Hellmut Wilhelm, Pioneer of China Studies

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In spite of our difference in age, Hellmut Wilhelm was my friend for over fifty years and a colleague for twenty-five. He was my senior by three whole days.

We met in Peking in the thirties, during those years that George Kates wrote about in his book, The Years That Were Fat. For the resident foreigner, they were fat indeed. Hellmut had a good old Chinese house in the East City, with a lovely courtyard and ancient trees. In those days Peking was the intellectual center of China, and it was exciting to live and work there. Hellmut taught at a leading university and knew everybody, including me.

Hellmut was born in Tsingtao. He was sent home to Germany at the age of 13. After finishing at the Gymnasium in Frankfurt, he did not turn to Chinese studies but went on to the University of Berlin where he took a degree in law, and then began his apprenticeship as a clerk. He soon got tired of this and returned to the University of Berlin where he completed a degree in Chinese studies. In China he had spoken a dialect but now was introduced to Mandarin. On graduation he joined the foreign service and was sent to China at government expense. He and his wife, Maria, arrived there towards the end of 1932, but his career did not develop as planned because Hitler came into power, and Hellmut had a Jewish wife. So he earned his living by teaching German at the University of Peking. I did not see a great deal of him until I returned to Peking for the summer of 1935. I stayed at the Language School where I met another future member of our faculty, Dr. Karl August Wittfogel, from whom I learned a lot about the German communist movement and Hitlerism and Stalinism. On the subject of Marxism, Wittfogel was a complete bore – but he was an interesting bore. He was a Marxist, so you knew where the man was coming home. Like me, Hellmut developed a workable relationship with Wittfogel, we both thought that he was asking many of the right questions and there is no doubt that he had a measurable impact on Chinese studies in the United States.

In 1937 I returned to China after a year in England, and then I saw much more of Hellmut as well as a lot of other scholars who turned up later in American universities. Another German appeared in Peking, a common friend, Adam von Trott, who later was hanged for his close association with von Stauffenberg’s
attempt on Hitler's life. Hellmut took Trott for a trip to Shantung province and his own birthplace at Tsingtao. A lot of people were not sure about Trott's relationship to Hitler, but Hellmut and I both decided independently to trust him. His tragic end in 1944 vindicated our decision. The fact that Hellmut knew Trott in Germany and was aware of his background encouraged me to follow my instincts and trust Trott. I myself had seen a great deal of Trott in London during 1936–37 while he was a German Rhodes Scholar, and I gathered then that he hated the new regime. But Hellmut's confidence was decisive.

Hellmut had not had a pleasant childhood during World War I, for the Japanese seized his birthplace, Tsingtao, and he was parked with friends in Shanghai. In World War II he was permitted to continue his teaching position because Germany was allied to Japan, then the occupying power in Peking. When the war was over and the Communists were moving close, I got in touch with Hellmut and this led to an invitation to come to the University of Washington in 1948. He came alone, for his marriage had broken up. Three years later, in 1951, Hellmut married Erica Samuel, a musician and sculptress of talent, and they lived happily ever after.

Hellmut had all the German virtues and none of the vices. His devotion to scholarship and to students was monumental, and it would never occur to him to take a day off if that would mean missing a class, whatever the reason. Erica told me that when her first child was on his way she told Hellmut, in the morning, before he was due at the University, that labor pains had started. Hellmut acknowledged the remark in a scholarly sort of way, and went off as usual to the campus. Having heard nothing from him by five o'clock she called up and got Franz Michael to drive him home. As expected, she prepared dinner for both of them and then she really got their attention and they drove her to Group Health Hospital. The Book of Changes has little guidance for expectant fathers. One of Hellmut's sons is a doctor and the other a lawyer. I cannot help but think that they thought their father could use protection on both flanks.

