

The Secret Joys of a Scholar: A Tribute to Rudolf G. Wagner

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Πολλῶ τὸ φρονεῖν εὐδαιμονίας πρῶτον ὑπάρχει.
("Wisdom is, by far, the supreme part of happiness."
Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1348–49)

When I was a bookish fourteen-year-old schoolboy writing an extracurricular essay about Chinese history, I decided to go to the nearest Institute of Sinology to learn more about China, and so I knocked on Rudolf Wagner's door asking for advice. Wagner's reaction was atypical—or at least unexpected—for a distinguished *Herr Professor*: He not only received me for a long audience, but also showed me around his beloved library, which I began to assiduously use over the next years—and, as a matter of fact, decades, up to this day. He treated me in nearly the same fashion as he would have treated any academic: he was utterly generous, but at the same time demanding, and sincere with his opinions.

Both then and more recently, when he became my second PhD supervisor in Heidelberg, he would nearly always welcome me—as all his other students—into his office for long academic conversations, out of which one would always come with many new ideas and pages full of annotations. His office, crammed with books and papers, and his ardour when speaking about his research, conformed in the most positive way to the hoary image of the scholar who thrives through, and lives for, the acquisition of knowledge.

One of the most characteristic of the many reminiscences I have of Rudolf Wagner is of my undergraduate years, when I was waiting, together with some classmates, for an undergraduate class that should have taken place in the room where Rudolf Wagner was teaching a seminar. Fifteen minutes after the scheduled end of his class, Wagner came out, was surprised to see us waiting there, and asked us what time it was—he simply had forgotten the time over his teaching the history of the Chinese language. Even when his health was declining, he insisted on delivering an hour-long lecture on the one-hundredth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement in the midst of a heatwave—temperatures of about 39° C were close to the hottest ever recorded in Heidelberg—in a packed room without air-conditioning, and he did so with a well-child-like enthusiasm for the object of his study.

As a matter of fact, Rudolf Wagner oozed a rarefied form of classical *Gelehrtentum* (scholarliness). He remained an academic generalist throughout his life, contributing to the study of early Taoism and Buddhism as well as to modern and even contemporary China. More than by a limited interest for a specific topic, he was driven by passion for understanding as such. As he used to say, he could as well have become a Graecist or a Sanskritist, but it was with Chinese studies that he found the most challenging and promising field of studies for himself. His breadth of interests might seem like a curious “intellectual eclecticism” in today’s age of specialisation, but the accompanying wide range of knowledge meant that he could enrich any academic debate related to the study of East Asia and beyond. Such debates he enriched with uncompromising and unapologetic sincerity, which certainly earned him a fair amount of grudges, especially when he raised the question “does this make sense?” about others’ work and answered it in the negative.

Living in a world of learning, Professor Wagner expected from his students the same level of devotion to it as he had himself. If a student sat tacitly in an academic reading or discussion group, he would approach them after the session and encourage them to partake in it: “And you, young man [or young woman], should speak more next time.” His zeal, as was natural for a restless professor, never diminished even after his retirement: He would still come to his office, work energetically, care about his students by sending them e-mails containing information with things he deemed useful for them, and share his excitement about his new findings in the corridors or the kitchen of the institute.

It is not empty lip-service when I write that Rudolf Wagner was one of the most inspiring intellectuals whom I have ever had the pleasure to know. In 2017, I had pre-circulated a paper for a workshop in Hong Kong. I had not cited Wagner in the paper, and although I sent it to him when it was finished, I had not discussed it with him beforehand. Nonetheless, one of the participants of the workshop, a scholar from Peking University, approached me and asked me whether I was a student of Wagner’s, for my paper “felt so Wagnerian.” I reckon that on that occasion, even more than his direct influence, my paper had soaked up a general Wagnerian *Geist* present among sinologists in Heidelberg. At any rate, Rudolf Wagner will continue to live on, both in his works and in the spirit of his many academic descendants.