

Memories of a Man Who Dared to Attempt Great Things: Obituary for Rudolf Wagner (November 3, 1941 –October 25, 2019)

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Rudolf Wagner, co-editor of this journal, passed away on October 25, 2019, after a long and serious illness. The Centre for Asian Studies and Transcultural Studies (CATS) at the University of Heidelberg, which he co-founded and which was launched this year, mourns the loss of one of its most prominent representatives.

I knew Rudolf from the founding years of the project preceding the Centre, the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows.” In 2006, the University of Heidelberg (mainly the Faculty of Philosophy) applied to the Excellence Initiative with a different proposal, but failed in the first round. When this was announced at Faculty Council, all were in shock. Shortly thereafter, I bumped into Rudolf on the high street in Heidelberg, and said: “Mr. Wagner” (we were still on quite formal terms at the time), “it is simply unacceptable that the University of Heidelberg should be out of the running in any competition for scientific excellence.”

Rudolf shared this view. A few days later we met for a preliminary talk. He also brought the historian Madeleine Herren-Oesch into play, and so a core group was born. We set to work (with many others) to write a second proposal, partly by telephone, with Rudolf sitting in Boston, Madeleine in Zurich, and me in Delhi. This proposal eventually succeeded, leading to the creation of the “Cluster,” as it was called from then on—though right to the end, we never could agree whether the word should take the masculine or neuter article in German. The Cluster shaped and enriched discussions about cultural studies in Heidelberg in a unique way, above all because Asian studies stepped out of the niche created for it in the nineteenth century and entered the arena of debates about cultural and social studies in general.

The role played here by Rudolf was unforgettable. He was often our guiding light and driving force, and, in his own unique way, sharpened

all our conversations. For instance, he brought in the idea of asymmetry. This notion was eventually to be rejected, but nevertheless, it was influential, and in my opinion, ultimately decisive for the success of the Cluster. Here, Rudolf showed that, for all his love for the beautiful, the good, and the delicious, he was a political thinker, and thought big. He knew that numerous economic inequalities, past and present, had led to cultural and social dynamics that continue to occupy us and to pose immense challenges.

Anyone who knew Rudolf knows how astute he was in these intellectual disputes. He was forever on the lookout for an opponent at whom he could lob his arguments, in rapid-fire, perfect English, often in ironic or humorous form. The to-and-fro with him was just like squash, which he loved and played to the end: fast, furious, and matter of fact (“as a matter of fact” was a phrase forever on his lips, sometimes several times in a single sentence). In his wife, Catherine Yeh, he found an equal partner who constantly stimulated him, just as the Cluster did.

Equally unforgettable were his bullet points on various topics, which he loved to send out the night before a meeting. Of course, he could also sometimes overshoot his target, and even be hurtful. On occasion, as he ran down this colleague or that, I inevitably wondered whether he would one day do the same to me. He did—but it was never personal. The point for him, rather, was the struggle over ideas: ceaseless struggle, till all were exhausted. And yet, neither was he dogmatic. Should anyone politely interrupt one of his torrents of eloquence, he would abruptly halt mid-sentence, and listen sharply, all eyes and ears. His paramount concern was to take people seriously, and treat them with respect. He devoted much time to sitting with students of all levels in the cafeteria of the Karl Jaspers Centre, the home of the Cluster, listening to what they had to say. They almost always received a follow-up e-mail with additional comments or references.

Once, at the very beginning of our work together, Rudolf wrote up some “rules of engagement” in an e-mail to Madeleine and me, in a three-step process he always favored:

1. Substantiate arguments concretely and objectively;
2. Establish agreement as to what can be considered an argument (his concern here was that he only wanted to accept scholarly arguments, not tactical considerations: “I am completely aware that human factors play a role in success or failure, but I think that we have to adhere to the fiction that this is not the case”);
3. Fix a procedure for arriving at a conclusion (“To guarantee the uniformity of such a proposal, it will be unavoidable, after all have done their thing and delivered their texts, to equip

someone with dictatorial powers to revise and homogenize the whole thing”).

Needless to say, he claimed those dictatorial powers for himself (though he did not get them).

Despite all criticisms, Rudolf always remained optimistic. On the evening before the announcement of the results of the Excellence Initiative, Madeleine and I met Rudolf and Catherine at their house in Ziegelhausen to prepare a press release for the next day, enjoying a beautiful evening view of the Neckar River as we worked. I was firmly convinced that we would fail, but Rudolf and Madeleine were confident. In the end, we drafted two versions of the release—and optimism won the day.

Rudolf also brought his intellectual rigor and incorruptibility to bear for the peer-reviewed, open-access *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*. This journal became his favorite child in the Cluster, combining the highest theoretical and philological standards with the then still relatively new idea of an online journal. Rudolf’s main concern was to get past seeing cultures as delimited entities, and instead to regard them by default as porous, influenced, and unstable, i.e. *transcultural*. The success of this journal proved him right.

So that’s what Rudolf was like, at least in my memory. He thought big, dared to attempt great things, and cast his intellectual spell over all alike. For his capacious vision we are greatly indebted to him. We will miss him very much. We will remember him in the knowledge that his greatness carries us though the challenges to come.