

Introduction

Catherine Yeh

Rudolf Wagner belonged to the first generation of sinologists growing up right after World War II. He came from a well-to-do industrialist family that resided in Wiesbaden. His father was a scientist and held a doctoral degree in the fields of physics and chemistry. He worked for quite some years in the US, then returned to Germany in the late 1930s. During the war, instead of becoming an officer, he was drafted as a foot soldier because he refused to join the Nazi Party. He survived the war, only to succumb to cancer and die when Rudolf was six years old. Rudolf did not remember his father very well, but he did remember being taken by his older sisters to the air raid shelter in the basement as the Allied forces flew overhead bombing the neighboring city Mainz. Growing up, the biggest influence on Rudolf was his mother. Having become an orphan at the age of eight, Rudolf's mother encouraged the spirit of independence among her children. Like many youths of his generation, he had to find his own way forward and construct an identity that would link him to the best of German cultural and philosophical traditions while rejecting the ideology that brought the Nazis to power and inflicted such trauma and horror on the world. This conscious acceptance and rejection of different aspects of the German cultural past formed the basis for Rudolf's highly critical mind as well as his openness to cultures and knowledge beyond national borders. Starting in middle school and throughout high school, he read voraciously, spending most of the little pocket money he had on slim paperback volumes. He read widely, and he acquired a broad knowledge base on European as well as other cultural histories. As an autodidact, his vast reading also helped nurture within him a rich fantasy life and imagination.

Coming to Heidelberg to study hermeneutics with Hans-Georg Gadamer, he steeped himself in the best German philosophical traditions. His interest in Buddhism, in particular Zen Buddhism, brought him to sinology. According to Rudolf, after the postwar boom years there was a shared feeling of alienation among Western intellectuals. Like many young people of his day, he read existentialist philosophy, went to Samuel Beckett plays, fell in love with Alberto Giacometti's sculptures, saw Bram van Velde's Tachisme, and became fascinated with Zen Buddhism. In the end, the Buddhist texts he read in translation presented, both philosophically and in the cryptic form of communication, the greatest attraction and the greatest challenges. The translations intrigued him. He wanted to be able to read the originals. By then he had developed a strong affinity with Buddhism, which he maintained

throughout his life. The combination of hermeneutics, both as a philosophical concept and a method of inquiry, and sinology, with a focus on Buddhist and philosophical texts, formed Rudolf's scholarly foundation and the source of his intellectual stimulus. This background helps to explain Rudolf's propensity for seeing culture as a form of dialogue and his rejection of national borders as obstacles to intellectual exchange—Buddhism does not belong to any particular country or culture.

This particular intellectual constellation resulted in Rudolf's unique contribution to a wide range of scholarly fields. As his scholarship was informed by ideas that are not bound by ideological trends or national borders, the questions that fascinated him were often unfashionable, out of the way of the dominant discussions of the time. For example, at the time when scholars were formulating a history of modern Chinese literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Rudolf's studies challenged the very concept of national literature by demonstrating the enormous impact of Soviet literature on the formation of modern Chinese literature, especially after 1949. With his intellectual makeup, he rejected the China-centered approach which situated the opinions of Chinese scholars at the center of discussion. This position favors the so-called Chinese perspective, disregarding the fact that, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a dominant role in determining it. Instead, Rudolf famously declared to his students "Go for the margins or the marginal, but then take all leads seriously." In doing so, he was able to make breakthrough contributions to various scholarly disciplines. This included his path-breaking study on the Taiping Rebellion, where, based on archival materials and employing hermeneutics methodology, he was able to recreate and bring to light the critical role religion played in forming the foundation of the Taiping movement.

His studies of the literature of the People's Republic of China (PRC) of the 1950s and 1960s and during the Cultural Revolution were likewise highly innovative and daring. Using archival materials, including actors' diaries, internal CCP documents, and textual variations of a literary work, he was able to demonstrate the transcultural nature of the formation of this period of literature in the PRC, as well as the political character of these works in reflecting certain Party policies. His studies rejected the prevailing fashions at the time of studying PRC literature as a national product without considering its relationship to international socialist literature, and the impact of Soviet literature. Furthermore, he challenged the mainstream reading of PRC literature using established methods of literary criticism. Combining social and political history, he showed that the literary works of the 1950s and 1960s were a form of political dialogue. It continuously reflected, articulated, and challenged the Party's policies. At times, this body of literature was directly subjected to interference from the party.

Rudolf's contributions to pre-modern Chinese studies were equally impressive. The most important were his study of Wang Bi's (226–249 CE) commentary on the *Laozi* or *Tao Te Ching* (late third century BCE), his extrapolative translation of the *Laozi* through the *Wang Bi Commentary*, and his study *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*. This three-volume study established a new direction in the study of *Laozi* and Chinese philosophy in general by offering a methodology of reading Chinese philosophical work through commentaries. Since ancient times, Chinese philosophical texts were always read through a given commentary. Going against the prevailing modern scholarly tradition of "scholar meets the raw and unmediated *Urtext*," Rudolf went for a historically specific reading on the basis of one commentary. That of course is a hermeneutic enterprise. The young man who was fascinated by Zen Buddhism and hermeneutics was able to realize his earlier aspirations through his studies of Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary, introducing hermeneutics to pre-modern Chinese studies.

