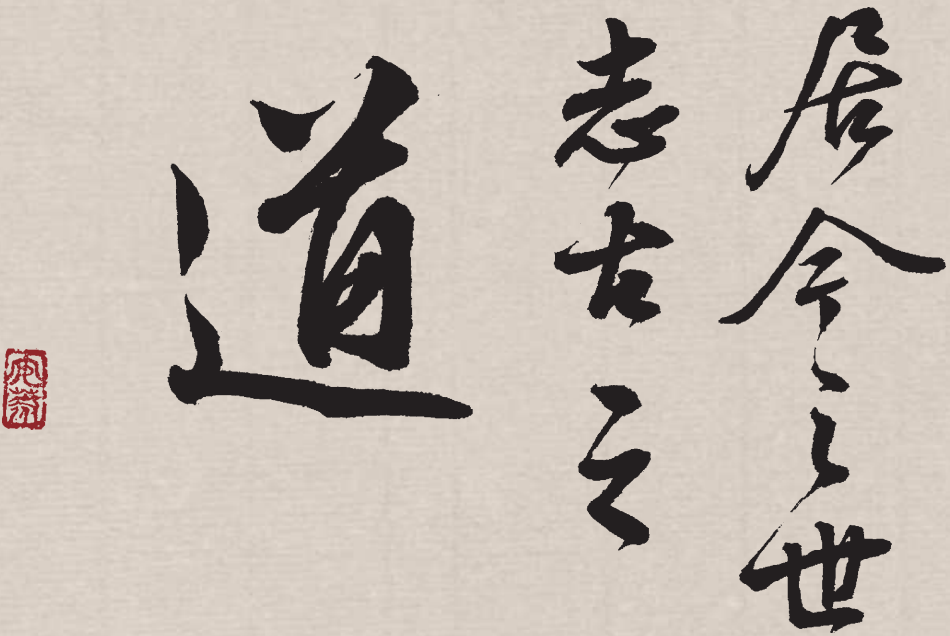


**Settled in the Present,
Committed to the Past**



Festschrift for Achim Mittag

Edited by
Fei Huang,
Dorothee Schaab-Hanke
and Martin Hanke

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on the Occasion
of His 68th Birthday

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The calligraphy on the cover, created by Dan-wei Zhu-Mittag (2024), 居今之世，志古之道, alludes to a passage in Chap. 18 of the *Shiji* 史記 ('The Scribes' Records) that serves as the governing word of this volume. For more details, see the introduction.

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Introduction

In his personal remarks introducing the “Table According to Years of Meritorious Ministers and Marquises enfeoffed by Gaozu” (Gaozu gongchen houzhe nianbiao 高祖功臣侯者年表) in Chapter 18 of the *Shiji* 史記 (The Scribes’ Records), the historian – be it Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–c. 86 BCE) or already his father Sima Tan 司馬談 (?–110 BCE) – wrote:

居今之世，志古之道，所以自鏡也，未必盡同。¹

Being settled in the present, but committed to the way of the past, one can use [the past] as a mirror [of the present], however, [the circumstances] are not necessarily completely the same.

What follows after this remark is a table that lists more than a hundred marquises enfeoffed by Liu Bang 劉邦 (posthumously Gaozu 高祖, r. 206–195 BCE), the founding emperor of the Han 漢 dynasty, and which had collapsed within barely a hundred years. The ancient enfeoffed states of earlier dynasties, by contrast, had endured for centuries. The contrast demanded an explanation, and the explanation points toward the Dao 道: the principles that the ancient lords had held onto, and which the Han marquises seem to have had let go of. Or was it perhaps meant as a criticism directed at the new centralized government as compared with the ancient system of the Zhou 周 with its feudal states?

Whatever the true intention behind these words was, what matters most here is the lesson that the historian draws from the observation of things past. The first part of his statement is rooted in early Confucian thinking. It is in Chapter 12 of the *Xunzi* 荀子 text that we find the instruction directed at how a gentleman (*junzi* 君子) should behave, namely that “While living in the present, he will be committed to the way of the past” (*sheng yu jin zhi shi, er zhi hu gu zhi dao* 生乎今之世，而志乎古之道).

However, it would be too simplistic to conclude from this that the historian here merely wants to express his own strong inclination towards Confucian values. Rather, one finds similar notions both in the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 and also in Jia Yi’s 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) famous essay “Guo Qin lun” 過秦論 that analyses sharply the reasons for the sudden downfall of the Qin 秦 (221–206 BCE) dynasty. The important detail in which the historian’s statement differs from all these earlier accounts is that he adds that “[the circumstances] are not necessarily completely the same” (*wei bi jin tong* 未必盡同), and this is exactly what makes Sima Qian (or already Sima Tan) such an exceptional historian.

