

# China and the World – the World and China

Volume 3

## Transcultural Perspectives on Modern China

Edited by Barbara Mittler and Natascha Gentz



# **China and the World – the World and China**

Essays in Honor of Rudolf G. Wagner

Edited by  
Barbara MITTLER,  
Joachim & Natascha GENTZ  
and Catherine Vance YEH

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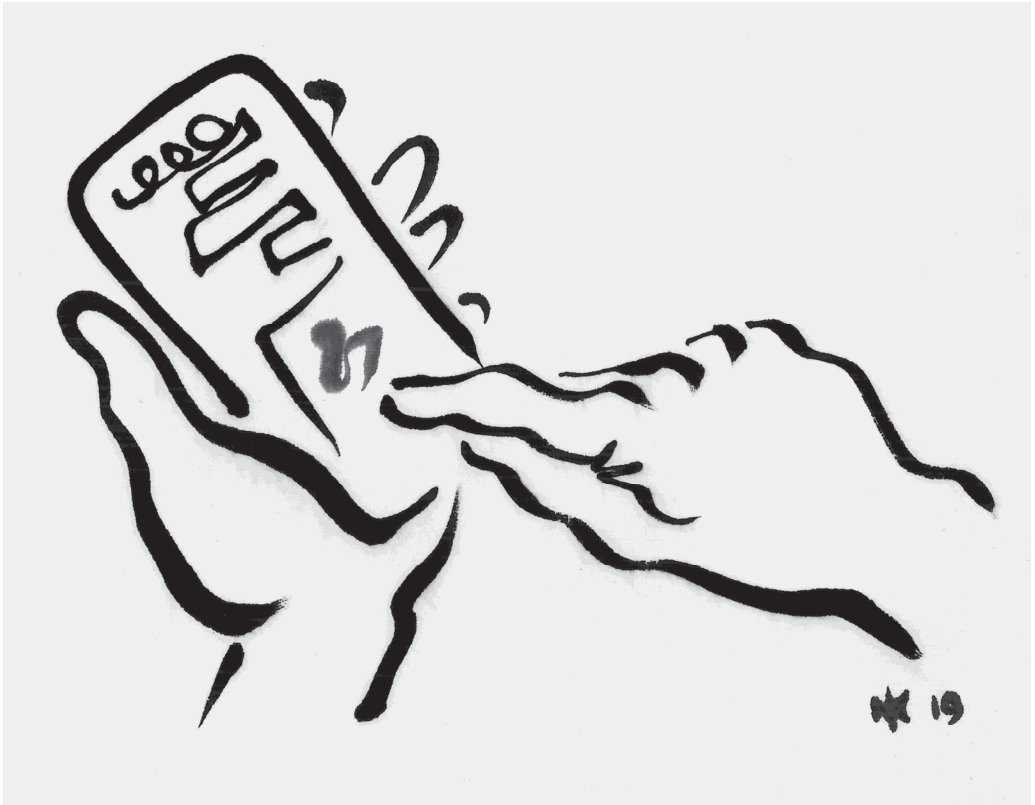
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*Das moderne China (Namy KIM)*

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## Editors' Introduction

Barbara MITTLER and Natascha GENTZ

The studies in this volume, arranged in rough chronological order, span a long twentieth century of cultural production in China. All of them, if each in a different manner, deal with one crucially important set of questions, one that has been very much at the heart of Rudolf Wagner's work as well: questions of readership and reception, and, related to this, of persuasion, legitimation and trust: how does one successfully draw an audience in China; how does one convince; what is an effective rhetorics or argumentation?

Many of the essays in this volume, and even those addressing the most contemporary issues, show that one particularly popular way of convincing one's audience in China was through referencing the past: the two concluding essays, by Heike Holbig ("Xi Jinping and the Art of Chrono-ideological Engineering") and Christian Schwermann ("Innovationsrhetorik chinesischer Prägung") offer two fascinating interpretations of Xi Jinping's rhetorics in the making of his politics. Both of their essays probe different uses of the past in the legitimation of his authoritarian power. Both of them show that while it may be hard to establish empirical evidence of the impact of his particular rhetorical logic, his uses of the past have become successful models for transporting China into the future. Indeed they can be taken as one explanation for his regime's resilience – in spite of everything one could say critically against it.

Johannes Kurz in his essay "The South China Sea and How It Turned into 'Historically' Chinese Territory in 1975" on uses of the South China Sea provides another example of how the past can become incredibly useful, at least (or, actually, only) internally, in propping up the stakes in contemporary territorial conflicts over a number of small islands, for example. In his reflections on 100 years of equally troubled waters and water (ab)use in Beijing ("Beijing Water 1908–2008"), Thomas Hahn, on the other hand, draws a bleak picture of Beijing's carrying capacity in terms of water, in spite of Xi Jinping's assurance that the "gold mountain" 金山 (economy) and the "green mountain" 绿山 (ecology) can and will be dialectically united, and that by 2035 the building of a "beautiful China" (green and well-watered) will have succeeded. This attempt at persuasion is met with great skepticism – at least on the part of the author – but apparently also within Xi's constituencies.

Does China perhaps need new foreign hydraulics to solve the problem rather than harking back to the powers of the past? These are, in fact, questions at the heart of Pierre-Étienne Will's essay on "The Emergence of the Modern Civil Engineer in China". He illustrates that the Chinese engineer was eventually able to edge out the foreign engineer who, beginning in the 1860s, had been working for Western companies, mostly in enclaves like Shanghai or Tianjin, and typically in urban engineering; or who had been hired by the Chinese authorities to work on "self-strengthening" projects, in arms factories and arsenals, rapidly followed by communications, steelworks, railroads, and more. But Pierre-Étienne Will also illustrates how hydraulic engineering remained somewhat slow in its emergence in China and explains this in part by the existence of a venerable and well-tried and effective indigenous tradition.

