

# Hellmut Wilhelm Remembered

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It is now forty-five years this month since I first met Hellmut Wilhelm, in Peking. That was a chance encounter in which we did not learn each other's names, and which I am sure he did not remember, and about which we never spoke. But it is vivid in my memory. I was in uniform and driving an American army jeep, hunting for an address somewhere in the western side of the inner city. I stopped at an ordinary looking front gate of a typical Peking *ssu-ho-yüan* (house built around a central courtyard) and knocked on the gate, expecting that a Chinese servant would appear of whom I could ask directions. Those of you who are familiar with the rabbit-warrens of small *hu-t'ung* in Peking will understand how one can seek without finding. To my surprise, the gate was opened by a Caucasian gentleman, who courteously but silently beckoned me to step inside. I managed to get a quick look across the courtyard, and at the plain but quite neat and elegant appearance of the living quarters beyond, from which other voices could be heard. He looked to be perhaps ten or twelve years my senior, a formidable gap from my perspective (actually he was seventeen years my senior), but he wore a friendly smile as he said hello. He was wearing a white shirt open at the collar, and held a cigarette in his hand.

His "hello" encouraged me to try English, and I asked my question. He laughed and replied: "That *hu-t'ung* is really hidden away, but I can tell you how to get there." He did, and after an attempt at further conversation – "This is an interesting part of the city." "Ah, ja, but Peking is a great city." – I thanked him and left. Somehow that brief encounter fixed itself in my imagination. Here was a most sympathetic sort of man, one I would have liked to visit with, but I did not quite have the courage to stay longer. I guessed from the faint trace of accent that he was German. My sense of Peking in the fall of 1945, a month after the end of the war, was that it was full of expatriate Europeans of all kinds, and I wondered into which category this one fell. I hoped he was a professor or a writer, and not one of the Nazi's that my branch of the armed services was supposed to be rounding up for interrogation.

By the time I arrived in Seattle in 1950 to begin my doctoral studies I had spent some years in Nanking earning my B.A., and had then gone to Peking to

enter graduate school. I remember that as I became re-acquainted with Peking at that time, I kept wondering if I would see the mysterious person again, but of course I did not. Henri Vetch's bookstore was the scholar's social club in Peking in those years, and I often stopped in to browse the shelves and see what scholars might drop in, wondering if the expatriate German might be among them. But, of course, he was not.

Then, in Seattle, I went to the first meeting of the famous Professor Hellmut Wilhelm's year long course on the History of Chinese Literature. When he walked into the classroom and began speaking, the dreamlike recollection of that encounter in Peking five years earlier took over my mind. This was the man! But I brushed that thought aside in order to concentrate on the lecture. After some weeks, when Hsiao-lan (my wife) had met Hellmut, I told her about the insistent feeling that I had met him in Peking, but she advised that it would be presumptuous to ask him – he had surely retained no recollection of so insignificant an encounter. So, two and one-half years went by during which I sat in his courses and seminars each quarter. In the second year there was the year-long course on the history of China. And there was the unforgettable seminar on the *Book of Changes*, in which we read the *Chou-i che-chung* text of the classic alongside his father's translation, and went deeply into philological and philosophical problems, and also ventured out into the wider realms of divination practice in Chinese and other societies. Then, in the winter of 1952–53 I left Seattle, to write my dissertation elsewhere without ever having mentioned to Professor Wilhelm the Peking encounter. In subsequent years we became close friends, associates in research conferences, and even colleagues when I taught at Seattle in the years 1970–1972. But still I never felt it appropriate to bring the subject up – for in any event he would not have been able to confirm or deny my recollection of an event so fleeting and unimportant.

Yet, as I remember Hellmut Wilhelm today, the chance meeting with him in Peking was not at all unimportant to my sense of the man. It was my brief but unforgettable view through the window into one other of his several lives; I had seen him standing in that gateway, at home in that scholar's courtyard, and intimately familiar with the alleyways and the gateways that were the physical context of his life in the intellectual center of early twentieth-century China. True, he was born in Tsingtao and spent his first thirteen or fourteen years in Shantung (thus was not an "expatriate" in the sense that word implied for most other westerners in China at that time). But I believe it was his sixteen years in Peking, from 1932 until he came to Seattle in 1948, that formed the essential core of Hellmut Wilhelm's relationship with the China that mattered the most to him. And, in particular it was the years after Hitler came to power in Germany, and the war began in Europe, that forced him to consider the implications of his fate. He was denied the role of interpreter of China to a cosmopolitan German-centered world in Europe. As

