Rudolf Wagner as Historian

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Rudolf Wagner had a powerful mind and rich personality. His works and deeds extended to an unusual variety of fields, and always stood out as forceful and creative. His academic genius cannot be easily defined. To me, as to many others around the world, he was a trusted friend and challenging colleague. Since I cannot describe the full extent of his versatility, perhaps the best way to pay tribute to him in this commemorative issue is to review his achievements as a historian in the China field, a research area familiar to me. In fact, Wagner was not an average historian of China, but a historian in the twenty-first-century version of the great German historical tradition, thinking globally, spotting the myriad links between human thoughts and emotions across space and time. We can see the purpose and meaning of his scholarship by following his many explorations on previously unknown ground.

As a child, Wagner was already a voracious reader and developed a love of text-based encyclopedic knowledge. At university, he engaged in Chinese studies out of an interest in Zen Buddhism, which required learning classical Chinese in order to access the only extant original texts.[1] The first stage of his research was dedicated entirely to a new reading of ancient Chinese texts and their commentaries, mainly inspired by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, aimed at uncovering and understanding Chinese traditional schemes of interpreting classical texts. The second stage began in 1979 and featured further inroads into literary and textual studies of modern China using a transcultural focus. The third stage started after 1987: Wagner focused his investigations on the molding of modern Chinese political culture and its transcultural linkages. In the last ten years of his life, his interest crystallized around the dynamics of transcultural interaction, probing the concept of asymmetry as an analytical tool.

The main scholarly contribution of his publications is twofold: first, they provide an innovative approach for the precise reading and interpretation of ancient philosophical texts, and of modern writings and imagery that contained

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1   Rudolf G. Wagner, Interviewed and Transcribed by Marina Rudyak, July 7, 2014; August 25, 2014; December 15, 2014, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, sponsored by the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University, 6–7, accessed March 25, 2022, http://www.china-studies.taipei/comm2/Rudolf%20G.%20Wagner.pdf. Catherine Vance Yeh kindly provided me with a copy of the original English version. A Chinese translation (hereafter cited as *Wagner Interview*) was published in *De Ao Zhongguoxuejia fangtanlu* 德奧中國學家訪談錄 [Interviews of German and Austrian Sinologists] (Taipei 2020), accessed March 20, 2021, http://www.china-studies.taipei/comm2/InterviewG%20Rudolf%20G.%20Wagner%20ch.pdf.

coded messaging; second, they show that transcultural interaction was the lifeline of Chinese culture too, as of any other culture. However, beyond the rich content of his writings, he should also be remembered as a historian devoted to spotting future fields of research and preparing the resources needed for them.

Scrutiny of local practices of ancient textual interpretation

While studying Chinese in Heidelberg under the guidance of Wolfgang Bauer, after reading *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and method), Wagner also studied with Gadamer, and attended young scholars' discussions with Martin Heidegger at Gadamer's home.[2] This early philosophical awakening to the epistemology of the human sciences and the conditions of a true hermeneutical grounding of historical knowledge shaped his approach to research on China and, together with readings from Reinhart Koselleck and Jürgen Habermas, remained a long-lasting source of inspiration and rationale for his scholarly agenda. It underpinned his innate interest in reading original texts and oriented the development of his skills in understanding and interpreting them.

In 1967, his first published article displays the accomplished skills of a well-trained, young sinologist fully at ease with ancient texts,[3] while still applying Gadamer's clues in a somewhat scholastic manner. He discusses how by the end of the Warring States period (475−221 BCE) many thinkers had introduced new concepts related to the state—not as word-concepts but story-concepts (*Geschichten-Begriffe*)—expressed through narratives of exemplary events that became fixed topics. In the *Han Feizi* 韩非子 (third century BCE), the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (circa 139 BCE), and in Wang Chong 王充 (27−97 CE), these narratives represent the very issue they are supposed to exemplify. The anthologies of the Han period such as *Shuo yuan* 說苑 and *Xin xu* 新序, which borrowed these stories, can thus be read as "dictionaries" of state philosophy. The enthusiastic young Wagner then scrutinizes one such story-concept, namely the story of Kuang Yu 狂矞 and Hua Shi 華士, who were executed by Taigong Wang 太公望 when they refused to serve him, as depicted in the *Han Feizi*, *Huainanzi*, and by Wang Chong in Han texts. He strives to show that the story undergoes a complete change of "horizon," that is, a change of the range of vision arising from the current situation, because that situation has changed. Although the story keeps the same outward form, it is infused with new content added to the earlier versions, which either sharpened or erased the latter, and could even be a return to the original meaning of the story. The

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2   *Wagner Interview*, 9−10.

3   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Die Auflösung des legalistischen Staatssystems gegen Ende der Han" [The dissolution of the legalistic state system towards the end of the Han], *Archiv Orientalni* 35 (1967): 244–261.

development of story-concepts is not different from that of word-concepts, and this development can explain the cancellation in Chinese thinking of the legalist view of the state by the end of the Han.

In his doctoral study of Buddhist texts, Wagner initiated a creative approach of his own within his philosophical concern for understanding the written word with the critical eye of hermeneutics. He chose the correspondence between two monks—Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344–413) who lived in Chang'an in the north, and Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) who resided on Mount Lu 廬山 in Jiangxi—whose eighteen recorded letters were themselves exercises in textual exegesis. On the basis of numerous Sanskrit sources, Kumārajīva had compiled a major treatise on salvation, and, after reading it, Huiyuan was asking him for clarification. However, in the surviving texts of this exchange—collected in the compilation *Dasheng dayi zhang* 大乘大義章 T1856—the questions and answers were utterly disconnected, resulting in an abstruse dialogue of which even the finest Japanese buddhologists could make no sense, suggesting instead that its recondite nature simply reflected the inability of the monks to communicate across the cultural divide separating China and Central Asia. Yet Wagner doubted that the record of a failed communication between two prominent founding masters of Chinese Buddhism would have been so carefully kept and transmitted over centuries. Thus, he moved from the center of the text—the content—to its "margin," as he called it, to crack the central riddle.[4] He scrutinized the assumption regarding the text's material production, namely, the idea of sequential exchange of eighteen letters on each side, carried over a period of six months at a distance of 1200 km each way, by a seventy-year-old general turned monk. By checking the references in each letter to the other's previous letter in each writer's text, he reconstructed four letters only (two from each side), dating 406–407. These were later chopped up by editors according to subject matter that suited their own religious priorities and teaching purposes, making eighteen nonsequential, paired question and answer sets. In 1971, the main findings were published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.[5]

In his doctoral research, Wagner thus sought the meaning of ancient texts through formal logic and philology; however, even more sophisticated explorations would come with the work on his habilitation. As a Harkness Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley in 1970, he began an extrapolative translation of the *Laozi* 老子 through Wang Bi's 王弼 (226–249) *Commentary*. This was prompted by the fact that on important issues, Huiyuan's terminology and pattern of thought appeared connected to the *Zhuangzi*

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4   *Wagner Interview*, 13.

5   Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Original Structure of the Correspondence between Shi Hui-yüan and Kumārajīva," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 31 (1971): 28–48.

莊子 or the *Laozi*. Third- and fourth-century commentaries on these texts, which Huiyuan could have read, were associated with the "learned investigation of that which is dark" (*xuanxue* 玄學), a term sometimes translated as "metaphysics," yet little had been written on these commentaries. Wagner thought that a full understanding of *xuanxue*'s impact on the formative stage of Chinese Buddhist conceptual language merited a special study, and that the leading author laying the foundations for *xuanxue* was Wang Bi. He then set out to reinvent the *Laozi* as constructed by Wang Bi. By tying the reading of the text to a particular historical reader, namely the commentator, he could escape the vagueness of most modern translations and discover the text's original argumentative links, which were obscured by changes in historical context. Close attention to the shared stylistic feature of parallelisms used in the *Laozi* and by Wang Bi opened his understanding of the *Laozi*'s interlocking pattern of stanzas: Wang Bi would quote the first line of a stanza as his commentary of the third, and the second as that of the fourth. While the exact order might differ elsewhere, this was an important tool for reading the ancient text, for grasping the internal logic that Wang Bi read in it, and for analyzing Wang Bi's own philosophy.