It is for this reason that we have chosen this quotation from the *Shiji* as the governing word of this volume. The essays collected here are offered in honor of Prof. Achim Mittag (Chinese name: Min Dao’an 閔道安), a scholar who has devoted much of his academic research to questions related to Chinese historiography.

Achim Mittag was born in Einbeck in 1958 and began his studies of Sinology, Medieval and Modern History, and Philosophy at the University of Munich, where he was formed under leading Sinologists such as Herbert Franke (1914–2011), Wolfgang Bauer (1930–1994), and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer (*1948). He extended his linguistic and scholarly grounding at Fu-jen University (Furen daxue 輔仁大學) in Taiwan (1981/1982), after which he spent, with a scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), two formative years at Fudan University (Fudan daxue 復旦大學) in Shanghai (1984–1986), during which he studied under the supervision of the eminent historian Zhu Weizheng 朱維錚 (1936–2012) and also met his future wife,

¹ *Shiji* 18.878.

Zhu Dan-wei 朱丹薇. The topics he had explored during his studies also shaped his subsequent academic career. In his Master's thesis finalized in 1984 he examined the historical thinking of the Song dynasty scholar Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162); his doctoral dissertation, finished in 1988 and published in 1993, offered a reconsideration of Song Classical Learning focusing on the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Odes) scholarship. The years that followed were marked by the necessity of post-doctoral mobility, moving between the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) of Bielefeld University, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) of Leiden University, the University of Marburg, the City College of New York (CCNY), and the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen, until in 2005 he was appointed to a permanent professorship at the University of Tübingen. From 2005 to 2024, he held the chair for Chinese Language, Literature, and Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, and since his retirement in Summer 2024 he remains committed to the Department of Chinese Studies as Senior Professor.

Achim Mittag's teaching in Tübingen has been inseparable from his scholarship driven by a single conviction: that the ancient Dao remains alive only insofar as it is brought into genuine contact with the present. Taking its inspiration from the three-volume-teaching book by Harold Shadick and Chien Ch'iao, *A First Course in Literary Chinese*, he conceived a Classical Chinese textbook of his own, entitled "*Wenyanwen* 文言文 – Ein Lehrbuch des Klassischen Chinesisch und der chinesischen Schriftsprache auf der Grundlage des ‚Grammatik-Buddhas‘" (A teaching workbook of Classical Chinese and Written Chinese based on the "Grammar-Buddha"). It was developed and refined over many years of teaching, with the assistance of students and PhD candidates, but has not been published so far. In this textbook, he assigns each part of speech and sentence element to a part of the Buddha figure's body, offering students a concrete, visual anchor for grasping the grammar and sentence structure of Classical Chinese poetry, prose, and philosophical texts. It is built on precisely this principle: that Classical Chinese is not a dead language to be deciphered but a living presence in contemporary song lyrics, modern poetry, political rhetoric, and everyday speech. The ancient and the modern illuminate each other; the task of the teacher, as of the historian, is to make that illumination visible.

To carry the Dao forward is to see oneself not merely as an individual trying to live well, but as a link in a chain, indebted to those who came before and responsible to those who come after. The clearest evidence of this in Achim Mittag's career is what he has done for the people and institutions gathered around the yellow building of the Department of Chinese Studies at Tübingen from 2005 to 2026 (he has described the department building as a "humble abode" of Sinologists (*armselige Hütte*), to borrow the spirit of Liu Yuxi's 劉禹錫 (772–842) "Inscription on My Humble Abode" (*Loushi ming* 陋室銘): "O, meine armselige Hütte! Allein meine Lauterkeit ist's, wovon sie zehrt.") Here he and his colleague, Hans Ulrich Vogel, established the language training and exchange programme at Peking University, built up international research projects on Chinese and comparative historiography, and pursued those on such inspiring themes as collective identity and historical trauma, among others. His care for students has been of the same quality as his care for texts: attentive, patient, and genuinely concerned with the individual person and his or her needs. This is also evident in the doctoral dissertations, Master's theses, and BA theses he supervised, as well as in his dealing with questions of his students which he always took very seriously. He has also offered mentorship and support to junior colleagues without reserve, and did whatever was within his power to help the next generation find their footing. All of this brought scholars and students from several generations and various traditions into sustained, productive conversation with him.

