is my profession and there was no room for negotiation on this. If they insisted on denying me a visa, fine, be my guest, I had other things to do. They probably already had decided to issue visas again to me, but kept their pride by insisting that I would get only business visas (with official invitation) but no tourist visas. I think I even know how I got onto their blacklist. Before she passed away, my mother had for many years shared a house with a dear lady friend who happened to be the editor of the German version of the Falun gong newspaper *Epoch Times*. They were close friends, but my mother was stubbornly secular and had no interest in the Falun gong work. As I often visited there and they shared a telephone and an e-mail address, I naturally became a suspicious character.

Sometimes you have to consider whether making a stand is worth the struggle. A short while ago a journal published by Renmin University in Beijing wanted to publish the translation of an article on the foreign-language press published in China during the Republican period which I had published in Australia. When I wrote to them that I would be in Beijing for the Hu Shi lectures and would like to talk the translation over with the translator, they invited me to also give a talk. I proposed as a topic the role Chang Pengchun (Zhang Pengchun 張彭春) had played in formulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947. I thought this might make a contribution as there was no scholarship on this because human rights were not exactly a popular topic in the PRC.

The secretary of the president of People's University wrote me back saying that this was a fine topic but could we take "human rights" out of the title because people might misunderstand. The misunderstanding was of course that they would understand what the talk would be about. I was quite wiped out from my lectures and wrote back that without "human rights" this would be the most content-free title around, but if they felt this was necessary, I would still focus on that topic in my talk, but they should do as they liked. So it became "Zhang Pengchun and Modern China." People saw this strange name on the poster, and my even stranger name wa-ge-na as the speaker, fished a little around for information on China's well-enclosed the internet, but it was enough to make some two hundred people show up. When this actually very friendly secretary picked me up at the gate of the University to take me for a bite before the talk, I made fun of her saying she was fretful like a "mouse". (laughs) She smiled a bit awkwardly.

My relationship with the Chinese state is mediated through my primary interest in textual en- and decoding. I only have a marginal interest in actual politics, and follow that as a common reader. I'm of course interested how the PRC is doing and I'm quite impressed that with all their repression they managed in the last twenty years to maintain a relatively high degree of stability, get really impressive economic growth, develop strategic concepts, and weather international crises such as the Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 meltdown without big damage. I'm also impressed by the sophistication with which they operate and maintain acceptance. I must say, a country pretty much has the government which it deserves. The Chinese government does not look as if it is sitting on an explosive pot bubbling all over the place – it might do so, I don't know, but on the visible surface it seems that the people's acceptance level of the government is about as high as the people's cynicism level, and everybody agrees that there is no alternative in sight. You don't see a muscular connected type of resistance and the Party makes sure to stamp out any social movement that goes beyond the local level and shows signs of organization. Preparing for all eventualities, it has developed a large new armed riot control force, and spends more on the security apparatus than on the military. Who am I to tell the Chinese what they should accept or not? They have enough people, and if many of them find, for example, the government's internet control abhorrent but find there's nothing they can do about it, I can't do anything about it either. I personally find this type of control by the propaganda apparatus repulsive, but that irrelevant because my job is to trace how it suddenly becomes an international model – just look at governments in Iran or Saudi Arabia, they like what the PRC is doing, have started to import Chinese control software and bring in specialists to show them



how to use it – and they might end up emulating the Chinese troll army of Five-Centers who post little praises for the government every five minutes and denounce the critics. Compared to earlier years there is a greater cynical distance among intellectuals and academics. It hardly ever translates into a consolidated argument about the legitimacy of CCP governance, but people will tell you cavalierly after two minutes acquaintance details about a rumor that the former security chief in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, Zhou Yongkang, has been arrested and might soon be executed. So much for the PRC.

***A question that came to me during our conversation when you were comparing yourself with American scholars: Do you think it mattered in a way that you are not American, that being a German sinologist gives you more freedom to maneuver in this minefield, because the relations between China and Germany is very different? Not only because of East Germany, but there is a specific relation with Germany because of Qingdao, because Germany apologized for the Second World War and so on. Would you say, this gave you more freedom or didn't that play a role?***

