In Memoriam
Helmut Martin 馬漢茂

(March 5, 1940 – June 8, 1999)

The sudden and unexpected news of Professor Dr. Helmut Martin’s most untimely death in the early hours of June 8, 1999 in a hospital in Hattingen left those who were privileged to know him personally and those who had consulted even a fraction of his publications deeply saddened and perplexed. After returning from research leave in East Asia, Helmut Martin, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature, Faculty of East Asian Studies, Ruhr University Bochum, had suffered severe insomnia and acute attacks of deep depression which led to the sudden irrational act he himself was not prepared for.¹

Professor Martin had established himself as a byword for energy and enthusiasm. He had published extensively as author, translator and editor, and leaves behind a legacy of publications, in part addressed to scholarly circles, in part to a much wider, educated audience.² He acted as editor of the series Chinathemen, neue chinesische bibliothek (1985–1987), and edition cathay, as co-founder and first director of the Institute of Arabic, Chinese and Japanese Languages (State of North-Rhine Westfalia), and as founder of the unique Richard Wilhelm Translation Centre at Ruhr University Bochum, which publishes renditions of Chinese literature and has established one of the finest collections of translations from Chinese into German.³ He was a Visiting Professor at numerous American and East Asian universities and chaired the German Association for Chinese Studies (Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien, DVCS) since 1995.

Helmut Martin was born in Kassel, Germany; he studied Sinology and Slavistics in Munich, Belgrade, Paris and Heidelberg where he received his Ph.D. degree under the Professors Wolfgang Bauer and Dmitrij Tschizewskij. His dissertation, Li Liweng über das Theater [Li Liweng on Theatre] (1966), later published under the same title by Mei

¹ The medical treatment Helmut Martin received is subject to a legal dispute and can therefore not be commented on here; cf. Der Spiegel 33/1999, p. 12.

² For a bibliography of his earlier writings see Christa Gescher: Literature, Language and Politics. Helmut Martin: Writings on China (1965–1991). Selected Bibliography (Draft) (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1991 [Chinathemen, 62]). An additional bibliography of his later writings is in preparation. A most admirable collection of his articles, reviews, interviews, speeches etc. was prepared by Helmut Martin and his assistants and published in hitherto six volumes under the title Chinabilder [China Perspectives] (Bochum: projekt verlag, since 1996). The seventh volume of this series is almost ready for print and will be published posthumously. These volumes make his writings conveniently accessible and provide a good basis for understanding Helmut Martin’s scholarly and intellectual development.

³ By launching the series Chinathemen and later the edition cathay, he offered a forum for many young researchers to publish their books under reasonable conditions. Edition cathay is now well established and will, hopefully, be continued.

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Ya Publications in Taipei (1968), is a particularly important contribution to the study of Li Yu’s 李渔 (1611–1680) writings. Apart from Helmut Martin’s research on Li Yu’s dramaturgy which is still a standard, his book also provides astute observations on the authorship of some of the writings attributed to Li Yu, such as the Rouputuan 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat).4

After holding an assistantship in Chinese at the University of Heidelberg (1966–1967), the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft awarded Helmut Martin a post-doctoral research scholarship which enabled him to intensify his studies on Chinese literature at National Taiwan University (NTU, 1967–1969) and at Kyoto University (1970). These years are perhaps best characterised by his advanced studies at the Institute of Chinese Literature of NTU and his pioneering and lasting contributions to the study of Chinese literature. Within the astonishingly short period from June 1969 to January 1970, Helmut Martin and his collaborators wrote thousands of cards from which they compiled a most useful tool for the study of traditional Chinese literary criticism. The Suoyin ben He shi Lidai shihua 索引本何氏歷代詩話 (2 vols.; Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe / Chinese Materials and Research Service Aids Center, 1973 [Research Aids Series, 10]) provides an invaluable index and an authoritative punctuated edition of the collection of twenty-eight shihua compiled by He Wenhuan 何文煥 (preface dated 1770). In addition to performing this immense task, Helmut Martin edited letters addressed to Yu Dafu 郁達夫 (1896–1945). Gei Yu Dafu de xin 給郁達夫的信 (1970), which were made available to him in Taiwan, and continued his studies of Li Yu and his writings. The latter culminated in the fifteen-volume edition of Li Yu quanji 李漁全集 published in Taipei by Chengwen chubanshe in 1971.5 As far as his research on traditional Chinese literature is concerned, Helmut Martin’s interest in Li Yu and in traditional vernacular literature remained an important part of his scholarly life. It is most unfortunate that his earlier plans to prepare a complete translation of Li Yu’s Shibier lou 十二樓 (Twelve Towers) had to be given up due to lack of financial support for the publication. Nevertheless, Martin Gimm and Helmut Martin recently produced solid and very readable renditions of those four novellas which are not included in Franz Kuhn’s inadequate German version of Twelve Towers.6

Whenever Helmut Martin spoke about his early and undoubtedly highly formative years in East Asia, one could easily sense how much he enjoyed studying with outstanding specialists in the field and working with promising young Chinese scholars. It is virtually unknown that, apart from his important contributions appreciated by any student of early Chinese literary theory and criticism, and his Collected Works

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4 Note that the limited edition of the Rouputuan published by Xianggang chubanshe (no place and no date of publication) during the early seventies was actually only possible due to Helmut Martin finding this rare copy in Japan and making it available again.