Starting from Vol. 49 (2015) and ending with Vol. 59 (2025), altogether eleven years, Achim Mittag edited, together with Dorothee Schaab-Hanke, the *Journal of Asian History* published by Harrassowitz, the last two issues also in cooperation with Sebastian Eicher (Ca' Foscari University of Venice). During their editorship, the journal's geographical scope was fixed on being as vast as Asia itself, and its historical scope encompassed all periods up to around 1900. Yet a special accent was placed on what they called the "Through the Looking-Glass" aspect of history. Contributors were encouraged to explore particular phenomena or events that reveal the dynamics of historical processes, elucidate changes at historical turning points, and trace the larger developments resulting from these.

The essays assembled in this volume have been contributed by long-standing collaborators, colleagues and friends, students and former students of Achim Mittag. The contributors are from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Austria, North America, Mainland China and Taiwan, who came to know him through conferences, research projects, and sustained scholarly conversations, as well as through the daily university work, and they all have enriched his life and academic career.

The volume is divided into eight thematic sections. In the opening Part I, "Macrohistory Versus Microhistory", two contributions deal with the broader perspectives on history and historiography, while two other studies concentrate on case studies which, however, likewise shed light on further-reaching questions of recording history. **Jörn RÜSEN's** focus is put on the question of historical consciousness which he defines as something that evokes the past as a mirror of experience into which the present looks in order to learn something about its future. **Hermann-Josef RÖLLICKE** contemplates the profound incompatibility of the conventionalised Western term "history" with the German word "Geschichte", and argues against the idea of the "historical Buddha" while making a case for thinking the "Buddha" anew in the sense of the "Buddha as his own *Geschichte*". Based on a text of the genre "brush notes" written in the mid of the 16th century, **Ulrich THEOBALD** analyses the account of a military revolt that had happened in 1560, mixing the report of the incident itself with the author's reflections on the protagonists' personal experiences. **Sebastian DEMUTH**, whose great-grandfather had been a member of the German East Asian Expeditionary Corps, traces the reports concerning a Boxer outpost in the region north of Beijing and reconstructs the location of Fort Hophu.

Part II, "Between Historical Geography and Travelogue", sets out with **Elisabeth BIEBL's** account of Albrecht Herport's book *Eine kurtze Ost-Indianische Reis-Beschreibung* (A Brief Description of an East Indian Journey) published in 1669. Though Herport had in fact served as a soldier in the Dutch East India Company and thus possessed solid firsthand knowledge of Formosa, he deliberately suppressed part of his knowledge in favor of fanciful stories. In doing so, he and his publisher crafted the report more in the manner of an adventure novel, calculated to attract greater attention. In stark contrast, **Martin HANKE** examines the maps drafted exclusively for the second English edition of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (The General History of China), demonstrating how they reflect the most current geographical and cartographic knowledge available in Britain at the time. Besides, he argues that both the maps with their legends and the translations of two volumes published between 1738 and 1741 were the work of a single person, identifiable as the Welsh cartographer Emanuel Bowen (ca. 1693–1767). A broader perspective is taken by **Angela SCHOTTENHAMMER** who deals with Don Joseph Camacho y Brenes (fl. 1770s to 1780s; d. 1795), graduate naval lieutenant and first pilot of the Royal Navy, who sailed the Spanish American coasts and the Pacific and drew many maps. The focus of her study lies on Camacho's transpacific voyage to the Philippines and his related maps.

Part III, “Working on Texts”, assembles texts which are scrutinized by using philological approaches. **Michael NYLAN** writes that she wanted to offer Achim Mittag, from whom she had “learned so much over the years”, a puzzle piece drawn from the *Guoyu* (Advice from the States). Her focus lies on the “Zhengyu” section of the work which in her view differs from other sections of the *Guoyu*, especially in its special rhetoric, and she asks herself what the message of that section is with regard to how the function of history should be understood. Another riddle is presented by **Barend TER HAAR** who discusses the possible impact of the “Witchcraft Affair” on the so-called Old Text-New Text Controversy and the fate of the scholar Kong Anguo (late second century BCE) and some of his contemporaries in its aftermath. **Hans VAN ESS** focuses on a famous poem by the Tang poet Du Fu titled “Jiaren” which was rendered by David Hawkes as “A Fine Lady”. Comparing his translation with those by Erwin von Zach, Stephen Owen, and others, he argues that translations informed by traditional commentaries, like von Zach’s, capture the author’s intent better than those that rely on the text alone. **Dorothee SCHAAB-HANKE**’s paper intends to add a facet to Achim Mittag’s research on the musical aspect of the *Shijing* as it has been formulated by Song scholars Zheng Qiao and Zhu Xi. She analyses the role of the *yuefu* and of the *Qincao* pieces reckoned among this category, as successors of the *Shijing* songs, whose musical aspect had long been neglected. **Fei HUANG**’s contribution resonates with Achim Mittag’s interests in Zhu Xi’s annotations on the Confucian canon. Her starting point is a passage from the *Lunyu* (Analects) in which the disciple Zeng Dian mentions his fondness for bathing in the River Yi. The precise meaning of this remark occupied Confucian scholars for centuries. Among their readings, she singles out Zhu Xi’s commentary, asking how his interpretation may have been shaped by his own experience of visiting hot springs.