In tandem with Wagner's more abstract library-based pursuits, his discovery of the local San Francisco Bay area alternative culture and his appetite for the concrete made him jump at a chance statement by He Yan 何晏 (196–249, prime minister in Wang Bi's time) that eating a certain powder cured all one's ills and opened one's mind to clarity. He published, as an excursion in crossing time and space, a finely researched article in the respected journal *T'oung Pao* on lifestyle and drugs in medieval China.[6]

After passing his habilitation in 1981, and after many more years of further comprehensive critical examination of a huge body of texts and scholarly literature using his philological skills and increasingly refined hermeneutics, Wagner's ground-breaking study of the process of textual and cultural understanding in ancient China deepened and enlarged the field with a series of three volumes starting with *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi.[7] The volumes included: a study of the development of the commentary genre, its exegetic devices, the battles for the interpretive

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6   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Lebensstil und Drogen im chinesischen Mittelalter" [Life-style and drugs in medieval China], *T'oung Pao* 59 (1973): 79–178. A shorter version appeared as "Das Han-shi Pulver, eine moderne Droge im mittelalterlichen China" [The Han-shi powder, a modern drug in medieval China], in *Rausch und Realität: Drogen im Kulturvergleich*, Part 1, ed. Gisela Völger, Karin von Welck, and Aldo Legnaro (Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, 1982), 320–323.

7   Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), ix; 361; Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing*: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), viii; 531; Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), viii; 261.

control of ancient texts, and the transmission of this literature from the pre-Qin to the Later Han period; a critical reconstruction of Wang Bi's text of the *Laozi*, compared with other available texts, including those discovered by recent archaeological findings; a translation of Wang Bi's commentary, together with a discussion of the way in which the commentary constructed the main text; and an historical and philosophical analysis of Wang Bi's work. The composing and editing of the English edition and the supervision of its Chinese translation published in China[8] were a wearying but rewarding task that brought worldwide recognition for him and lasting momentum to sinology.

The young scholar had bemoaned the fact that the study of classics was based on a division of labor between scholars who collated, edited, commented, and translated the texts and those who mostly focused on analyzing them once made available. Yet he was able, in the words of his own praise for Rudolf Bultman, "to span the entire breadth of the enterprise, from painstaking philological research through broad analyses of religious, social, and political currents, to hermeneutical explorations of the internal logic of philosophical texts and religious beliefs."[9] From the point of view of the philosophy of history, his achievement was an illustration of Gadamer's chapter "The Elevation of the Historicality of Understanding to the Status of Hermeneutical Principle."[10] Wagner maintained a lifelong interest in Buddhism; however, he did not engage further in writing about the historical entanglement of Daoist and Buddhist thinking, as previously planned.

Literary and textual studies of modern China with new analytical concepts and transcultural focus

When Wagner started teaching at the Free University in Berlin, in 1972, where the focus of the Ostasiatisches Seminar was on modern China, he began to delve into the world of modern Chinese thought. He read novels and dramas and analyzed them not so much for their literary value but, using his hermeneutical lens, as texts that reflected contemporaneous local interpretations of Chinese society. In other words, these texts were seen as political and social documents in literary form. He pointed out the close link between literature and politics in imperial China, when the function of literature was to praise or blame the ruler—in an era of social decay after the age of wise kings—and under

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8   Rudolf G. Wagner 瓦格納, *On Wang Bi's commentary of Lao Zi: Wang Bi* Laozi zhu *yanjiu* 王弼《老子注》研究, trans. Yang Lihua 楊立華. 2 vols. (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2008).

9   Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator*, 1.

10   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garett Burdon and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 235–238.

Communist rule, when literature served as regulated self-examination.[11] At the time of his initial forays into the field, studies of post-1949 Chinese literature had just begun and his approach inspired further scholarship. His first article, on the modern Chinese social investigation-novel (*Untersuchungsroman*), was published in 1979.[12] Over the next decade, more works appeared in edited volumes[13] and in journals, including a pioneering study of science fiction.[14] Liu Binyan 劉賓雁 (1925−2005) is the only author he wrote about individually, with an eye to analyzing the different types of texts he published over time, and the words and stylistic devices he used in order to keep his own discourse alive in the face of the Chinese Communist Party's prevailing rules and rampant power struggles.

The art of digging through multi-layered texts crafted by writers in their attempt to "speak the truth"—and yet survive such audacity—is clearly displayed in Wagner's study of the contemporary Chinese historical drama, especially the plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which were said to be attacks on the Party, its chairman, and socialism.[15] He documents in amazing detail the genesis and development of these dramatic texts, and minutely deciphers the subtext of every character, situation, particular, and word. He shows the potential of historical themes to critically depict contemporary realities, and provides ample evidence that in 1959—after most writers of "realistic" prose (popular during the Hundred Flowers period) had been silenced or sent to labor camps—the historical play, together with the essay (*zawen* 雜文) and the historical essay, with their esoteric communicative forms and ever-greater variety and richness of meaning, gained a relatively high literary status as a voice of critical thought. However, this form of critical thought followed the directives of a divided political leadership; authors' critiques were responding to or challenging each other in coded dialogue.

From Tian Han's 田漢 (1898−1968) play *Guan Hanqing* 關漢卿, Wagner extracted the rules governing the reading of historical plays. He then applied

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11   Rudolf G. Wagner, ed., *Literatur und Politik in der Volksrepublik China* [Literature and politics in the People's Republic of China] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 11−21.

12   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Der moderne chinesische Untersuchungsroman" [The modern Chinese novel of social investigation], in *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 21, ed. J. Hermand (Wiesbaden: Athenaeum, 1979), 361−407.

13   Rudolf G. Wagner and Wofgang Kubin, ed., *Essays in Modern Chinese Literature and Literary Criticism* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1982). See also Wagner, *Literatur und Politik*.

14   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Lobby Literature: The Archaeology and Present Functions of Science Fiction in the People's Republic of China," in *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society 1978−1981*, ed. Jeffrey Kinkley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 17−62.

15   Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

those rules back onto the play itself, which thematizes the writing of another play, and thus provides a lesson in the art of reading innuendo drama. "In the play, the levels of past, present, and future become blurred as much as the difference between the stage and life itself."[16] Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan* 謝瑤環 is one of three historical plays, all published and staged in 1961, whose critical reception set the stage for the Cultural Revolution—yet contrary to Wu Han's 吳晗 (1909−1969) *Hai Rui baguan* 海瑞罷官 (Hai Rui's dismissal), it had scarcely elicited any foreign scholarly attention. Wagner shows that the play went far beyond the immediate criticism of the politics of the center. He reconstructs the horizon of perception and expectation within which the play appeared, follows leads into the text's esoteric elements, and compares it to the absent and unspoken demands made on literature by various segments of the political class at the time. Further investigation found that plots taken from the popular novel *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West) had been staged as dramas representing the Chinese Revolution and its road to socialism, with the Monkey King, a hero of magical powers, embodying Mao Zedong, and the muddle-headed monk, Tang Seng, impersonating the Communist Party. Shifting interpretations of the literary and dramatic versions of these plots (including widely consumed films and picture books) by the country's top political and intellectual leaders point to their important role as a weapon of propaganda, easily capturing the political imagination of the common people and the youth.

The narrative history of the politics of the historical drama stands in sharp contrast to the early-1950s setting of realistic prose: instead of the future, the past becomes the source of inspiration in both understanding and dealing with the present. The social realm of the text also changes: it no longer deals with "the people," but with emperors and ministers. And the central issues no longer revolve around rationally debated topics of economic and social progress, but protagonists who are engaged in power struggles wherein opponents are routinely tortured, poisoned, or slaughtered without even a minimum of mutual respect. The heightened textual pitch is accomplished through exaggeration and crass imagery of language. The battle for the public mind has changed its public: it now addresses only the minds of a small group within the political class. The values upheld by the hero-protagonists and authors alike have also shifted—they move from rational and modern values to the values of traditional heroism, benevolence, justice, and patriotism. The use of the historical play implies that control of the public sphere had become so tight and reckless, and the internal crisis of the land so deep, that only this time-honored and relatively immune genre was left to voice one's concern.

Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose (1992) followed this line of analysis on the interplay of political struggles and

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16   Wagner, *Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 79.

literature. This book explored the potential of literary analysis to illuminate the social, intellectual, and political history of the People's Republic of China.[17] It did so by illustrating the connection between swings in the Party line and variations in the themes and style of literary narratives and criticism. While earlier studies by other authors dealt mostly with governmental policies or literary theories, this book focused on the texts themselves.

Wagner's earlier research into the worlds of modern Chinese literature had made him keenly aware of the inadequacy of conceptual frameworks based on national narratives that attach the past to clearly defined culturally autonomous entities—whether using a comparative approach or that of intercultural transfer. Instead, the culture of an individual or group always shares in a plurality of cultural systems; identity cannot be separated from alterity, and culture should be approached in a deconstructionist manner. In 1981, a position as Fellow of the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University gave Wagner an opportunity to apply his method to research late Qing history. As he soon discovered, Cornell's East Asian library did not yet possess the materials needed for his planned book on China's new post-Maoist literature, but it held a wealth of original and secondary resources on the Taiping Rebellion.

