

China and the World – the World and China

Volume 4

Transcultural Perspectives on Global China

Edited by Barbara Mittler and Catherine Vance Yeh



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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Volume 4

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Editors' Introduction

Barbara MITTLER and Catherine Vance YEH

This fourth and last volume – Transcultural Perspectives on Global China – is testimony to the imprint Rudolf has made beyond many borders, with contributions from Indology (Axel Michaels) to Egyptology (Jan Assmann) and Theology (Michael Welker), from world history (Paul A. Cohen) to world literature (Mark Elvin – *haiku*), to a world language (Joshua Fogel – Esperanto), and talking about travelling concepts and objects such as tea (Dietmar Rothermund), comical stereotypes (Michael Lackner), and knowledge (Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer). And finally, this volume also contains a number of reminiscences about Rudolf G. Wagner as border-crosser: his radical bonmots (Wolfgang Kubin), his role as great master-teacher for people from many different walks of life (Xia Xiaohong), in short, his expansiveness (Perry Link), ... and more.

His vision and spirited leadership indeed branched out into many areas: institutional and library development (constantly increasing the budget and the number of volumes in an exponential curve), student support on many counts, one being his teaching a spirit of never taking anything for granted, of constant and continuous critical discursive debate, the other, his innovative intra-, inter- and transdisciplinary impulse (apart from teaching all around him about the benefits not just of Aceto Balsamico but, first and foremost “an apple a day”). Xia Xiaohong 夏晓虹, in her contribution entitled “The Great Master in Sinology – My Impressions of Mr. Wagner” (Hanxuejie de “guangda jiaozhu” – wo yanzhong de Wagena xiansheng 汉学界的“广大教主” – 我眼中的瓦格纳先生), reflects the impact he has had on her own scholarship and her understanding of sinology and transcultural research. She emphasizes his passion for hunting and collecting primary research materials and his equally zealous generosity in sharing it with other scholars; she notes his dedication to scholarship and his conscientious attitude towards work and the belief that one should try to reach the highest standards in all scholarly inquiries as well as in one’s teaching, a point which is also taken up in Nara Dillon’s contribution.

Wolfgang Kubin in his “Der Meister der Bonmots. Eher eine freundliche Polemik als ein giftiger Essay zur Frage der Sinologie als Wissenschaft” calls Rudolf Wagner a “universalist” in the best sense of the word... one who wants to know everything and who fights anyone who, as he put it, “deposits his mind and wit in the cloakroom” (Da hat jemand seinen Verstand an der Garderobe mit abgegeben) – a radical thinker, to be sure, and one who took on Tacitus’ *sine ira et studio*: while he left his political radicalism behind, or rather, transformed it into an intellectual radicalism (serving the students and thereby, the people) he has pushed (not just German) sinology beyond many and by many never imagined borders.

He is, as Perry Link puts it in his contribution, an “Expansive Scholar” who could be called otherwise, as well: “Omnivorous? Generous? Latitudinarian? Doggedly empirical? Unselfdefensive?” Whether or not this great and expansive vision could be equaled to that of the bird Peng who appears in that famous chapter on “Free and easy wanderings” 逍遥游 from the *Zhuangzi*, and whether or not this great vision makes those who own it exceptional and thus lonely, that is something that is, implicitly, discussed in the contribution offered by Liu Dong 刘东. His “The lonely soul – enjoyable or endurable – a comparative perspective on loneliness” 是享受、还是忍受 “形单影只” – 比较视野中的“孤独”问题 takes on the theme of “loneliness” in a transcultural framework. The paper outlines different definitions of the concept. It delineates a number of different strategies of responding to loneliness as well as the respective value systems reflected in them. He discusses in particular how in modern times, as “Chinese” and “Western” understandings of the concept of “loneliness” began to meet openly, and how differences became ever

more marked. Liu Dong argues that China in pre-modern times did *not* have the concept of “loneliness”, but that “loneliness” was in fact regarded within a very different conceptual frame. By elaborating some of the criteria used to delineate mental health in the West and in China, and their impact on the psychological stability of society in the transcultural context, he shows that the crisis of the modern self comes along with an epistemic rupture – a shift in relevant conceptual frameworks: both in China and elsewhere.

Taking the transcultural perspective seriously in illustrating different features of what could and would have been possible interpretations of loneliness, Liu offers a rather specific case study which captures – on the micro-level – what Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer describes on the macro-level in his contribution “Einige Gedanken zu Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft in China und dem Westen”. He offers a rather all-encompassing structural suggestion for the (re-)writing of global history. He shows the inadequacy of classifying the world into those cultures who are “backward” or “catching up” and those who are not. If something does not constitute a structural need in a given group or society, not having it, need not be a sign for backwardness. What he describes, then, as the inevitable rise and fall of different parts of the world, in terms of epistemic, as well as military and political power, is something which Rudolf Wagner has called “shifting asymmetries in cultural flows”. Meeting the challenges of the present, Schmidt-Glintzer argues, in terms of our environment but also, one might add, in terms of migration and urbanization, as well as rising nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and therefore, separatisms, we will have to find new approaches to understanding and, more importantly, to cherishing the constant element of surprise that crossing borders in global history entails.

Offering an alternative to the writing of Chinese History, by bringing in the border-crossing perspective, is another option for rethinking the writing of world history. Paul A. Cohen in his contribution “China in Global Context: An Alternative Perspective on World History” takes on this challenge. His aim is to broaden the study of Chinese history, by treating China not from the perspective of the proverbial frog in the well that sees a small part of the sky only and thinks it is the whole world but, rather, by placing Chinese history in a global setting, thus shedding a new and different sort of light on it, providing a wide-angle-perspective, so-to-speak – bird Peng is coming back with force... And the connection to the contemporary challenges that Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer ends with, is, of course, part of the reason why Paul A. Cohen and others are asking their questions to the past the way they do: our study of the past, is inevitably informed by the challenges of the present in which we live.