In Part IV, “Society versus Individual”, **Hoyt TILLMAN** muses on a topic that was inspired by the conference on “Collective Identity, Experiences of Crisis and Traumata” organized by Achim Mittag in 1998, namely the question of how the Song scholar Zheng Sixiao (1241–1318) dealt with the conflict between loyalty and conflict which seems to have been an unsolvable dilemma to him. **Jan DE MEYER** discusses the question whether the poems of Qin Xi (c. 725–c. 805), whom he denotes as a “lifelong hermit” and not someone who went into retirement after long years of service, should be read as direct reflections of his life in reclusion or rather as rhetorical devices. Hermits are also the topic of **Jonas SCHMID**’s paper, though his study takes a different route: it is based on a text by the Jesuit missionary Alfonso Vagnone (1568–1640), who produced a Chinese version of Pedro de Ribadeneira’s (1526–1611) *Flos Sanctorum*. The lives of Christian saints and hermits thus served Vagnone as a European counterpart to the Chinese tradition of recluses who had withdrawn to the mountains.

Part V, “Intellectual Debates in China’s Past and Present”, starts with a text by **Philip SCHERER** who traces the development and institutionalization of *Guoxue* (National learning) starting with the late Qing to the year 2024 by taking Yangzhou as his point of departure. The focus of **WANG Weijiang**’s study lies on Pan Zuyin (1830–1890), a member of a family of illustrious statesmen. He traces his career which initially advanced smoothly but was time and again thwarted by setbacks, some of which were personal and some political in nature. As Wang argues, Pan’s biography to some degree also mirrors the broader predicament of his era. The text contributed by **HAN Qijin** examines Chinese intellectual debates on ethnicity between 1905 and 1907 through a digital textual analysis. By analysing word frequencies, relative keywords, and textual sources in reformist and revolutionary writings, the chapter reconsiders the patterns of this debate. It argues, counterintuitively, that the reformers’ conceptual toolkit was more progressive than is usually assumed, while that of the revolutionaries remained more strongly shaped by traditional notions.

Part VI, “Memory Culture and Identity”, assembles four texts. **ZHANG Zhirui**’s contribution reconsiders the Southern Campaign of King Zhao (r. 977/975–957 BCE) of the Western Zhou period. Drawing on the concept of trauma that Achim Mittag introduced to him as a disruption that demands narrative coherence, he argues that the ideal of “Kingly Government”, grounded in ethics and cultural transformation rather than conquest. It provides an alternative explanation on why the Zhou royal house abandoned further expansion after the decimation of its army. In dialogue with Achim Mittag’s discussion of premodern Chinese concepts of the body, **Emily GRAF**’s article examines a bronze figure cast in the eighteenth century (ca. 1744) depicting a nude female body with acupuncture points engraved on it. She interprets this exceptional figure as breaking with the conventions of how the human body was visualized prior to the Qing within the court, among high-ranking officials, and among physicians. This break was closely tied to the Qing court’s explicit ambition to establish a new orthodoxy of medical knowledge. She further traces how that knowledge continues to be presented in contemporary Chinese medical museums. **Christine MOLL-MURATA** re-examines Achim Mittag’s thesis that the young Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) had praised the Taiping struggle against the Manchus in his 1908 writings. Her own findings are based on an examination of Zhang’s record on a shrine erected in Hangzhou in 1895, dedicated to the victims of the Taiping Rebellion, included in the memorial collection *Gengxin qi Hang lu* (Weeping for Hangzhou in the Gengxin and Xinyou Years [1860–1861]). She argues that Zhang used the Taiping Rebellion as a dark mirror through which to reflect on the complex situation following the First Sino-Japanese War. **Thomas H.C. LEE** approaches memory culture and identity through the lens of museum conception, focusing on the National Palace Museum Taipei in comparison with what he calls the “other” museums. While the National Palace Museum, completed in 1965, was designed from the outset to support the Nationalist Party’s claim to legitimate Chinese representation, many of the newly built “other” museums, Lee argues, reflect local Taiwanese culture or evoke memories of Japanese colonial life, a sensibility he labels “anti-post-colonial”.