The fraught relationship between Chinese and foreign professionals which comes to the fore here (and which echoes some of the points made earlier, in contributions to volume 2) is at the heart of a number of other essays in this volume, too: Flavia Solieri discusses "The CCP's Policy Toward Foreigners in the late 1940s" and shows how the Chinese Communist Central Committee was deliberating rather thoroughly what freedoms to give or not to give to foreigners and how best to "make use" of them, in the months just before "Liberation" in 1949. Her reading of Party Docu-

ments on the one hand, and a foreigner's (Derk Bodde's) diary, on the other, makes for a fascinating shot-reverse-shot description of the production and reception of these policies. Elizabeth Perry & Hang Tu in their joint essay, "Cultural Imperialism Redux? Reassessing the Christian Colleges of Republican China", provide one possible pre-history for what was happening then, by claiming that the termination of Christian colleges in 1952 was most likely not attributable to their failure to cultivate "Chinese characteristics". Instead, they argue (and Solieri's case echoes their findings) that the problem really was not one of lack of willingness to compromise and adapt to Chinese styles on the part of the foreigners. The demise of the foreign presence in China can be seen as a politicized reaction to international hostilities (and a long-established humiliation discourse). The shadow of "cultural imperialism" continues to complicate efforts to connect current initiatives back to the once reviled Christian colleges: there is fear and distrust. But to what extent do U.S. programs of Chinese studies in the PRC really display of the state's pursuit of soft power?

Building trust in foreign ideas and institutions is also at the heart of Bryna Goodman's contribution "Betting on a Cardinal Virtue: Transcultural Formations in Shanghai Finance" which draws a fascinating picture of how the trust company was successfully introduced as a model in China in the 1920s with the help of financial pedagogy on the one hand, but mostly through clever advertisement strategies, financial journalism, and the work of Chinese economists, on the other. Her study sheds light on the political and legal contexts for the popularization of these new financial institutions and illustrates the fetishization of Western-identified financial knowledge as well as the skepticism with which these were met.

Nicolai Volland's contribution on transcultural socialism in the field of literature ("Steaming Toward the Future: Cao Ming, Locomotive, and Transcultural Socialism"), offers another audience attitude toward the Foreign – here, it serves as an escape gate: as he argues, some of the Soviet novels, that had been translated and promoted as the benchmark of socialist fiction, in the early years of the People's Republic, offered a space to Chinese readers where they would be able to "find all that was denied them in fictional works by their own authors." The simultaneity and coexistence within the literary field of the early PRC, of fictional works by Chinese authors and by writers from across the socialist world, then, resulted in a heterogeneous landscape that allowed for diverse and one might even say "liberal" modes of reading and writing. Reading in context what was not necessarily intended to be read together created a hybrid mix in the readers' minds that had the potential to become a catalyst for new creative endeavors.

Old and new style encyclopedias are a genre which typifies this kind of juxtaposition of very disparate reading matters and thus appeals, at least potentially, to many different types of audiences. Three studies in this volume deal with encyclopedic works – one of Rudolf's great interests, manifested in many thousands of scanned pages of rare encyclopedias, done by his own hand – probing into questions of readership and audience: Joan Judge's contribution "Is There a Common Reader in This Text? Understandings of Cholera in Daily-Use Compendia" tackles the question of how common readers – "the people" – in late Qing and Republican China read and understood the conglomerates of new and old knowledge and presented them on the pages of these encyclopedic collections. Her study on the dissemination of popularized medical science and how this was potentially used during medical crises such as the cholera outbreaks in the late 19th century, offers a first glimpse at how reading these encyclopedic works could translate into (useful!) action.

Barbara Mittler's and Leo Lee's contributions on the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of New Knowledge* (EDNK) *Xin wenhua cishu* 新文化辭書 of 1923 both problematize the claim for "usefulness" in some of these encyclopedic works. Leo Lee presents a close reading of the sections on Religion, Philosophy and Thoughts in this work, including a meticulous study of the selection processes and actors involved. He provides fascinating insights into how this knowledge was produced and presented and

how taxonomies of knowledge are framed and epistemologies were created. Clearly encyclopedists of the EDNK were not innocent conveyors of “objective” knowledge of the time.

While Leo Lee unravels the intellectual mindset of compilers of the encyclopedia – China’s Republican mainstream intellectuals, one could perhaps say – by highlighting what is not being said and which European mainstream philosophers are not being mentioned, Barbara Mittler addresses the same question from the opposite angle. She scrutinizes what is being said and which European composers are mentioned, and questions whether or not this knowledge could in fact have made sense to the contemporary reader, in the way that the paratexts of the work, the preface, for example, say they would. In her interpretation, she situates this particular new Chinese encyclopedic dictionary in the global context by comparing its own programmatic statements about its purpose and intentions with self-proclamations of encyclopedic texts in Europe and other parts of the world.

While it is incredibly difficult to grasp the figure of the actual historical reader and to enter the world of historical reception, all of these studies, in bringing together different sources, and in reading additional texts, images, memories and reactions to these texts, provide glimpses of a history of Chinese readers’ reactions and responses to China and the world in the long twentieth century.