I think, if that is so, the reason would probably be a different one. I would assume that given the actually very close links of many in the American Chinese Studies establishment with various government agencies, foundations, and business entities, the Chinese authorities assume that they basically are all tied to US political and commercial interests. Given the deep divide separating policy makers and scholars in Germany, a suspicion that we German sinologists are involved in government, secret service or political foundation activity, is just not plausible. In our marginality we are considered happily irrelevant so that whatever we do cannot really do too much damage. In the United States you time and again have former CIA agents – very knowledgeable CIA agents as a matter of fact – contributing to scholarly books and journals. I see this in the Fairbank Center at Harvard where I am a Research Associate and normally spend about five or six months every year. We often have people there as speakers or fellows who are working or have been working in government and security agencies, it's not much different from the visitors coming from the PRC. In the long documentary produced together by Guofang Daxue [National Defense University] and Shehuikexue yuan [Academy of Social Sciences] two years ago you are shown how American soft power tries to undermine China. It comes in all forms, missionaries preaching Christianity, professors talking academic freedom, foundations teaching grassroots organization, lawyers talking constitution, you name it. Then it lists the two groups most easily seduced by American soft power: academics and people looking to Christianity for values. To make sure that the journalists at least would have the correct understanding, management of the journalism departments in the country has been taken from the universities and put under the direct guidance of the Propaganda Department. From this example you can see that the nervousness about the Americans is much higher. This is also because America (rather than Germany) continues to be the dream destination of much of the younger generation of the Chinese elite.

I also have to say that the attitude of most academics during the Nazi period taught me to what extreme even highly educated people can go if the central government leads the way. Scholars are essentially not brighter in terms of politics than other people. They might know a little bit more on some issues, but that doesn't necessarily give them more reliable conclusions on actual matters. What they can contribute is well-grounded background knowledge that might be useful when framing policy decisions.

### ***What were your relations with Chinese scholars?***

For much of my life I have been in classical Chinese studies and only after at the end of the Cultural Revolution I began developing knowledge about contemporary China. My interaction with Chinese scholars in the earlier phase was hampered by the fact that I actually didn't speak Chinese, and to this day there are few Chinese scholars in classical Chinese studies especially in the PRC who speak or read any foreign language. This is slightly, but not much different in Taiwan. There also was no scholarly communication in this field with the PRC before early 1980s. With Taiwan it was a little bit different, but even Taiwan was under martial law and there was a very claustrophobic climate. There were people in Taiwan doing good scholarship but neither Taiwan nor the PRC looked like a place I wanted to go to. Once I had started to acquire some basic capacity to communicate in Chinese my interaction with Chinese scholars improved, but in both the pre-modern and modern fields a problem remained - there is a basic lack of familiarity with international scholarship. Only the works that have been translated into Chinese are known, their influence is enormous if hardly ever acknowledged. Take the example of the economic history of the Ming dynasty. PRC scholarship had for years been taking the data and the arguments from the translated Japanese works, rephrasing and recasting but not acknowledging them. The same is true in modern history, where the key books available in China that are not repeating the master narrative are translations of Japanese or English-language works. Chinese scholars have in many cases superb detail knowledge, but they keep to the mainstream and insert their knowledge into a preset master narrative. Even access to sources is in many areas not as good within China as it is outside. You are better off studying the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Heidelberg than in Beijing, because sources have been preserved and kept accessible, while they might be somewhere in Beijing, but you don't get to see them. In other words, there are many Chinese scholars who are hard-working, widely learned, and intelligent, but they tend to follow an approach that yields the most satisfying harvest under the conditions, namely to do detailed fact-finding research in the framework of the prevailing master narrative. As a consequence, innovative and convincing argumentative contributions are rare. That makes interaction with them into quite a challenge, one can have a lively exchange about the date of a letter, but once you go into an analysis and discuss various scholarly opinions that have been published all around the world in different languages, you end up doing what feels like development aid, namely introducing to Chinese scholars what has been done in the last fifty years abroad on that particular topic - and it is not even clear that anyone is interested because this is not where their bread is buttered. Most younger Chinese scholars now have read some