The best friends are those with whom you have done something significant. Hellmut and I worked together, with others, to build the Far Eastern and Russian Institute, the name for the device we used to develop Asian and Soviet studies. That is why I suggest that Hellmut's greatest contribution in the academic world was his assistance in one of the most important academic revolutions of our times. I refer to the post-war effort to get to know the non-Western world, an effort which several of the major universities undertook right after the war. Everybody does it now.

Adding such a huge segment of the world to the academic landscape was not an easy task, graveyards have been moved with less effort, but the greatest difficulty was to find qualified scholars to staff the new fields of scholarship. There were
times when we had more dollars than scholars, for the big foundations made funds available for area studies on a generous scale.

We were fortunate in the China field, as in others. The very wars and revolutions that induced American scholars to turn to the non-Western world provided us with men and women who would otherwise not have been available.

Hellmut was one of the first to join a distinguished group which included Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, Li Fang-kuei, Vincent Shih, Nicholas Poppe, Victor Erlich, and Franz Michael, who was already here. We soon added American scholars who had had training in Asian languages during the war and continued their education in that field. Hellmut was definitely one of those who made it possible to achieve our objectives, and I am glad that he lived long enough to help finish the job and to enjoy, by way of graduate students, some of the fruits of his labor.

Hellmut's contribution falls into two categories, his scholarship and his academic statesmanship. As for the first, the quality of his research and teaching, for which he was uniquely prepared, is beyond dispute. He brought to us an unrivaled knowledge of the Chinese language, history, philosophy and poetry and thereby helped to make the China faculty of the University of Washington one of the best, if not the best, in the country. The China team made a sound contribution to the understanding of Imperial China and, in contrast to the dismal record of most American scholars on Communist China, came up with interpretations that have stood the test of time. Hellmut was a man consumed with a love of scholarship, he lived and breathed it, he spent no time on anything else. He did not make speeches to service clubs, play academic politics, dash off to endless conferences, or get involved in community activities. He held the old-fashioned idea that the duty of scholars is to study, and his single-minded devotion to scholarship was the open secret of his stature as a teacher. He turned out a remarkable group of students who will carry the memory of the man and his scholarship well into the next century.

Hellmut's academic statesmanship is not so well known. In fact, it came as a surprise to me that this gentle student of the Book of Changes would be a tower of strength in the early, formative years of the struggle to get a handle on the non-Western world. When you are engaged, as we were, in bringing about a major shift in the academic landscape, it is necessary, among other things, to have on your faculty a critical mass of men and women who can give guidance and support with problems of strategy and tactics. I had no way of expecting that this charming scholar I had known in Peking would be such a source of sound judgment of men, of scholarship and of institutional development in an American setting. But, he was.
Hellmut thoroughly understood and strongly supported our mission in the University. He may well have been the last of the Sinologists, but he was among the strongest supporters of our efforts to get the social science disciplines to commit themselves to the study on the non-Western world. He had no use for the traditional Sinological view that no one should be allowed to speak about China unless he had made a lifelong study of the language. He helped us to make sure that our language teaching was geared to the needs of the social science disciplines. Even more important, Hellmut strongly supported our emphasis on interdisciplinary research and he practiced what he preached. He was always there at the faculty research seminar on China to which our colleague Franz Michael gave so much of his time and leadership. In the recruitment of faculty, Hellmut was always a fair and sound judge of scholarship. He cooperated easily and graciously with his colleagues, an accomplishment that calls for a good sense of humor, which he had.

You will realize how dependent I was on Hellmut and our other colleagues if I remind you of the condition of affairs in 1946 when we started what was called the Far Eastern and Russian Institute. We had to set up the teaching of Asian languages, stimulate faculty research, construct a curriculum, work out requirements for degrees, recruit the staff, build up the library, find the money, enlist the support of the administration and outlast our watchful colleagues in departments suspicious of the whole enterprise. In other words we had to design the house, collect the materials, build it, live in it and protect it, all the same time. They were exciting days and Hellmut was in the thick of it. No wonder I think of him with pride and gratitude. God bless him.