A similarly triangulating approach – writing history from several vantage points and borderlines, not just one – is Michael Welker’s contribution “Karl Marx’s Critique of Religion and Christian Theology”. He argues that some of the most brilliant minds in German-speaking Christian theology in the 20th century (including Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich) were inspired by Marxism which they understood as a comprehensive criticism of religion and morality, in short, a narrow worldview. They argued that Christian theology had better learn from Marx. In his essay, Welker shows where this may in fact be possible.

Similarly open to seeing global problems as reflected on a local screen, is Michael Lackner in his contribution “Another China. Representations of China and the Chinese in European Comics and Graphic Novels”. He successfully illustrates the variety and complexity of European images of China in 20th century comics. These images are considered by him less as “real” or “authentic” representations of China (and thus, also, not as offensive attacks incriminating or characterizing “the Chinese”), but as reflections of foreign desires and fears that could and would be projected onto the China screen. Lackner suggests a new hermeneutics of reading such images, taking recourse to the Chinese concept of *yijing* 意境 which presupposes the active involvement of intuition and imagination (*yi*) to understand the “mood” (*jing*) of an (artistic) conception or idea.

According to Lackner, an *yijing*-approach may free a scholar from the ideological biases entrenched in his or her own specific (culturally- or disciplinarily-determined) outlook in order to be able to see not just difference but *différence and differance* in them.

This kind of approach is perhaps what was practiced by Shimada Kenji 島田虔次 (1917–2000), the subject of Joshua Fogel's contribution entitled "Why is Esperanto so Popular in Japan?". Fogel explains why Shimada Kenji would be taking an interest in Esperanto in spite of his fervent belief in the superiority of Confucianism and Chinese civilization vis-à-vis the West. He was, Fogel confirms, an avid reader of Western history and philosophy, and his internationalism was accordingly, utterly genuine in Fogel's view. Yet, evidently, Esperanto was only a putatively "international language" as it was built on Western languages predominantly. East Asia, on the other hand, had had an East Asian "international language" with literary Chinese for many centuries – Hanwen, Kanbun, Hanmun, Han van: 漢文. Indeed, one could argue that literary Chinese fit the bill of an "international language" far better than any other language in the world at that point in time. And perhaps, one could argue even further, as Fogel does: from the perspective of East Asian history and culture, Esperanto was in fact inferior. And still it became popular. The attraction of Esperanto in East Asia, and especially in Japan, was less for what it was (or should have been), i.e. a "genuine internationalism", but more for what it was taken or imagined to be – potentially: a Western phenomenon, yes, but clearly purporting to be internationalist.

It was a similar impulse – just from another direction – which caused the proliferation of *haiku* 俳句 all over the world and in all number of languages. World traveler Mark Elvin presents a small selection of his collection in print for the first time. He creates images in the mind which are most easily deciphered in the engaged mode of *yijing* 意境 – when the Duomo in Milano, for example, appears in defamiliarizing terms of propaganda that "imprisons" one's thoughts and ideas:

Windows in the cathedral,
stories that imprison the mind.
a fire-glow of propaganda,

There are many other surprises that Elvin's *haiku* contain. The importance of allowing for surprise in effective scholarship is what is at the heart of Jan Assmann's contribution on Rudolf G. Wagner's book on the Taiping as well. He finds himself bewildered that 35 years ago already, this book would take an approach to the sources that only today one would naturally specify as "kulturwissenschaftlich", a methodology which, when he wrote the Taiping book, however, was anything but self-evident; Assmann is also surprised about the deep level and degree of hybridity that characterizes the Taiping rebellion and that goes far beyond customary effects of mission and colonization; and finally, he is quite taken by the role that the Biblical Exodus tradition is playing in the course of events and their interpretation.

"Naturalization" maybe a term that could be used to describe this phenomenon of seamless acceptance of a border-crossing notion, object or person, a process which can have significant consequences for the product at hand. The idea reappears in Dietmar Rothermund's story of Chinese tea where he describes how dependent Britain was on Chinese tea and thus explains why they made great efforts to foster tea cultivation in India. In 1836 the newly-established Indian Tea Commission received amazing news: indigenous tea now grew in Assam (*Camelia assamica*). While British planters established plantations in Assam, Chinese tea continued to be planted in Darjeeling, but in the second half of the 19th century, Indian tea became the success story edging Chinese tea out of the British market.

Around the same time as this shifting asymmetry occurred, in the late 1860s, an adventurous Englishman set out to find a trade route from China to India and ultimately to Europe. As the

Suez Canal opened on November 17, 1869, the kingdom of Nepal had suddenly become an important connecting piece on the global trade route between Asia and Europe. This is what Axel Michaels describes in his contribution “Lost in Transhimalayan Transculturality. Opium, horses and an Englishman between China, Tibet and Nepal”. Michaels argues that Cooper’s legacy is somehow continued with China’s *yidai yilu* 一帶一路 (“One Belt, One Road”) strategy. The high-speed railway route now in planning, connecting Kathmandu with Shigatse would entail that 98.5 % of the 72 kilometres on Nepali territory would be crisscrossed by bridges or tunnels. While building them would probably be no less adventurous than the travels of Mr. Cooper, the people of Nepal fear that their 33 million gods will soon be lost between the two economic giants. The governments of China and Nepal, on the other hand, believe that the small but beautiful “gourd” Nepal will survive and even thrive between the two rocks, enabling and allowing expansive border-crossing, which, in terms of time, space and discipline, the contributions collected here all attempt to do.