Part VII, “Early Cultural Encounters with China and the Beginnings of Sinology”, engage two of Achim Mittag’s central themes: the history of knowledge and early Sino-European intellectual exchange. **Hans Ulrich VOGEL** deals with the notion of dragon columns as they are recorded in two text families of *Le Devisement dou monde* ascribed to the Venetian merchant and traveler Marco Polo (1254–1324) and argues that the description of this architectonical adornment can be taken as further evidence that Marco Polo had indeed stayed in China. **Patrick ABERLE** examines the novel terminology in the *Celiang fayi* (Meanings and Methods of Measurement), a 1608 collaboration between Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) and the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), treating it as both an encounter between two mathematical traditions and a case study in translation. His analysis focuses in particular on the Jesuits’ deliberate linguistic and translational strategies for introducing and adapting technical terms at the interface of these two traditions. **CAO Jin** and **Alexander JOST** focus on another work by Xu Guangqi, the *Kaicheng jiyao* (Record of the Essentials of Exploitation and Completion), an unpublished manuscript assembling notes on technical methods gathered through collaboration with European missionaries including Matteo Ricci and Johann Schreck (1576–1630). Covering topics from machine construction and metallurgy to telescope-making and porcelain production, the work’s metatexts reveal a sustained effort to conceptualize and systematize knowledge acquired from Europeans. **Jürgen LEONHARDT** examines a text by the theologian Johann Benedict Carpzov (1720–1803) which he describes as “the first treatise in Europe solely devoted to the Chinese philosopher Mencius”. Leonhardt interprets this treatise as a critique directed against the reformer Christian Wolff (1679–1754) who in a footnote to the written version of his

famous “Oratio de Sinarum Philosophia Practica” (Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese) of 1721, published 1726, refers to Mencius as “the other great philosopher among the Chinese”, but left completely open the question of who Mencius was and what his relationship to Confucius was.

Part VIII, “China Expertise and ‘Greater China’”, presents three papers on modern Chinese studies. The first, written by **Helwig SCHMIDT-GLINTZER**, muses on the question of the changing role of Sinology and Sinologists during the last some decades in the West. Among the factors that have contributed to this changing role Schmidt-Glintzer perceives the changing worlds of knowledge caused by digitalization, which have given rise to new possibilities but also to some problems which he discusses as an homage to Achim Mittag. **Gunter SCHUBERT**’s paper deals with the term “Greater China”, which was in the past an object of discussion much debated in Western media already in the 1980s and 1990s and which was also an object of discussion with Achim Mittag. In his article Schubert clarifies the dimensions of “Greater China” in modern and contemporary studies, especially under the aspect of its relevance in our thinking about China. And last but not least, **Anno DEDERICH**S’s essay on the question of how cooperations between German universities and universities in China should be successfully established in the light of the 21st Legislative Term of the German Bundestag (2025–2029) in which clear strategies with regard to a future cooperation with China have been fixed.

If one reads these 29 articles contributed by altogether 30 contributors attentively, one will find that most of them discuss topics that Achim Mittag himself has already explored in one way or another and that the authors explicitly refer to these talks or publications. At times a detail is added that he had not considered, or not at length; in one or two cases a contributor even dares to disagree with him on a particular point. What holds the contributions together is a shared interest: a curiosity to know more than was hitherto known or thought, and to scrutinize the detail that turns out to be a piece of the puzzle that makes up the bigger picture. Far from indulging in *l’art pour l’art*, they join Achim Mittag in asking how the things of the past, once examined, may matter even for the present. And this shared question is exactly that which historian’s programmatic sentence taken from the *Shiji* frames with precision: how does a scholar committed to the ways of the past use that commitment to illuminate the present, and how are events that had happened in the past related to developments of the present?

Achim Mittag’s Chinese name, Min Dao’an 閔道安, carries within it: 道, the Way; 安, at peace (with it), settled (in it), at home (in it). A scholar who has spent forty years apprehending and carrying the Dao of humanistic learning across civilizational boundaries has earned the right to that name. It is a name he has spent years earning, and will continue, in the many days still ahead.

Fei Huang and Dorothee Schaab-Hanke
June 22, 2026