5 Helmut Martin compiled this edition with the utmost awareness and caution concerning the disputed authorship of a number of writings. Censorship in Taiwan however made it impossible for him to include Rouputuan in this collection. For a more recent edition, which shows a less cautious attitude in attributing writings to Li Yu, see Wang Yiqi 王翼奇, Wu Zhanlei 吳善蕾 et al. (eds.): Li Yu quanji 李漁全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991).

of Li Yu, the young Helmut Martin also drafted an outline of traditional Chinese literature, which is still extant as a manuscript. It is understood that this book reflects some of his insights during his extensive studies at NTU. Apparently, Helmut Martin hardly mentioned this outline nor did he seem to have any plans to publish it, thus some of his evaluations of and conclusions on traditional Chinese literature and its achievements are rather contemplative. Another important aspect of his early years in Taiwan was his close relationship with an extensive circle of colleagues and his ability to develop lasting friendships with many who later became distinguished scholars themselves.

When Helmut Martin returned to Germany in 1970 with his wife Liao Tienchi, the young couple experienced considerable difficulties. Fruitless efforts to re-integrate himself into German academia, unstable living conditions, the search for an adequate job and the lack of a stimulating and encouraging academic environment as experienced at NTU, undermined his health. As we know from his own accounts, the more gloomy memories of those days had a formative influence on his supportive attitude towards junior colleagues. After working temporarily as a journalist to earn their modest livelihood, he joined the Institute of Asian Affairs (1972) in Hamburg with which he remained affiliated until his appointment as Professor at the Ruhr University in 1979. Helmut Martin’s academic production during those years focused mainly on the politics of the PRC. Most of us are familiar with his research on Mao Zedong’s commentary on a Soviet textbook on political economy, his edition and translation (with Liao Tienchi) of Mao’s internal post-1949 writings, the seven-volume edition Mao Zedong. Texte (München: Hanser, 1979–1982), which was the impressive outcome of a project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. Apart from this, one might also mention his Chinakunde in der Sowjetunion [Chinese Studies in the Soviet Union] (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 1972) and the useful glossary Chinesisch-Deutscher Wortschatz. Politik und Wirtschaft der VR China [Chinese-German Glossary of Political and Economical Terms] (Berlin: Langenscheidt, [1977] 1987) compiled by Helmut Martin and Liao Tienchi.

After his appointment as Professor of Chinese Language and Literature in Bochum and after finishing the bilingual German-Chinese edition of the so-called wansui texts, Helmut Martin re-focused his research on literature. Although he always kept abreast of new developments in the fields of traditional literature and although he continued to pursue his interest in vernacular traditional literature as well as in the study of literary theory, he decided to concentrate his work on modern and contemporary literature. The prodigious contributions to the field and the overwhelming quantity of books he edited and brought to press, are exceptionally impressive and speak for themselves. It goes without saying that his extensive study of modern Chinese literature had a distinct socio-political objective. His indefatigable attempts to make reliable translations of worth-while writings available to a wider German readership clearly aimed at enriching the public’s appreciation of non-European literatures. In the process of his own reading through enormous piles of publications and selecting what he considered to be reasonably good writings, literary study often became an end in itself, and it is not easy to say which interest predominated in his sensitive mind at any given time. However, it must be emphasized that Helmut Martin
was a highly critical recipient. Given the enormous quantity of literary and pseudo-literary works emerging from the Chinese writing world, his tireless efforts to locate the gems were occasionally rewarded. I believe that those who heard him speaking enthusiastically after such a find can hardly forget the atmosphere in which he let others share in his joy.

Helmut Martin took the tripartite function of an university professor seriously. Besides teaching in a most inspiring manner, involving his students in scholarly activities on various levels and single-mindedly pursuing his projects, Helmut Martin developed outstanding skills as an academic manager in the best sense of the word. The ambitious research projects he conducted at Bochum, which were financed exclusively by national and international foundations, research bodies and grant agencies, enabled him to work with a team of collaborators much bigger than the resources his university could possibly ever provide. Among the enduring reminders of Helmut Martin’s activities in Bochum, we may emphasize the generous contributions he made from his private collection to the library of the Faculty of East Asian Studies and the Taiwan Archive, the most comprehensive collection on Taiwanese literature in Europe, which he built as a basis for his project on regionalism and Taiwanese literature.