translations of theory-laden works with new concepts that have been developed, for example, for French history. These have long become standard references in Western sinology where they have been, sometimes critically, adapted and specified for Chinese studies, but these studies are not known in China. You then have a PRC scholar hearing about this “famous work” by Nora and Ouzouf on the “places of memory”, finding a summary presentation of it in Chinese, and using it to give some gloss to something on “red tourism” in China to revolutionary sites. I find scholarly cooperation with the PRC in Chinese Studies by-and-large frustrating because it does not contribute to my own scholarly growth and I doubt whether it contributes to theirs. I have just given two long lectures series at Fudan in Shanghai and in Peking University, spending a vast amount of time and energy to prepare. These preparations yielded good results, the discussions after the lectures in these top universities, however, could not compare with the stimulating and critical exchanges I could have expected in a good American undergraduate college, not to mention our Institute, the Cluster or the Fairbank Center. You see people in the audience whose deep knowledge of some of the issues you suspect from having read their publications, but we still don’t have a culture in the PRC that encourages a frank and open scholarly discussion although I have heard colleagues being lambasted in the PRC for even mentioning that, for example, the modern Chinese conceptual vocabulary was largely based on translation of Western terms made in Japan, because this implied doubts about Chinese creativity and authenticity. In areas of the master narrative that are considered sensitive the translations of foreign scholarly works are simply abridged or rewritten. My Wang Bi study was not seen to be in such an area and so there was no interference whatsoever. But the extensive Chinese summary by the Taiping Museum in Nanjing of my book on the role of religion in the Taiping rebellion is in a more sensitive field. The book refutes the master narrative of the Taiping being an anti-foreign, anti-landlord peasant rebellion that is the forerunner of modern revolution by saying that it was a religious movement in which the vision of the leader was of primordial importance not just in terms of himself but also in terms of the stamina of the entire movement and of guiding the Taipings’ historical action. The Nanjing Museum summary had nothing of this, but picked up the argument about the theological independence of the Taipings from the different missionary enterprises, because it suited their assigned role as the forerunners of China’s revolution. Perhaps I am overly critical and have set my expectations too high, but I think that my frustration is shared by many China scholars and very few of them have been happy enough to have found PRC scholars on the same scholarly wavelength with whom they could have serious, fertile, and critical exchanges.

***If there are translated volumes on Western theoretical thinking, why is there no questioning of this Western thinking, why is there no “Let’s have a look first whether it fits to what’s going on here or not?” Why do they just take it over?***

***On the other hand, there are some highly knowledgeable people who if they wanted could argue with you. When do they learn to do that? If you look at the students, they are not encouraged to have their own opinions, but at the very top you find quite a***

***bunch of smart people. When do they have the opportunity to develop those skills and how?***

That is quite true. From a certain level up people in the PRC talk much more easily even about controversial things, but these people are mostly not little scholars. They are Party leaders, ministers, and leading bureaucrats, just remember the Minister of Agriculture's reaction to my revelation about the proportion of abandoned biogas digesters in China, which I mentioned earlier. When I had earlier presented this result to his underling from the Biogas Office, he blew up that such a claim would put me into a "passive position," that saying this would damage German-Chinese cooperation, etc. That is a normal situation that you have people at the very top who talk rather openly, as long as they know that this is not becoming a political liability.

In the scholarly field that's a different affair. The general assumption in the PRC is that broad lines are defined by the authorities. As a little scholar you are not sticking out your head and say that China's having been "semi-feudal and semi-colonial" is nonsense on both ends as well as in the combination, and you don't even think that because it is a waste of time. The consequence of this is that most important research on China is to this day taking place outside of China. I don't know how and when this is going to change. It actually is a broader problem of a fake uniformity and stability. Assume for a moment the CPC implodes one day as did other Communist parties. No group outside the Party has been able to develop the experience, the networks, and the public trust to step in and take over as the Charta 77 did in Czechoslovakia, because no social organization outside the CPC control was allowed to exist. They might end up with a dictator, or with several dictators fighting each other, in any case with a social and economic cataclysm. I personally think it's a social responsibility of a government to make sure that such social organizations exist and can develop enough stamina as well as trained and educated leadership to take over. A discussion of this kind of scenario and its policy implications would be, I believe, necessary and in the best interest of China. But there is just no space for it to happen in China, and that, I believe, bodes ill because no one in the world can have an interest in China disintegrating.

My relationship to China is not one of an Old China Hand, or somebody who has an intrinsic fascination with China. China holds no fascination for me and neither does any other place. I went into Chinese studies because I thought these classical texts, whether Buddhist or other were a great intellectual challenge and I continued being fascinated by texts with more political implications in modern times. As I said, I could have gone for English or Greek studies, or gone into the EU administration. China is not something which has some particularly privileged place in my life: I'm not a great fan of Chinese cuisine, I find much of the bare Chinese countryside depressing. Of course, you come to a country, you meet people and you like them or you don't like them, you engage with them, but this is basically a professional of a general human affair. I don't miss China. I haven't been in China for two years, and I don't yearn to go there; but I don't miss the United States or Germany either, I do my work wherever I am. If I miss something, it's

not being able to do scholarly work for some stretch of time– but I can do that work on any mountaintop. I am not troubled by the occasional visa denials; these are just the regular vagaries of bureaucratic organizations with their suspicions. If they had denied me a visa to the end of my days and down to my fifth generation descendants and retroactively denied visa to my great grandfather, I wouldn't have cared. A state is a sovereign entity; if they want to refuse me a visa they can do it at their leisure. I won't be happy about it but neither my Chinese studies nor my transcultural research depend on my going to China (laughs). So much on Chinese Studies.