Struck by the discrepancy between the original records and the master narrative, which had made of the Taipings a peasant revolution against landlords and imperialists, he decided to figure out what the Taipings themselves thought they were doing. This seemed to be spelled out in the 1837 vision of Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814-1864), the future Taiping leader, in which he was brought up to heaven and ordered to wipe out the demons who had taken possession of the earth. The actual meaning and role of this vision had been discarded by historians as either the hallucinations of a madman or a ruse to gain followers. However, Wagner found ample evidence in firsthand sources that the Taipings were indeed trying to translate the symbolic repertoire of the vision into the real thing. In his seminal book on Taiping religion,[18] with its thorough exposition of Protestantism and its many endeavors in China, Wagner relied on the *Zhao shu* 詔書 (Book of proclamations)—a collection of religious texts printed and widely distributed

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17   Rudolf G. Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

18   Rudolf G. Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). In a later article, he discusses contemporaneous Western thought about the Taiping Rebellion in more detail, and stresses that it cannot be summarily subsumed under the heading of "colonial thinking." Wagner, "Understanding Taiping Christian China: Analogy, Interest, and Policy," in *Christen und Gewürze. Konfrontation und Interaktion kolonialer und indigener Christentumsvarianten*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 132−157.

by the Taipings—a source seldom used in previous historiography except to castigate superstitious or crude aspects of the movement, and proposed a radically new reading of the rebellion based on carefully built factual evidence: the rebellion had sprung from a Chinese Christian movement with close affinities, but no organizational ties, to evangelical Protestantism in its revivalist form. Wagner's work presented features of events normally considered incompatible. For the Taipings, as much as for Western missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and journalists, the movement defied familiar conceptual categories, and all sides looked for analogies in religious history to grasp its core features and define their actions. The Taipings themselves found their analogy in the *Book of Exodus* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*—they were a Christian sect in China, and acting as such. Western perception of the Taipings and attitudes towards them were driven by debates concerning the most appropriate Western analogy, sought from among the world's great politico-religious historical events. The shift in the main thrust of the evaluation reflected less a shift in the character and fate of the Taiping enterprise than a shift in the religious and political climate in the West, with the main factor being the fading of the transatlantic Protestant revivalist clergy's millennial expectation of an "outpouring of the Spirit" on an international scale. By the late 1850s, they linked obedience to God with obedience to the missionary and foreign authority.

Hermeneutics of modern Chinese political culture and knowledge

After his return to Germany in 1987, as a professor at Heidelberg University, Wagner started working on a new line of research that filled a gap between his early interest in ancient Chinese textual traditions in his student days, and his later investigations of contemporary literature and politics undertaken during nearly a decade of stimulating immersion in the profusion of American libraries and academic life. This new research agenda was envisioned as a collective, to help train students and offer them various topics and approaches to explore. To accomplish this goal, one needed firsthand sources that had not yet been extensively researched. Wagner reached back to his experience of research on the Taipings, for which the materials from the local press had been so rich and illuminating. This material had made him aware of the special role of foreign concessions as workshops of Chinese modernity, at a time when such "foreign enclaves" were neither "bridgeheads for a colonization of China,"[19] nor suspected of being any such thing. Nonetheless, he concluded that these:

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19   Rudolf G. Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision*, 118.

> Enclaves or niches … were not subject to the homogenizing pressure that
> was strongly felt elsewhere in the country. They presented, on Chinese
> soil and protected by cannon, alternative options of ideology, institutions,
> life-style and technology. When the Taipings adopted many features
> from these niches into their own system, they were not submitting to
> foreign pressure but retaining their autonomy, much to the surprise of the
> foreigners. This autonomy was the social precondition for any kind of
> public acceptance of the Taiping program.[20]

Wagner then decided to research the late Qing Chinese press as the breeding
ground of a modern Chinese *Geist*. With the help that his indomitable energy
could galvanize around him from students and young scholars, his university
and colleagues, the state of Baden-Württemberg, and federal institutions such
as the German Research Foundation, he built a professional Chinese studies
library with one of the best microfilm and reprint collections of newspapers
and periodicals published in China. Every year he would travel to China in
search of materials, buying them at local prices and shipping them back in
bulk containers.

In several articles,[21] he explored a range of media including dailies, illustrated
weeklies, and entertainment papers, and looked at factors that influenced their
nature, such as foreign models and managers and first-generation Chinese
journalists, editorialists, and "newspainters" working for pictorials, whose
names were unknown. Thorough multi-archival research allowed him to
disprove the myth—spread by Chinese historians since the 1920s on the basis
of dubious hearsay—that the early Chinese vernacular press was a propaganda
tool of foreign imperialism. He brought to light the connections between the
development of a native press in China and in the wider scene of Europe,

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20   Rudolf G. Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision*, 118. This line of interpretation, in harmony
with a new approach in mainland China's post-1978 historiography, was fully advocated in his
article "Staatliches Machtmonopol und alternative Optionen: Zur Rolle der 'Westlichen Barbaren'
im China des 19. Jahrhunderts" [The discretionary monopoly of the state and alternative options:
on the role of the 'western barbarians' in nineteenth century China], in *Traditionale Gesellschaften
und europäischer Kolonialismus*, ed. Jan-Heeren Grevemeyer (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1981), 105−136.

21   Rudolf G. Wagner, "The *Shenbao* in Crisis: The International Environment and the Conflict
between Guo Songtao and the *Shenbao*," *Late Imperial China* 20, no. 1 (1999): 107−138; Wagner,
"The Early Chinese Newspapers and the Chinese Public Sphere," *European Journal of East Asian
Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1−34; Wagner, "Jinru quanqiu xiangxiang tujing: Shanghai de *Dianshizhai
huabao*" 進入全球想像圖景：上海的 點石齋畫報 [Joining the Global Imaginaire: The Shanghai Illustrated
Newspaper *Dianshizhai huabao*], *Zhongguo xueshu* 8 (4.2001): 1−96; Wagner, "Importing a
'New History' for the New Nation: China 1899," in *Historization − Historisierung*, ed. Glenn
W. Most, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 275−292; Wagner, "The Philologist as
Messiah: Kang Youwei's 1902 Commentary on the Confucian Analects," in *Disciplining Classics −
Altertumswissenschaft als Beruf*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002),
143−168.

Japan, and India. He gave detailed evidence of the early cultural acceptance that the British editor of Shanghai's famous daily, the *Shenbao* 申報, was able to secure—an acceptance that would preclude the Chinese political desire to ban it, even when it was known that the British Foreign Office would not have objected to the move. He showed how the growth of popular media led China to join the global public, and revealed how new social attitudes and values were spread through entertainment papers, such as the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* 點石齋畫報 (1884−1898), which filled the space of newly created urban leisure. In 2007, an edited volume presented the methods and findings of this first stage in the investigation.[22] A complementary publication followed, namely a critical survey of the foreign press in China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[23]

A backdrop to the first stage in this comprehensive examination of the late Qing Chinese-language press was the academically much-discussed issue of a Chinese public sphere—that is, the press offered a new space for debate in a public sphere and was seen as instrumental in China's joining a global imagination and global community. On the structure of the Chinese public sphere, Wagner's serial investigation of newspaper readership, the authorship of letters to the editor, and of published content showed how the public sphere, formerly limited to higher officialdom, soon extended to city-dwellers from all walks of life and encompassed a growing range of subjects. Wagner had said that ever since he read Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere) in 1963, he had in the back of his mind the idea of writing such a book in relation to China.[24] Late in life, he expressed regret that although he had written a several hundred page manuscript on the subject, he could not finish it because he was unsure of his conclusions. However, he wrote several insightful studies on the Republican-era public sphere. His analysis of the 1919 May Fourth Movement highlighted "the institutional maneuvering that gave rise to May Fourth *as* a movement (i.e., an organized mass action masterminded and mobilized by a calculating leadership)."[25] The student demonstration in Peking was consciously crafted and called a movement before it even started—a new form of social action

22   Rudolf G. Wagner, ed., *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870−1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

23   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Don't Mind the Gap! The Foreign-language Press in Late-Qing and Republican China," *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 30/31 (2012), accessed August 14, 2022, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=030_wagner.inc&issue=030.

24   *Wagner Interview*, 49.