Helmut Martin’s development as an academic from his early work to his research on modern literature and its social conditions reflects the transformation of Chinese studies during the decades he witnessed. Trained in traditional Sinology, he strongly objected to the notion of the metaphorical ivory tower. And although he adopted the attitude of reserve one associates with and expects from a man of letters of his calibre, he showed remarkable courage in taking an unpopular stand and confronting his audience with painful realities. The strength of his conviction is reflected in one of his favourite idioms: „Farbe zu bekennen“ – the need to declare one’s intentions. To derogate him as a „journalist“ or „China-watcher“, as some have done, is, I believe, to fall into the insidious fallacy of ignoring his academic contributions and of misreading his belief in the public function of an intellectual and university teacher. Bringing results from his ambitious projects to public attention was indeed one of his most driving concerns. He considered it one of the compelling tasks of his profession. At this point, it should perhaps be pointed out that his insightful scholarly and public concern for issues related to the modernisation of China, his involvement in the agenda of China’s democratisation, and his invaluable support for contemporary Chinese writers, intellectuals and dissidents gave rise to a number of arbitrary obstacles he had to face. It is certainly not a coincidence that the man who had published the most notable edition of writings of the „Great Helmsman“ in any Western language found his name on the (not just legendary) black list and was refused entry to the PRC on several occasions.

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7 The numerous references to so-called grey literature, i.e. unpublished papers, MA theses etc., in Helmut Martin’s writings stand testimony to the respect he had for the achievements of (not only his own) students.

8 For some of the results of this project see his articles in volume 3 of *Chinabilder: Taiwanesische Literatur – Postkoloniale Auswege* [China Perspectives: Taiwan Literature – Postcolonial Options]. Helmut Martin’s long awaited *opus magnum* on this subject, his *History of Taiwanese Literature*, was left by him in a stage nearly ready for print.
Shortly after the re-unification of Germany, Helmut Martin, who thought highly of the translations published by (former) East German colleagues, joined the DVCS, an association founded in 1990 by East and West German scholars to encourage the co-operative discourse between the two scholarly worlds separated for decades. Helmut Martin’s unequalled tolerance, his ostensibly limitless energy and his encouragement to face and discuss the past openly turned the DVCS into a lively forum for senior and junior colleagues alike. He breathed new life into the then ailing association, organized regular yearly conferences and made possible the publication of the papers delivered at these sessions in three consecutive conference volumes. Some of the questions arising from the problematic circumstances under which East German academia was re-organised after the re-unification triggered Helmut Martin’s more recent interest in the history of Chinese studies. In passing I should like to call attention to the DVCS conference Chinese Studies in the German Language Context: History, Scholars, Perspectives (1997), its preparatory stage, and its aftermath, which were overshadowed by highly controversial debates showing the urgent need for dispassionate studies of sensitive archive material. In the context of the debate initiated by himself, the task entrusted to Helmut Martin as chairman of the DVCS became extremely difficult, and he contrived to handle it with tact and sensitivity. Although his own Clavis Sinica project on the history of German Chinese studies was denied the financial support necessary for it to be conducted on a larger scale, he endeavoured to balance the discussion on the most controversial issues in the history of 20th century German scholarship between responsive tolerance and factual accuracy.

In the German sinological arena, which is hampered in part by petty personal vanities, Helmut Martin was not only a controversial but also a distinct figure. His stamina and his commitment enabled him to appreciate his colleagues’ achievements wholeheartedly and without envy. Even in situations in which he was faced with adverse partialities, he succeeded in keeping his heart and mind open.

As a friend and colleague, teacher and mentor, he was always a sympathetic listener to one’s troubles – whether they were academic, career-related or even private. Besides offering his advice, he never hesitated to deliver concrete help. For him, this was a matter of responsibility which he took very personally. Many of us have profited from his generosity in one way or another.

Helmut Martin had high expectations. And he was extraordinarily demanding of himself. The perpetual driving force behind his activities and his magnetic personality created an atmosphere around him which made working with him an inspiring and rewarding experience. What, I believe, none of us spotted below this surface, was the darker side of these expectations. Being disappointed, for example, by so-called intellectuals whose capacity proved to be far removed from what he had hoped or by a research topic into which he plunged himself for a considerable period of time only to find at the end that it is not as worth-while as he had anticipated, caused him extreme anguish.

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9 For details see http://ruhr-uni-bochum.de/oaw/slc/slc_dvcs.html#DVCS eng.
When his unbounded energy turned against himself, his wife Tienchi and daughter Katja where at his side to try to help him in his struggle against the force over which he had lost control.

Bernhard Fuehrer (London)

We are indebted to Mrs. Tienchi Martin-Liao for sending us this photograph showing her deceased husband in a lively discussion with the literary critic Chen Xiaoming and the poet Yang Lian taken in London during September 1997. As Mrs. Martin-Liao wrote in her letter, she prefers a picture taken from real life rather than choosing one of those portrait photos often used for obituaries.