***What do you see as your biggest contribution to views and theories on China and Chinese Studies?***

I might have made some contribution to the precise reading and deciphering of philosophical classical texts and modern writings with coded communication. I have pursued this in the history of philosophy, Taiping studies, but also newspaper studies, literary studies, drama studies or studies of political documents. The difficulty with these contributions is that people can say, what you do is very fine – and I'm very happy they sometimes do say that – but how do you teach it, how do you make it into something which people can do themselves. My kind of approach presupposes offering to the material a vast range of options and potential interactions with background and counter-texts, but to get together this range of options is for most students and many other scholars an exercise that is very costly in terms of time, and not always rewarding in terms of result. In a lot of cases they just cannot offer the text this range of options, and end up squeezing the text into one corner and when text doesn't respond they start imposing meaning on it. The main problem is that it is before you go for this exercise; you first have to spot the flaws in the established reading and then step by step unlearn its routines. The easiest example is with this Taiping book we talked about. I took on this assignment for a college textbook entry because I thought I should know more about these Taipings. So I read whatever I could get, but it became very quickly clear that at least for these Taipings this neglected Hong Xiuquan vision was the key. So I started building up context on the handling of visions in South China, on the role of dreams in the Testaments, on the images of gods in local temples, on revivalist theology, on Christian tracts and books distributed at the time in China, etc., I would not even know into how many different disciplines I must have crossed without asking permission, using whatever seemed useful of their sources and methods. I am very happy with the result. In other studies the procedure was similar, but as you have to follow the leads the material offers you, you don't know where you might end up, and while this is very disciplined and concentrated work, it is each time one of a kind and that is very hard to systematize and teach. I remember John Fairbank saying after a friendly word of praise for my Taiping book that he was also wary about it because other people might try to follow a similar track without being able to do it as well. Perhaps the question about my contribution itself is wrong and people should be encouraged to develop their own approaches from a critical engagement with others and their sources, and my own students have in fact done so.

Otherwise, many of the things, which I've pushed, for ended up becoming rather mainstream. That was not necessarily the merit of either my students or myself. When we started working on the early *Shenbao*, this paper was part of the Chinese master narrative of cultural imperialism. This narrative had quite an international market. I remember mentioning in a talk at a meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in the 1990s that the manager of the *Shenbao*, Ernest Major, was actually also the editor and that he played a key role in the Chinese public with the international public discussion. Several people got up claiming that no foreigner had a Chinese good enough for that at the time and that the *Shenbao* was just an imperialist instrument to exploit the Chinese. Then the Chinese Communist Party one fine morning concluded it would not be good politics to blast the foreigners as imperialist bloodsuckers while also inviting them to invest in China in special economic zones where they were granted special rights. So the State Council sent out an order to re-describe the Treaty Ports such as Shanghai as engines of China's modernization. Soon books with this new master narrative came out as many in the West were still using a "China-centered approach." Without either Shanghai or Heidelberg doing anything, Ernest Major transformed into a modernizing Shanghai entrepreneur and people stopped doubting the self-evident. I was even made special appointed professor of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences for locating Major's tomb. This experience is the reason why I kept a careful distance from sinological fashions, because they were often so dependent on PRC politics as well as domestic agendas such as opposition to the Vietnam War. As to my second focus besides the hermeneutical approach, namely the assumption that transcultural interaction was the lifeline of Chinese as for any other culture, this for many years smelled like an apology of imperialism, but it got a similar unexpected boost at the same time. The Chinese government suddenly claimed as it was moving to join the WTO that the country actually had been open to the world from time immemorial. As a consequence, and Chinese authors could now write that there had been several sources of Chinese culture and that all of them had greatly and continuously benefitted from innovations coming from the West such as bronze casting until lacquerware and silk from China also started being emulated in the West. These changing Chinese master narratives have a big impact on actual research because they are each time supported by large reams of selected documents to prove them. Hans Ulrich Vogel, who was an assistant professor in Heidelberg before going to a full professorship in Tuebingen University, was confronted with a fine example. The document selections published by the PRC showed many cases where tenants had killed their landlords as examples proving fierce class struggle. Eventually he could check the full records, and the stories they told were quite diverse, in some cases the landlord had an affair with the tenant's wife, in other cases there was a drunken brawl, in short there was very little evidence of "class struggle". As to the fallout from Western experiences such as the Vietnam War, I remember a discussion in Harvard after the end of Vietnam War where James Polacheck, who later wrote a brilliant study on the "inner opium war" was criticizing John Fairbank for promoting during the 1950s and 60s doing a lot of studies on Chinese foreign relations. A textbook on China which Fairbank had co-authored, *China's Response to the West*, he claimed, implied with its title that China was this inert huge body that would only "respond" if