25   Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and David Der-wei Wang, "Introduction," in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 1−27; 6−7.

addressed to both the political elite and commoners at large, with a new type of communication, a manifesto, directed to the people on the street. As Wagner writes, "It stressed independent, essentially unarmed, civic action of broad sectors of the populace enlightened as to the essential interests of the nation. It rejected other established forms of political action as ineffectual and damaging."[26] He adds, "The movement saw itself as part of an international upsurge against the big powers and their local representatives and actively copied forms of action employed by other such 'movements,'" especially the Korean independence movement that was reported about enthusiastically and in detail by the Chinese-language press.[27] The participants in the May Fourth demonstrations arrogated for themselves, as "new youth," the role of national vanguard and teacher. May Fourth was neither populist, nor did it champion "the people" or commoners; rather, its protagonists' subjective legitimacy derived from the internationalist logic of oppressed nations struggling to recover their supremacy, and from the Chinese historical role of the educated as remonstrators. The "elitist structure embedded in the notion of the 'movement' gave rise to two alternative definitions of the 'spirit of May Fourth': the first according the role of the elite to the young educated members of the political class; the other to political parties willing and able to stay tuned to, direct, and instigate such 'movements.'"[28]

In his essay, Wagner mapped "the struggle for hegemony over the definition of May Fourth and the control of the political capital it represented" for its three main contenders: the Nationalist Party, the Communist Party, and independent, educated youth.[29] A feature of the struggle was "the recurrent parallelism and contention between state-organized and citizen-organized celebrations."[30] The canonization of May Fourth as a national day (beginning in 1923 for students, and later for schools and the youth) gave priority to the nationalist agenda, which reflected the imperial elite's traditional commitment to national unity, as well as the hope of regaining China's status as a great power.

> The price paid for this nationalist agenda was the hectic search, be it in literature, the economy, or revolution, for shortcuts to a world leadership …, with the result of a deep provincialism made up of cheap borrowings,

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26   Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital*, 66−120; 82.

27   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 91.

28   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 67.

29   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 67.

30   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 68.

heightened self-righteousness, and the claim that all of China's problems were due to imperialist evildoings.[31]

The very "self-righteousness encoded in the 'spirit of May Fourth' prompted its protagonists to use a state power they were otherwise often critical of in order to effect the re-education of their benighted countrymen; in this process they did not refrain from resorting to terrorist methods."[32] Inevitably, this reliance on state power severely curtailed the citizenry's leeway within the public sphere. Through the policy of cultural re-education under Party rule, "the citizens were required not only to silently tolerate state action, just as they had been in the past, but also actively verbalize and express their new cultural consciousness as the progressive 'mass.' At the same time the integration of a large part of the intelligentsia in this re-education effort deprived the populace of articulate and legitimate spokesmen for their woes."[33] Wagner adds, "The cultural desertification of China pursued by the Nationalist government during the 'destroy superstition' movement of the late 1920s as well as by the Communist government after 1949 (and not only during the Cultural Revolution) were well within the May Fourth agenda" of a "radical break with Confucianism, Christianity, and popular beliefs."[34] By its fierce "attack on the moral values upheld by the various belief systems present in China," the May Fourth Movement "unwittingly helped to create a moral vacuum into which the diverse governments moved with a value propaganda running directly counter to some of the core tenets of May Fourth, especially the need to foster the development of a self-assertive and independent-minded individual."[35] Whether spread by Nationalist or Communist leadership, the "new morality" preached individual subordination to a mixture of party orders and select Confucian virtues.

Enhanced with encyclopedic references from world art and history, a thorough critical search of numerous rare Chinese sources, and a great sense of humor, two of Wagner's iconoclastic articles carefully deconstructed the mausoleums built for Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, as well as the ritual and ceremony surrounding them.[36] The articles bring to light many intended,

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31   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 68.

32   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 68.

33   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 68.

34   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 69.

35   Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," 69.

36   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Ritual, Architecture, Politics, and Publicity during the Republic: Enshrining Sun Yat-sen," in *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts*, ed. Jeffrey W. Cody, Nancy S. Steinhardt, and Tony Atkin (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 223−278; Wagner, "Reading the

contested, and actual symbolic elements and meanings of these stone texts. Wagner points out that both leaders were enshrined as Party heads, not heads of state, and that the monuments' structural principles were centrality and unity, directly inspired by American and Soviet models. However, he stresses that Mao, unlike Sun, is not enshrined as a patriot or a united-front character, but as a communist. "The dominant emblem to characterize him is the international Communist flag with its hammer and sickle referring to workers and peasants."[37] Moreover, despite Mao's statue as a smiling teacher sitting comfortably in an armchair with a peaceful Chinese landscape behind him, the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, erected in Tiananmen Square, the heart of the nation, in a central position on the imperial axis, facing north, confronts and challenges the assembled south-facing Party leadership on Tiananmen Gate, as a "remonstrative Maoist sore in the center of the nation."[38]

Such studies of the political culture sponsored and shaped by Chinese higher officialdom and its own power concerns had their limitations, lacking, for example, sufficient evidence of the real impact they had on the public. Wagner preferred areas of inquiry where the dynamic engagements between cultures called for a transcultural focus, with special attention to asymmetric cultural flows and their agency. He saw transcultural interaction as the lifeline of Chinese culture as of all others. Beyond the late Qing press as a space and tool for the newly emerging public sphere, he focused on the channels and devices of the cultural flow of modern knowledge into China. His methodical browsing of advertisements in early Chinese dailies made him aware of the amazing number of encyclopedic dictionaries and comprehensive reference works on "new" or "Western" knowledge published in the last imperial and early Republican decades, and he strove to gather together the best possible collection of these popular, ephemeral works, now rarely kept by public or private libraries. From this huge and hitherto unexplored literature, he reconstructed a forgotten mainstay in the actual process of inflow and transfusion of foreign knowledge and ideas into the Chinese world of thought.

In the introduction to the edited volume published in 2014 with his friend and colleague Milena Doleželová-Velingerová,[39] he highlights a well-established traditional Chinese encyclopedia culture, the role of encyclopedic works in spreading modern scientific knowledge among a wide Western public, and the

Chairman Mao Memorial Hall: The Tribulations of the Implied Pilgrim," in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China,* ed. Susan Naquin and Chu Yuan-fang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 378−423.

37   Wagner, "Reading the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall," 408.

38   Wagner, "Reading the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall," 417.

39   Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Rudolf G. Wagner, ed., *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930): Changing Ways of Thought* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014).

ongoing contest between old and new styles of reference. For many centuries, Chinese encyclopedic reference works came in two types. One type addressed a literati audience and was compiled "as a source of learned quotation and conversation," with writings transmitted from the past.[40] Such works "drew explicitly on authority rather than first-hand evidence for the reliability of their entries. They grouped quotations under relevant headings (such as 'dream'), which they then organized according to the triad of heaven, earth, and man. A table of contents ensured easy access via this familiar taxonomy."[41] Standards of relevance and usefulness for these "books arranged by category" (*leishu* 類書), as they were called, were generally framed by the requirements of the imperial examinations and home government. Finally, they "contained no substantial information about the world at large."[42] The other type of encyclopedic works— which began to appear in the thirteenth century—were a commercial business and were directed to more general consumers; these works provided "practical, useful, condensed information about a broad range of daily concerns. … They combined authoritative quotations with newly written texts, and were published in ever-updated, revised, or pirated versions."[43]

The various types of Western encyclopedic works, such as the *Cyclopaedia* of Abraham Rees and *Chambers's Information for the People*, were brought to China by foreign missionaries, used in their publications, and given to Chinese high officials, such as Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785−1850), who drew on them for their own writings as early as 1835. Wagner pinpoints the many difficulties in changing the knowledge system, which involved displacing the intricate traditional Chinese common knowledge system. As Zhong Shaohua writes in the same volume, the "inclusion of concepts and structures borrowed wholesale from the West" demonstrate how the Chinese embraced this new "systematic method of expression."[44] The preliminary step of sheer "knowledge of the alphabet and of the material objects familiar to Western culture" was hard to overcome. "In terms of breadth and depth, the new learning also far exceeded

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40   Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Rudolf G. Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930): Changing Ways of Thought (Introduction)," in *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge*, 1−28; 6.

41   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 6.

42   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 6.

43   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 7.