Hsü Dao-lin's poem dedicated to him on his sixty-fifth birthday says of the two of them, old friends who had shared many years of friendship both in Germany and in China before meeting again in Seattle: "Half our lives we were strangers in strange lands."<sup>5</sup> China was the "unwobbling pivot" within the *Wandlungen* of those two lives. And particularly in the life of Hellmut Wilhelm, Chinese civilization became his special point of access to the archetypes underlying all human existence. The verities on which he had been reared, whether those of the cultural realms of his German and European roots or those of his Chinese world of human experience, were then in a state of profound peril. Peking's intellectual community, in both its Chinese and its non-Chinese components, offered a quite extraordinary intellectual and spiritual milieu. It spurred him to respond to the shared sense of peril.<sup>6</sup>

Hellmut Wilhelm's three immensely important volumes, published by Henri Vetch in Peking in the years 1942–1944, were written within and for that milieu, in the first instance. They display the depth and range of his resources for understanding China and through it, the human condition, and thus their significance for students of China is broad and enduring. They are: 1) *Die Wandlung*, 1944, since published in translation by Cary F. Baynes under the title: *Change: Eight Lectures on the I Ching*, Bollingen Series LXII, Pantheon Books, 1960. 2) *Chinas Geschichte: Zehn einführende Vorträge*. 3) *Gesellschaft und Staat in China: Acht Vorträge* (expanded new edition, Hamburg, 1960). The first of those probes the *Book of Changes* both in its history as a classical text and in its universal meaning for our understanding of the human mind. This aspect of Hellmut Wilhelm's life and work was carried forth thereafter, especially in his participation in the many publications of the Eranos Conferences. The other two volumes display his broad knowledge of the patterns of Chinese social history, and in particular of the role of ideas in the unfolding of that history. This side of his scholarship continued to be displayed in his work for the Chinese History Project at the University of Washington, most importantly in his studies of Ming and Ch'ing period thinkers and trends in thought. I am happy to say that one of his most important essays on Ch'ing thought, "Trends of Thought in Early Nineteenth-century China", written in the 1960s and never published, was recently brought to light and submitted by some of his students for publication in the revived *Asia Major*, Series Three. It was heartily accepted at an editorial meeting in May, 1990, and was published in vol. 3, part 2, winter 1990–1991.

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<sup>5</sup> See the front matter in the Hellmut Wilhelm *Festschrift* issue of *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1970–71): i–ii.

<sup>6</sup> See the description of the wartime scene in Peking in Howard L. Goodman, "Hellmut Wilhelm's Collection at Princeton: Last Stop from Peking and Points Beyond", in *The Gest Library Journal* 1.2 (1987): 5–18.

Those are but two sides of “Hellmut Wilhelm, Sinologue”, that we are remembering on this occasion.<sup>7</sup> I will leave it to others to mention, in particular, his wonderfully sensitive translations of Chinese poetry, his work in lexicography, studies in various historical topics of pre-Ming and Ch’ing times, reviews of a wide range of books, and his thoughts on development in contemporary China.

It is probably clear enough from the foregoing that in remembering Hellmut Wilhelm, despite my respect for and constant reliance on him as a Sinologue, it is the presence of the man, both the powerfully imaginative and original mind, and his warmth in the combined roles of teacher, guide and friend, that is most unforgettably etched in my consciousness. In the weekly colloquia of the Modern China History Project, the principal instrument for stretching graduate student minds during my student years at the University of Washington, whether with passion for something about which he felt particularly deeply, or more commonly with wry humor and understatement, he always could be expected to interject issues and ideas that others overlooked. And those, most frequently, were ideas reflecting back on his profoundly sympathetic sense for the human element in history. Every historical figure he discussed was seen as a human grappling with the dilemmas of understanding the human condition, and utilizing in deeply personal if not always commendable ways the tools his civilization provided him. As student and as friend, I felt that he looked upon us in the same way. His most natural role, but not a consciously didactic one, was to help us to find our way, by reminding us of the broader and deeper dimensions of human capacities, and being able to show us where we are.

That is why I treasure the recollection of meeting him in Peking in 1945. I was overwhelmed by fascination with the place and the people, and I was lost. He knew where I wanted to go, and with quiet and un-selfconscious grace, he showed me the way. It was to be like that thereafter. A host of his students and friends all know what I mean. I miss him. We all miss him.

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael Gasster, “Hellmut Wilhelm, Sinologue”.