outside stimuli were applied, and that was an imperialist perspective. In the book itself, nothing of this kind was actually ever claimed. Fairbank dryly replied that the book title had been made up by the publisher and that the foreign relations focus had a simple reason. During the 1950s there was no access to any archives in Mainland China or in Taiwan. All they China Studies people had by way of reliable historical sources were the films of the Chinese Foreign Office files made by Mary Wright in the late 1930s, and these documents were of course all dealing with foreign relations. That should have been the end of the argument, but it was only the beginning of a call for a China-centered approach. I am happy that I risked my reputation and my career several times over to steer clear of these fashions, sometimes finding myself later landing in the middle of the new mainstream without knowing how and why. I know, that's a pretty arrogant attitude, but so be it. It has the great advantage that I sleep well (laughs), like my work, and don't have to change my opinions as the wind turns (laughs)! This is going to give you a nice recording, which a lot of people are going to read with pleasure!

***Lets get to our final question then: your thoughts about China's future?***

Well, I botched my prediction on China's future once and did so solidly, now you ask me to do it a second time! I have no idea about China's future but on some points, I have some inkling. First, it is probably rather difficult to switch from the low end in the production chain to a higher level without a sustained potential for innovation. Now, nowadays, one may counter, you have the option of buying your innovation from others – and that's what most of the big companies already do. Apple or BASF don't invent much, they rather buy small start-ups that did. It's much cheaper. Therefore, I am not sure whether China would need domestic innovation potential to move up in the production chain. It could very well be that it can keep an authoritarian political system with little intrinsic innovation potential, or innovations limited to only a few areas, while buying from outside what it needs for innovation. The Chinese government seems to have a rather good understanding of the stifling effect of its education system. That is why they send large numbers of students abroad at gigantic cost, including the kids of all the princeling families. Only about a third of them return and while those from science and technology often returned because they did not make it abroad, in the management of state finances they have done very well, maintaining a high growth rate and managing regional and international financial crises with deftness and flexibility. Without any qualms they were making use of socialist state structures for perfectly monetarist ends and they did that effectively, fast, and of course without the constraint of democratic governments, votes by state parliaments, or unions barking.

Two thirds of the students going abroad, however, stay, most of them in business, medicine, and IT as they rarely go for things like art history. While they might stay to work abroad they retain a kind of a patriotic commitment at least in this generation, perhaps even the next, and they might eventually do something for China as well. As the lower end jobs are disappearing into Vietnam, the Philippines, or Indonesia the normal thinking is that China will have to come up with higher end products on her own. But such high-end developments need an innovative crowd and a well-stacked technological

environment. The former has a hard time forming, and the latter is not present, perhaps with the exception of Shanghai and because of this foreign high-tech firms are also unlikely to put their development branches into China. I see the huge Chinese investments in science, her institutes all gleaming with the newest devices, but I have the impression that there is a huge level of waste because of the undeveloped human potential for innovation. Our science professors come back full of envy about the fancy equipment, and then they mention how strange it was that what they saw them doing there looked so very to what the man who was now the director of that institute had been taught by his professor while he was a student abroad. This is anecdotal evidence, but there seems to be agreement that China is still far away from the type of independent developments pioneered by Japanese scholars in some fields. Even the big Chinese push at present for a leading role in making the batteries driving electrical cars is all based on Japanese patents. I'm quite sure that with the educational system they have and with the structures they have in terms of the social behavior of scholarly work, the chances of creating a hub of strong innovation in China itself are low. That of course is exacerbated by all sorts of controls imposed on access to information. The billions spent on newest equipment need creative and innovative human beings to have an effect. You look at the contact addresses in publications by Chinese authors in the best science journals, and it turns out that many of those with a PRC address have kept their American or other positions and the related access to funding, but did their patriotic duty to accept a second appointment somewhere in China under condition that occasional visits are enough. Under this assumption, the country will hit a wall with its efforts to keep up this high rate of growth.