44   Zhong Shaohua, "Studies on the Characteristics of Late Qing Encyclopedia Entries," in *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)*, 425−452; 430.

the scope encompassed by traditional Chinese common knowledge."[45] Wagner provides a chronology of the new Chinese-language reference works and an analysis of their successive features. Although further research may complete or qualify his interpretations, they clearly show several evolutionary stages. The first new-style Chinese reference works appeared in the 1880s, a good twenty years after Japan, and on a smaller scale, with less expertise and no governmental support. Unlike earlier Chinese-language missionary publications on common knowledge, these works were based on up-to-date, firsthand Chinese observations and analysis, grouped under new taxonomic headings intended for the practical needs of Chinese diplomats and their staff. For self-study and school instruction, they provided the "integrated modernization package" that fostered both national salvation and new career options. After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese war (1895), the number of such works thought to help overcome the asymmetry of power between East and West greatly increased. Gradually, they also began to introduce "a new conceptual taxonomy" that expressed—through "newly formed Chinese-language key terms and terminologies"—Western scientific knowledge and the "institutions that conveyed, managed, and translated them into practice."[46] These works included novel information about China itself drawn from writings by Chinese and foreign cultural brokers familiar and conversant with both East and West.

In Shanghai, the new technology of lithography made the speedy publication of massive works at modest prices possible, and the nationwide book distribution network pioneered by Ernst Major's Shenbaoguan Publishing Company in the International Settlement, and hence outside government control, reached a Chinese readership in every province. A new surge of reference works followed the "Reform of Governance" (*xinzheng* 新政) edict of 1901: several dozen books were published every year for three consecutive years, driven by the introduction of Western subjects into the imperial examinations. However, even after the 1905 abolition of the old examination system, production remained high, with several works appearing each year, until the fall of the imperial regime in 1912. The works themselves exhibited a heightened professionalism (using well-designed Japanese exemplars as their main source) and developed along two tracks: "compilations of systematic and factual information on the one hand, and efforts to overcome the terminological confusion through precise definitions of the new key concepts and terminologies in the style of encyclopedic

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45   Zhong, "Studies on the Characteristics of Late Qing Encyclopedia Entries," 430.

46   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 12.

dictionaries."[47] Wagner stresses that while in quantity and quality they were no match for their Japanese counterparts, the availability of encyclopedic knowledge in China by the fall of the empire went far beyond what scholarship had hitherto acknowledged, and should be valued as an important backdrop to the New Culture Movement. Indeed, publication of reference works dried up in the early Republican era and it is only in 1919 that the Commercial Press launched the *Riyong baikequanshu* 日用百科全書 (Everyday Encyclopedia), which dominated the market throughout the Republican period. In the 1920s, the trend favored specialized encyclopedic dictionaries of new knowledge in a single field, such as social problems, education, philosophy, and the like. Through the "radical modernism of their perspective, content, and organization and the multilingual competence of their editors, they resolutely joined the 'new culture,' and rang the death knell for the works of the first generation. The older works faded from memory as quaint efforts from the past and the last gasps of a dying dynasty."[48] Only a recently growing interest in vernacular knowledge has turned some attention to this body of work.

Another analytical essay in the same volume looks at eight of these older works, published between 1887 and 1911, and focuses on three questions. The first relates to editing and content; the second concerns the degree of acceptance or commonality of the information and value judgments conveyed by the works; the third deals with the actual circulation and popularization of the new commonplaces crafted in them. As an example, Wagner looks at the entries about the periodical press, especially the privately owned newspaper, a new agent in the late Qing cultural world. The finely edited 1887 work combines fully referenced quotations of firsthand observations from Chinese diaries and travelogues with a "systematic summary of the topic," which adds "substantial new information;" this "provided a convincing framework from which later compilers felt no need to depart."[49] Large-scale copying was standard practice so "the different encyclopedias do not present radically different orderings and evaluations of the new information about the West":[50] neither do they show a strong concern for keeping their data up to date. However, each work organizes the information under different categories: in the first two works, newspapers are discussed under the heading "government"; they are then moved to the

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47   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 17.

48   Doleželová-Velingerová and Wagner, "Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)," 19.

49   Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Formation of Encyclopaedic Commonplaces During the Late Qing: Entries on the Newspaper," in *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870−1930)*, 103−136; 105, 109.

50   Wagner, "The Formation of Encyclopaedic Commonplaces During the Late Qing," 109.

"postal system," and in 1902 to "education." But another work published that same year places them under "parliament," as a means to communicate information and opinion publicly. The first encyclopedia published under the Republic ignored newspapers altogether, although the entry re-appeared in 1925 as part of "social education"; in the 1934 edition, newspapers were given a separate, long entry that included Chinese newspapers, but again placed them in connection with "schools" and "libraries." These shifts show that the place of newspapers in the order of things remained contested, and that they were seen more as cultural instruments than a basic requirement for sound politics. Yet a basic and quite sophisticated framework regarding commonly accepted information and evaluation of newspapers is provided in the first reference work published in 1887: newspapers serve communication between high and low—they are a medium for publicly addressing information and bringing critical opinions to the ruler's attention, as was the practice in ancient China; they have a strong impact in spreading technical and political ideas, but may become instruments of upheaval and libel, thus needing regulation and control. The 1897 reference work adds the value of the press for business and all kinds of extra-governmental uses. It stresses that "the blossoming of the papers reflects the vitality of public opinion," and deplores China's tardiness in this regard;[51] this feature receives less attention in later works. The 1911 encyclopedic dictionary introduces a sharp analytical distinction between the essays on political and social issues in journals (*zazhi* 雜誌) and the factual information in newspapers (*xinwenzhi* 新聞紙). It links the post-1901 flurry of Chinese magazine publications to the earlier practice of serial collections, and situates this development in global history. Seen as a whole, this dictionary emphasizes a formal and rigorous set of definitions.

Through these reference works, a pool of commonplaces had developed that writers of different persuasions drew upon. The investigation of contemporaneous texts shows how authors relied on the detailed information borrowed from encyclopedias to develop their own ideas—for instance in the case of Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848−1908) on issues such as the need to relax control over private papers, and combine them with more and better official papers at every governmental level, in order to enlighten a much larger proportion of the citizenry and the translation of the best foreign papers for daily imperial use and the wide circulation of key contents through official Chinese papers. In addition, compilations of model examination essays display an artful mixture of material and conceptual discourse drawn from various encyclopedias with diverging views. Wagner argues perceptively that "the encyclopedias were mostly geared towards a rapidly expanding market

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51   Wagner, "The Formation of Encyclopaedic Commonplaces During the Late Qing," 119.

for knowledge about the West."[52] He adds that "they were part of a widely dispersed and shared body of knowledge and assumptions"; however, because they did not possess the authority enjoyed by similar works in Europe or Japan at the time, "They lacked the capacity to authoritatively define their terms or their order of things."[53]

Dynamics of transcultural interaction: probing the concept of asymmetry as an analytical tool

Wagner's interest lay in mapping out the broadest possible context for the shift of knowledge that blended Western ideas and paradigms with the cultural outlook of educated Chinese in the late Qing. He looked thoroughly at original texts,[54] seeking to discover which parts of the native Chinese intellectual framework accommodated the inflow of challenging new ideas and social practices, and how they did so. In several detailed articles, he pinpoints the role played by interpretations of the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Ritual of Zhou) in Chinese acceptance and advocacy of foreign ideas and institutions.[55] He does not mock the argument that Western knowledge conformed to the teachings and practices of the ancient Chinese sage kings—hence making it ultimately of Chinese origin—nor does he dismiss it as a ludicrous device of feeble-minded conservatives aimed at eschewing blame for giving in to the barbarians, as was the habit of many Chinese and foreign critics both then and now. Instead, he takes the idea seriously, and shows that beyond its use by Taiping leaders ever since Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 in 1860, the *Zhouli* was read by the staunchest Chinese reformers as a handbook for state management. In their eyes, this old classic described what state institutions *should* do, and they used it as a blueprint for the reforms they advocated, thereby generating, in Wagner's words,

> an alternative for both the state and the understanding of the classics that had the cultural advantage of representing modernization along Western

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52   Wagner, "The Formation of Encyclopaedic Commonplaces During the Late Qing," 132.

53   Wagner, "The Formation of Encyclopaedic Commonplaces During the Late Qing," 133.

54   He highlighted many texts, especially Sun Yirang's writings and commentaries on the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Ritual of Zhou).