While he was teaching at Heidelberg, two research groups were formed under Rudolf's guidance, one focused on pre-modern Chinese philosophical texts and commentary, and the other on the study of Chinese newspapers or the creation of the Chinese public sphere. Many doctoral dissertations came out of these two research groups. Rudolf himself drafted his study *The Life and Times of a Cultural Broker: Ernest Major and His Shenbao Publishing House in Shanghai (1872–1889)*, a work he did not have time to complete but which is now in the process of being published. He submitted his study on the films produced in the Chinese Cultural Revolution entitled *The Last Stand of the Cultural Revolution: Film, Society, and the Politics 1972–1976* to Heidelberg University Publishing in 2019, the same year he passed away.

In 2007, Rudolf's idea of transcultural studies finally found its institutional outlet in the creation of the Heidelberg University Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context." Together with two other scholars, Axel Michaels and Madeleine Herren-Oesch, Rudolf became one of the founding members of the Cluster. The Cluster of Excellence was a research facility that was funded in the framework of the German Universities Excellence Initiative of the federal government and the German states. As one of the Center's first directors, he helped guide a new generation of graduate students in writing their M.A. and PhD dissertations in the field to which he had dedicated most of his scholarly life. During this period, he completed an edited volume of studies on Chinese newspapers: *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910* (2007), and co-edited the volume *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870–1930): Changing Ways of Thought* (2014). And these were only his main works. In addition, he published numerous

journal articles and book chapters (see Rudolf's publication list at the end of this special issue of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*).

In this special issue of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* commemorating Rudolf's contribution to various scholarly fields, we bring together a group of scholars to reflect on Rudolf's work in the field of pre-modern as well as modern Chinese and cultural studies. The highlight of this volume, however, is an article by Rudolf himself. The article "Reconstructing the May Fourth Movement: The Role of Communication, Propaganda, and International Actors" was based on Rudolf's last lecture, which was first given at the Harvard University conference "May Fourth @ 100: China and the World" on April 12–13, 2019. He then gave an updated version of this lecture at Heidelberg University on the occasion of the symposium "China and the World, the World and China: In Honor of Rudolf G. Wagner," held on June 26, 2019. Here I need to thank Cynthea Bogel and the late John Stevenson for their help in editing the paper. Following his provocative article "The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere,"¹ Rudolf challenges the well-established narrative embedding the May Fourth Movement into the nation-state historiography of the PRC. By exploring newly opened archival materials, Rudolf helps shed light on the role played by international actors in the movement, and later in the struggle against Japanese imperial ambition towards China. The article thus reestablished the transcultural dimension of the May Fourth Movement, which has so far been left out or largely marginalized.

Marianne Bastid-Bruguière's article "Rudolf Wagner as Historian" offers a detailed analysis of Rudolf's intellectual journey and scholarly contribution spanning many decades. It includes Rudolf's work in the modern and pre-modern period, from work on philosophy to PRC literature, from the Taiping religious movement to the Chinese encyclopedia. Edward L. Shaughnessy's contribution is titled "Rudolf Wagner and Wang Bi." It is a personal remembrance of Rudolf as a scholar, based on a detailed discussion and critique of Rudolf's major arguments regarding Wang Bi's commentary on *Laozi*. The discussion and arguments with Rudolf's findings continue in this article, which thus attests to the provocative nature of Rudolf's approach to scholarship. Leo Ou-fan Lee focuses on the enormous contribution made by Rudolf in "Bringing a Global Perspective to Chinese Studies." Mareike Ohlberg furthers this discussion in her tribute "Rudolf Wagner's Work on the Politics of Modern Chinese Literature." Both Lee and Ohlberg emphasize Rudolf's insistence on following all leads in recreating the cultural and political horizon in which events such as the Taiping rebellion, or literary works such as the Chinese historical drama, were created. In so doing, Rudolf's works always

1 Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Role of the Foreign Community in the Chinese Public Sphere," *The China Quarterly* 142 (1995): 423–443.

went beyond the national border in terms of Chinese studies, and helped firmly place Chinese studies in a global perspective.

Finally, the last two articles deal with Rudolf's contribution to the field of transcultural studies. William Sax's article "Transculturalism Beyond Dualism: In Memory of Rudolf Wagner," discusses Rudolf's critique of the tendency towards binarity in transcultural studies. Based on Rudolf's lectures "The Trees and the Forest: Notes on Recalibrating Culture," Sax discusses the prevailing tendency toward dualism, and Rudolf's thinking on the sustaining relationship of local or regional culture versus culture in general. Sax, however, points out that even in Rudolf's breakthrough thinking on the culture of nature including humans, there is still an underlying binary structure of culture versus nature. This special issue ends with a piece by Sabina Brady and myself entitled: "Lifeworld in the Anthropocene Age: An Imaginary Interview with Rudolf G. Wagner, His Thoughts on the Trees/Forest Metaphor and the Culture of Nature in Transcultural Studies." The motivation in creating this imaginary interview with Rudolf was to give him a chance to articulate some of his thinking and exploration on the concept of transculturality and of the culture of nature close to the time when he passed away. The piece is based entirely on Rudolf's own writings with minor editing. It also aims to highlight Rudolf's challenge to transcultural studies, and the need to go beyond human history to understand transculturality as the lifeline of the Lifeworld in the Anthropocene Age.

Rudolf, you have the last word, rightly so.

Catherine Vance Yeh