But another assumption is as good that she might be able to keep importing sufficient innovation input for continued growth from developers abroad – many of them perhaps former students from China who remained to work overseas and retained a patriotic commitment without wanting to live in China.

I think, in short, that China's chances of continued, if not as fast, growth are an open case. Economic scholarship has been treating the Chinese hybrid economy as a freak case that will not survive, but the predictions of China's economic collapse have been collapsing year after year.

Concerning the political side my personal feeling is that China is in a relatively critical situation, because the country does not have an elite segment with the experience and stature to step in with a responsive and responsible government if the Communist Party implodes or falls apart. That said, one must also remember what Liang Qichao said so nicely, that "the Chinese are so easy to govern, they are so docile." A country has the government it deserves. If you had a vote tomorrow, which of course would reflect the situation that there is no opposition, the CPC would get anywhere between 99,9 and 101 percent. You certainly do have a lot of grumbling, and people make all sorts of cynical comments, but that does not mean they will not join the Communist Party and abide by whatever they are told. And I don't think this is just a function of them being content with having more money. A population, which lets the Great Leap Forward famine pass without an outcry apart from the coded words of some literary men on stage for which they were brutally punished, where else would you find that? And this not a government



with a policeman standing at every corner! There is obviously an acceptance that this is the government, which by and large provides stability and has the power and will to secure its authority. I have no idea how in the long run this can work, but the different scenarios on the market all look equally speculative. The Party itself has joined this discussion by using its own tools to define its present and its long-term scenario in 1987. The Party Congress then resolved that the country was not in the advanced stage of the transition to communism, but only in the “first stage” of the socialist transition. This reset the clock of the present to 1952, provided a rationale for restoring private property of land, allowing foreign investment, and giving legal protection to Chinese entrepreneurs. The Party went back the recruiting system of the New Democracy period, when a lot of people with a “bourgeois” class background were allowed to join, and to an economic system that provided individual incentives for growth while keeping the dominant role of the state-owned enterprises that were to be run according to commercial principles. It then resolved that the country would remain on this stage for hundred years to calm everybody down that expropriation was not around the corner. This is a fine example of a new Marxist-Leninist master narrative that justified present-day policies while keeping the legitimate place of the Communist Party. Very few China scholars even know about that resolution because of the assumption that “Marxism” has become a completely irrelevant ideology in contemporary capitalist China. A look at the Party school shows that this type of Marxism is very relevant indeed for China because it creates a kind of normative discursive framework to talk about absolutely everything in society today in way that sounds orthodox. The capacity of developing this kind of cogent story is by any standard impressive. It even includes a self-critical note about the Party getting too radical too early. There are few states in the world with a leadership able to develop and impose this kind of a unified all-fit narrative and if discursive control is an indicator of real strength there clearly is a lot of it.

My thinking is that China is going to stay pretty boring as a place for scholarly exchange, but that as an object to study, China, including modern China is absolutely fascinating. Asia altogether is the lab of the 21st century. This is where every single option is present, whether it is rogue states, communist parties running sovereign funds for international investment, or democratic states looking like their own opposite. But I’m just intellectually interested in this kind of process; I have no emotional investment in it apart from the fact that we are all human beings and I don’t like our joint the world environment altogether to go to pot to which the Chinese development drive has been contributing a lot. But even here, I think it is very likely that they have the way and the muscle to get much of their environmental impact onto a more sustainable track. With their huge wind and sun farms, the volume of their green energy production, for example, had become by far the largest in the world. But of course, if I travel to China at this moment, I make sure to go when there is a meeting of the Association of Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (laughs) because then all the factories are turned off to let the foreign leaders breathe, which vicariously lets me breathe, too. (laughs) The “APEC Blue!” I’m very sorry that I have so little of an enthusiastic China scholar in me. But you see, Chinese studies is on one point just wonderful. You go into the library, reach out with closed eyes to pull out a book, you start reading it and the likelihood that within ten

minutes you know more about this book than anybody else in the world, is pretty high (laughs). That of course also means that the level of available scholarship is often pretty low. The challenge is that you have an overdose of complexity and volume and an underdose of scholars and critical scholarship. This means that in most cases you have to start from scratch for every single thing you are studying, which is a drag, but it also can be great fun.

OK young lady, that's what I have to say to the world, which is terrible, I know it, and I have just lost any standing that I might have had in the scholarly community offending everybody in sight, including myself, but happily enough I still see no end of my love for scholarship in Chinese and transcultural studies.