55   Rudolf G. Wagner, "The *Zhouli* as the Late Qing Path to the Future," in *Statecraft and Classical Learning: The Rituals of Zhou in East Asian History*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman and Martin Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 359−387; Wagner, "Denouement: Some Conclusions about the *Zhouli*," in *Statecraft and Classical Learning,* Elman and Kern, 388−396; Wagner, "A Classic Paving the Way to Modernity: The *Ritual of Zhou* in the Chinese Reform Debate Since the Taiping Civil War," in *Modernity's Classics,* ed. Sarah C. Humphreys and Rudolf G. Wagner (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 77−100, and the "Introduction" to the same volume.

lines as a return to the true and forgotten dispensations of the sages of Chinese antiquity. This argumentation eased anxieties about asymmetries in cultural exchanges, while keeping the way open for an emulation of foreign features considered beneficial.[56]

However, Wagner stresses that the exclusive focus on the state's agency in the *Zhouli* marginalized the contribution of society, which was not conceptualized at all. This tendency may account for the fact that all modern Chinese reformers were primarily "state-minded" and had little interest in an active and autonomous national role for society.

Going further in textual decoding of the late Qing, Wagner found fertile ground in deciphering the catchwords, metaphors, and iconography of China's imagined awakening and partition.[57] In two long essays, he brought to fruition the archaeology of images, which he started in his book on Taiping religion and refined in his study of the first Chinese pictorial, the *Dianshizhai huabao*. He extends the study of basic political concepts as expressed in native words for "state" or "nation" into the medium of images that take their material from a reservoir of metaphors and allegories. Inspired by the works of Koselleck and Hans Blumenberg—but critical of their view concerning the incidental role of metaphor in conceptual history—he points out that in Plato's example of the city, which like a ship is doomed without a qualified navigator (quoted by Blumenberg), a metaphor does not "simply illustrate existing concepts, ... they can be crucial elements of historical experience that enter into the constitution of these concepts."[58] He then compares various versions of a cartoon published in Hong Kong in July 1899 by Tse Tsan Tai (Xie Zuantai 謝纘泰), a Christian Australian of Chinese descent. According to its creator, the cartoon was "designed to arouse the Chinese nation and to warn the people of the impending danger of the partitioning of the Empire by the foreign powers."[59] Its Chinese title was *Shiju quantu* 時局全圖 (Complete illustration of the contemporary situation) and its English subtitle "The situation in the Far East." It showed the foreign powers, symbolized by animals, taking hold of parts of China. The animals are inscribed with English-language statements of purpose, which are summarized in a Chinese text at the bottom. China itself is a blank space. On the upper left-hand side, a short Chinese poem without an English counterpart

56   Wagner, "A Classic Paving the Way," 77.

57   Rudolf G. Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening': A Study in Conceptualizing Asymmetry and Coping with It," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1 (2011): 4−139; Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon, *guafen* 瓜分: The Fate of a Transcultural Metaphor in the Formation of National Myth," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1 (2017): 9−122.

58   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 8.

59   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 17.

deplores the fact that China is in deep sleep, and urges the nation to wake up now, before it is sliced up like a watermelon. Wagner painstakingly documents the successive versions of the print, known as the image of "China carved up like a melon," and their distribution in journals and newspapers, as postcards or individual prints. In his 2011 essay, he focuses on the sleep metaphor, which first appeared in 1884 in connection with the Sino-French War. Its use increases in reformist writings after 1896, especially those by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873−1929); after 1900 it spreads to a variety of publications and "sleeping China" is now portrayed as a sleeping giant or lion. After China's 1895 defeat in the war with Japan, Chinese authors often disparagingly referred to an English-language article published in 1887 by Zeng Jize 曾紀澤 (1839-1890), the Chinese minister to London, Paris, and St. Petersburg, who claimed that China had awakened, strengthened her defenses, overcome huge rebellions, and proved able to protect her tributary states.

Wagner's research shows that the sleep/awakening metaphor as applied to nations appeared in Europe in the fifteenth century. It was widely used in the eighteenth century and applied to other communities as well. By the nineteenth century, it was routinely used in writings and for creating popular images, satirizing Britain and Germany alike. After the 1850s, the metaphor was commonplace in European writings on Turkey, and the Chinese reformers of 1898 reproduced it as a warning that sleep led to dismemberment by foreign powers.

> By the end of the 19th century, the metaphoric transition from sleep to awakening was used in Japan to frame a general master narrative that described the sudden and shocking transition from traditional ways to modernity in nations that were characterized by this double distance, which they had further increased by a conscious policy of closing themselves off from the rest of the world.[60]

Regarding India, it was used by the British historian Robert Mackenzie in 1880, in his authoritative book *The Nineteenth Century, a History*, translated into Chinese in 1898. Already in 1872, the visual metaphor of sleeping nations (including China) crops up as images in the foreign satirical journal *Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari*. In fact, Zeng Jize's 1887 article was met with lively discussion in both the foreign press and the English-language press in China and Hong Kong (from where it was translated and picked up by the Chinese-language papers). The gradual spread of this translingual and transcultural debate shows no evidence of partisanship linked to ethnic, national, or linguistic affiliation. While the ensuing controversy quickly faded, it reappeared in January 1895 with the publication of an article by

60   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 48.

Lord Wolseley, Chief of Staff of the British army, entitled "China and Japan," which fueled the debate for many years to come, both in China and abroad. The author stressed that China's slumber was due to bad government alone, while the people had enormous potential and would soon overtake Europe and America if only they found their Napoleon.

Chinese publications and statements that mixed image and text, along with many political cartoons, showed "a clear understanding of the different and interlaced dynamics of an asymmetry of power as well as an asymmetry in cultural flows."[61] In all of these depictions, China's weakness is self-inflicted; no foreign power is credited with bringing about the country's present abysmal state. "The crisis was not caused by foreign powers that were intrinsically stronger than China, but by the corrosion of China's own internal structures, which made the country easy prey for outsiders."[62] Wagner adds, "This line of reasoning opens a field of meaningful action for reformers and revolutionists who may dare to take on their own enfeebled government, but shy away from taking on the [foreign] Powers, especially because the latter are also the source of the 'civilization' towards which these rebels are trying to push their own polity."[63] Only in the last years of the Qing does one find some deviation from the metaphor and consensus that China's sleep was self-inflicted, when massive foreign loans and opium—a product associated with the Opium War and banned by the government in 1906—were treated as foreign tools used to keep China asleep. Up to the present day, the vocabulary and imagery of China's sleep and awakening have remained recurrent themes in literary and political writings.

In this research, Wagner brings to light the fact that metaphor and image focus on a critical situation, impacting the audience through the suggestion of an urgently needed practical action. As he writes, "The agenda was to awaken nationalist commitment, and the strategy was a combination of shaming the audience/onlookers into such a commitment, and showing the potential utopian result."[64] The metaphor and image form part of the material and experience on the basis of which a new abstract concept of nation is synthesized. The concrete form of presentation turns the abstract concept into a potentially powerful political engine. Although the conceptual generalization succeeds the metaphorical or visual articulation, it retains traces of its origin. The translingual and transcultural flow of political concepts, metaphors, and images is mediated in the nineteenth century "by the global spread of text and image

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61   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 79−80.

62   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 111.

63   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 111.

64   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 132.

media," by cultural brokers familiar with both their own space and globalized public discourse, and by "translingual and transcultural contact in contact zones, such as ports."[65] The speed, focus, and intensity of the flows peak in crisis moments, and the harvested foreign material then completely recasts the vernacular language, rhetoric, and imagery. Such massive flows presuppose an external resource that matured long enough to provide a large quantity of consistent material. Nevertheless, "The dominant agency driving the flows is not in the push or imposition by an external power, but in the pull exerted by people who assume the role of cultural brokers."[66] These brokers come from different ethnic groups, nationalities, and linguistic backgrounds, and act for all kinds of personal, social, or economic reasons. However, "Their agency hinges on a 'market bet,' namely, that their cultural products (translations, images etc.) will find buyers or followers."[67] The material carried in these flows, "if successful, will spread further inland from the brokers and the contact zones through print or other media."[68] The spread shows evidence of a highly uneven density of the public sphere, or rather "a dual public sphere with one part integrated in the global flow, while the other, the hinterland, is very much cut off and only thinly fed by the contact zones."[69] Wagner continues:

> The metaphor of "China asleep" is an effort to conceptually grasp the instability of a complex asymmetry in agency and power vis-à-vis the Powers. The perception of this asymmetry and the resulting historical energy differs depending on which side one identifies with. For the speaker/artist/onlooker identifying with the "sleeping China" in this critical environment, the scenario suggests an anxiety, which might end up mobilizing his or her energies to "wake" up and, depending on the reading, realize the potential buried in the sleeping giant, level or inverse *(sic)* the asymmetry in agency and power, or to avoid the issue. For the speaker/artist/onlooker identifying with the surrounding Powers, the scenario presented in the metaphor and image suggests an anxiety, which might prompt efforts to keep China asleep so as to maintain the asymmetry in power and flows, to prepare for a confrontation over the spoils should China not wake up at all, or, to the contrary, follow an utopian path by actively contributing to a leveling of the prevailing asymmetries.[70]

65   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 133.

66   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 133.

67   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 134.

68   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 134.

69   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 134.

70   Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening,'" 134−135.

In his second essay on political metaphor, Wagner goes back to the cartoons of 1899−1900 that address the partition of China, and investigates the sources of the "cutting China up like a watermelon" (*guafen* 瓜分) metaphor, which has been part of mainland China's master narrative of foreign power policy since 1949. He also endeavors to "assess the relationship between the *guafen* narrative and historical reality."[71]

As Wagner writes, "*Guafen* 瓜分, 'watermelon-cutting,' has been used since Chinese antiquity as an unmarked metaphorical concept for dividing up."[72] However, recorded textual uses are fairly rare. He explains, "It occurs in the Warring States period as a term for neighbors dividing up the territory of a state amongst themselves. Until modern times, *guafen* was one of the many more or less 'dead' metaphors that have entered all common languages."[73] Evidence from available databases shows that the term gained new life in policy-related texts as a legal category used to translate the Western concept of "partition" in relation to Poland. "While originally its use was due to the lack of a suitable noun in Chinese, its metaphorical character ended up fostering lively and emotional reactions among the broad [Chinese] public."[74] Exhaustive unearthing and review of every Chinese-language mention of Polish partition—the first appearing before 1834 in the British missionary Robert Morrison's sketch of the history of foreign countries—reveals that Xu Jiyu's 徐繼畬 1848 world geography, *Yinghuan zhilüe* 瀛寰志略 (Sketch of the globe), a widely read work in China and Japan, "pioneered the use of *guafen* 瓜分 rather than just *fen* [cut] in its treatment of Polish partition."[75]

From an impressive array of primary sources, Wagner documents in detail the development of related terminology and notions in the Chinese historical and legal vocabulary, and shows that since the 1860s the term *guafen* carried a heavy value judgment against such unlawful actions, with precedents drawn from Poland, Turkey, and other countries. "By 1890, the potential partition of China itself became a topic of discussion and concern in China,"[76] and some writers explored the possible benefits of this for both China and the foreign powers. In 1887, Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 wrote in his *Riben guozhi* 日本國誌 (Chronicle of Japan), published in 1895, that Europe "had greatly benefitted

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71   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 11.

72   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 11.

73   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 13.

74   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 15−16.

75   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 23.

76   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 33.

from the fragmentation of the Roman Empire into different states,"[77] and that the same would be true for China. Intense discussion by Chinese authors of the partition as a distinct threat to China began in 1895 after the Shimonoseki Treaty with Japan, when the prospect was widely featured in the foreign press abroad and in China. The topic was, in fact, introduced to Chinese readers by Westerners who published Chinese-language papers committed to China's progress, first by the *Wanguo gongbao* 萬國公報 (*A Review of the Times*) in January 1895. While the discussion of *guafen* as a polemic narrative of illegitimate partition was frequent in reformist journals and books, relying on fully translated foreign-press articles, it barely appeared in commercial dailies. "The agenda that came with the *guafen* narrative, however, was one of urgent reform."[78] Once Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858−1927) met the emperor in 1898, he tried to establish the *guafen* narrative and its agenda within the language of the political center, sending the sovereign the detailed *Bolan fenmie ji* 波蘭分滅記 (Record of Poland's partition and demise) together with his essays on successful reforms in Japan and Russia. After the Empress Dowager's coup d'état (September 21, 1898) forced reformers into exile, their pamphlets and journals emphasized the responsibility of the court and high officialdom for the dangers of partition. The media explosion in China after 1900 "did not come with a concomitant spread of the *guafen* narrative and its agenda"; that narrative and agenda "did not make it into the mainstream of commercial papers and journals but remained concentrated in a substantial, but still marginal section of media directly associated with the reformers … as well as some political novels, new stage plays, and poems."[79]

An international visual language had long illustrated the concept of partition, with a famous 1773 map-print of Poland showing its neighbors marking out shares and captioning the country a "cake". Associating territory with a delicacy and partition with a dinner party soon became an established norm. The depiction of China as a fat pig is often documented in Chinese and Japanese cartoons, and sometimes even simple maps used captions or figurines to depict foreign spheres of influence. While foreign press cartoonists favored cakes and dinners, "With the beginning of the Qing court's 'reform of governance' (*xinzheng* 新政) in 1901, the main focus quickly became the threat of an 'awakening' China,"[80] now pictured as a huge sword above the heads of hungry diners. In the Chinese advocacy press, the use of the term *guafen* continued into the first decade of the twentieth century,

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77   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 34.

78   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 57.

79   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 80.

80   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 102.

but was inflated to account for new developments familiar to its readers, such as the expansion of railroads and mining with the help of foreign investors and generous bribes. Cartoons, plays, and novels turned out to be the most effective media for reaching wider audiences, especially with "the discovery of *guafen* as a lively metaphorical expression that would relate the danger for the country in terms of everyday experience."[81] In 1904, a new opera linking Turkey and Poland with a watermelon sliced on stage became hugely popular. The melon as a common icon was shared by political essays, dramas, poetry, paintings, and cartoons alike. However, Wagner argues that "the *guafen* storyline did not get enough traction in the public sphere during these early years to become a significant tool of discursive power."[82] The late Qing government, as well as Sun Yat-sen and Republican governments, all wanted foreign capital and technology to develop China, and believed that by involving multiple, competing foreign powers, China's territorial integrity would be protected. In 1932, the Chinese Communist Party picked up the *guafen* story, and after it came to power in 1949, "The *guafen* narrative was elevated to become the defining feature of imperialist policies" towards China, without gaining "in factual credibility for either the late Qing or any later period until now."[83] In recent years, some bold painters have revived an older meaning of the *guafen* metaphor, "namely the dividing of spoils among, for example, the members of a robber band."[84]

Wagner's two studies on the metaphors of sleep and watermelon-cutting explore similar themes. In both articles, Wagner makes a substantial contribution to conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), highlighting the decisive role of metaphor in the shifting formations of a concept. In so doing, he asks us to consider the following:

> the dynamics of transcultural interaction in the formation of concepts; the role of platforms other than words in articulating concepts; the impact of the systemic environment of concepts and that of the actual usage of concepts on their valuation; the agenda associated with them, and their antonyms; the reach of their application in public discourse and the efforts to expand it to gain hegemony; the benefits and costs of their metaphorical visualization; their place in a contest about an accurate reflection of historical reality; and their continued use in propaganda after historical reality had falsified their definitory claim.[85]

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81   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 103.

82   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 108.

83   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 110.

84   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 111.

85   Wagner, "Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon," 117.

Both pieces were experimental demonstrations of methods and interpretive arguments that he had been devising, mulling over, and refining through years of work with Chinese texts and representations that crossed centuries, against the background of his own deep and wide understanding of Western learning and cultures.

Wagner's last two published essays appear in the form of epistemological commentary and reflections on his work as a historian and the agenda for historians of China. In fact, the first essay, published in the University of Chicago journal *Know*, sounds like a manifesto.[86] It discusses and documents three examples of new knowledge related to governance, in order to deny any essentialization of East and West: first, "the perception of the Chinese system of governance as instrumental in securing a stable order over a vast territory over a long stretch of time in Europe between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries"; second, "the perception in China after 1860 of 'wealth and power' resulting from a new system of government in Western Europe and the United States"; and third, "the effective projection of a commitment to just governance" in nearly all Eurasian states between the seventh and eighteenth centuries, through a public drum or bell used to voice complaints or give advice—a device adopted from China.[87] As Wagner makes clear,

> The ways of knowing are intrinsically connected to the ways of forming, acquiring, and communicating knowing. In all three cases, knowing and its communication are connected to a crisis mode of the polity with the people who are supposed to be professionals in knowing, such as government advisors and journalists publicly conveying their understanding of the main problem of the polity to the powerholder as well as others of their own kind. … they acted as brokers of knowledge, selecting relevant knowledge from abroad and presenting it in a form suited to the presumed desires of their patrons, whether they be rulers, elites, or the public at large. They are bridging an asymmetry of relevant knowledge that often comes with asymmetric power dynamics. The neocolonial assumption that agency in asymmetric power rests with the superior party is not supported by actual processes.[88]

That is to say, "The agency in transcultural interaction is with the pull and not the push."[89]

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86   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?" *Know* 2, no. 1 (2018): 31−46.

87   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 32−33.

88   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 43−45.

89   Rudolf G. Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," in *Engaging Transculturality:*

Wagner goes on to stress that all the cultures involved in his three examples "made use of and benefitted from cultural imports in developing the knowledge about themselves."[90] He explains:

> In this sense, transcultural interaction is the lifeline of culture. Without it, cultures dry up under the management of the upholders and beneficiaries of orthodoxy and lose the capacity to recognize and deal with historical change. But this is only one half of the story. Culture is also the anchor of identity. This comes with a claim to authenticity. The result is that cultures constantly take from others what seems to promise a desired result, and then very often deny this ever happened. This denial of the importance of transculturality is much older than the nation-state, but the nation-state has taken on the role of the modern administrator of memory. … This has produced an entire set of tropes such as, in China, the endless repetition of *you Zhongguo tese,* things "having something particularly Chinese," that extends across the board from Marxism to food and ethics. Similar propositions are heard in Europe, for example, about music, philosophy, democracy, or science. These tropes have merged into a mother trope of Eastern and Western ways of thinking and knowing, which often is claiming the authority of specialists in the field.[91]

One outcome of this phenomenon, Wagner adds, "is the often systematic marginalization or deletion of evidence for the importance of transcultural interaction. This dramatically reduces relevant sources for scholars working in the field."[92] Wagner sounds an indignant outcry about the resulting conundrum: "The burden of proof for transcultural interaction has even been increased."[93]

Wagner's last essay maps "the explanatory power of the concept of asymmetry" as an analytical tool for the study of transcultural interaction onto a case study of the development of the Chinese press.[94] Basing the definition of asymmetry on its use in the natural sciences (especially biology and physics)—as a property of physical and abstract systems—he notes, "Many processes in observable asymmetrical and chaotic reality tend towards the establishment of symmetry"; there is a dynamic relationship

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Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies, ed. Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter (London: Routledge, 2019), 15−38; 18; Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 45.

90   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 45.

91   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 45−46.

92   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 46.

93   Wagner, "Can We Speak of East/West Ways of Knowing?," 46.

94   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 34.

between asymmetry and symmetry, or rather, "between high and low levels of fluctuating asymmetry," and this dynamic tends towards accommodating more symmetry and sustainable order than chaos.[95] In the field of the humanities, asymmetry describes the comparative perception of two entities regarding their functionality or adjustment to a given purpose. If that perception defines those entities as "asymmetrical in the degree of their functionality, a historical agency is released to overcome this asymmetry, because the given feature of the other is more enjoyable, powerful, beautiful, efficient, and so on."[96] If the entities involved are cultures or social bodies such as nations, this perception results in asymmetrical exchanges, where one entity draws more from the other than vice versa.

Wagner insists, "Both the reality of asymmetry and the lofty goal of symmetry are pervasively present in history, … and even universally present in the interaction between cultures."[97] In his view, "while the terms might not be used, the language of historical protagonists suggests that there is an intrinsic dynamism in the perception of asymmetry to overcome it."[98] The abstract modern formulation of asymmetry takes up this internal dynamic and thus qualifies as a hermeneutic concept for the analysis of the perception of historical actors and their ensuing agency (much better, in fact, than the comparative *ex post facto* concepts imposed by the social sciences). The use of asymmetry as an explanatory concept requires that one neglects "elements and processes unknown to or disregarded by the historical protagonists" while simultaneously "highlighting their construction of an environment framed by binaries."[99] Wagner sharply ascribes modern scholarship's reluctance to use the concept of asymmetry to the stigma of political incorrectness—attaching itself as it were to value judgments such as who is more advanced or stronger, and who is less so—"even though the sources constantly operate with and act on just such judgments."[100] In his view, "Modern scholarship has reduced the perceived asymmetry in the functionality of cultural or political features to an 'objective' asymmetry in power. This tendency has been most prominently pronounced in postcolonial scholarship in the wake of Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978)."[101] With several examples from ancient and

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95   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 15.

96   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 16−17.

97   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 17.

98   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 17.

99   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 17.

100   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 17.

101   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 17.

modern Eurasian history, Wagner artfully shows that the historical record does not support the latter line of argumentation. He highlights once again that the "agency in transcultural interaction is with the pull and not the push," and provides stunning evidence from an arsenal of Chinese classics, modern cartoons, and contemporary art, that the "driving force behind the action is the perception of the degree of asymmetry. Perceiving an asymmetry of power as the marker of functionality will release an intense form of agency to balance it out, or reverse it, but only a mild form of agency on the other side to counter these efforts so as to maintain or even enhance a dominant position. The actual mechanism, in other words, is the reverse of what has [commonly] been claimed."[102]

We are forewarned, however, that although a hermeneutic approach is highly suitable for reconstructing the perception and motivation of actors' actions, it also follows the logic of binary relationships with an "other," which could represent an essentialized collective made up of many parts, such as "the West" or "the Orient," thereby covering up more complex processes. In addition, Wagner comments on what he calls "massive translation": a high "level of transcultural interaction where the 'translated' items are no longer absorbed within an existing system, but end up creating a new system in which they play a key or even the dominant role";[103] if this "occurs on a regional or global scale, the result will be shared core features existing under a surface of seeming diversity."[104] He defines two characteristics of the process of transcultural interaction: "the appropriation of all that seems of interest together with the simultaneous or retroactive claim to authenticity, the denial of its relevance, and the marginalization of the related evidence in heritage preservation and scholarship."[105] Finally, he draws up a list of sixteen insightful key propositions to chart the study of cultural interaction with sound critical method and purpose. A summary of his research on Chinese-language newspapers, organized in accord with these key propositions, ends the essay, as an illustration of the validity and richness of the concept of asymmetry.

However, in conclusion, I go back to the weakness of asymmetry as a concept, which may be best summarized by Wagner himself:

> Its weakness thus is that it juxtaposes essentialized and dehistoricized features and does not cover the actual complexity of the historical process. The historical process involves multiple interactions with fluctuating asymmetries in many different fields and, most importantly, participants

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102   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 18.

103   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 23.

104   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 23.

105   Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction," 24.

with a wide range of differing assessments of the causes and proposals for solutions. A full analysis of such a historical process might even prove that the perception of the historical actors was short-sighted or wrong. Such proof, however, would not invalidate the hermeneutical argument because the historical protagonists act not on an elusive objective truth and complete set of deep information, but on their own perception. A full historical analysis might have to proceed in three steps, uncovering the hidden evidence of perceptions of asymmetry and transcultural interaction through a critical perusal of the historical record, as this has generally been homogenized under the banner of internal continuity and authenticity; an exploration of the perception of the historical protagonists and the energy released by it; and a confrontation of their perceptions with relevant data unknown to them or disregarded by them.[106]

Conclusion

For me, Rudolf Wagner is one of the finest examples of the best German scholarship, which combines a deep and firm grounding in philology, the "mother of all sciences," with the extensive knowledge, understanding, curiosity, and rigorous critical faculties of a great historian, and the philosophical questioning of history itself—what it is, what makes it, where its truth lies, and how to write it. He was one of the few sinologists of his generation whose learning was able to encompass the whole of Chinese history with precise and insightful arguments and comments. While he never chose to write a textbook of the history of China, he contributed a great many articles to various dictionaries and encyclopedias, thereby making new and sound knowledge widely available. His specialized works on Chinese texts and images old and new, on the history of the Chinese press, and on the dynamics of transcultural interaction in China will remain milestones for the breadth and richness of documentary sources they mobilize and their thorough argumentation.

Wagner was born during the Second World War and belonged to the young German generation who vowed to ensure the horrors of the Nazi past never happened again. This made him fully aware of the traps and drifts of authoritarian government, and deeply suspicious of them. He was certainly more sensitive than most foreign historians to the subtle forms these phenomena could take in China. His demonstration of the fallacies of many China-centered narratives and the postcolonial narrative of China's victimization by the West presents a far more sophisticated, well-documented, and convincing approach than the said narratives. He restored a historical reading of events. When in the late 1990s he embarked on this approach, challenging the dominant historiography

of imperialism focused on guilt, it required not only dedicated scholarship but also courage. He was an enlightened scholar who believed in humankind and had a true global vision, which he expressed with humor. Today his views are gaining ground, and we should remain grateful to him. As Wagner said, "Scholars can contribute well-grounded knowledge that might be useful when framing policy decisions."[107]

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107   *Wagner Interview*, 66.