

Hellmut Wilhelm: Scholar, Teacher, Colleague

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Hellmut came to the University of Washington in 1948, a year before I did. His father, Richard Wilhelm, was a renowned German specialist on China, among other things having translated the *I Ching*, and he himself was a distinguished interpreter of that elusive document. However, he was much more than that. In March 1952 Franz Michael, acting director of the Far Eastern and Russian Institute, wrote to Lloyd Woodburne: Hellmut Wilhelm's "courses in [Chinese] history and literature have made up a program which is not paralleled on any other campus in this country... [his] profound knowledge of bibliography in Chinese and many Western languages has been of very great value to the research group as a whole" – and, I should emphatically add, to his students of all ages; doubtless at least three of us here – David Knechtges and Jack Dull as students, and I when long past the usual student age – have had the privilege of sitting through the entire cycle of his courses in both Chinese history and Chinese literature. Franz Michael went on to say that Hellmut had been the authority on Chinese thought in the Eranos society, with headquarters in Switzerland, to which a select group of scholars from Europe and the United States were invited annually. I do not know if it still flourishes, but I do know that Hellmut was very fond of attending its meetings, in an era when international travel was more unusual than it is now. Hellmut was one of an astonishing group of specialists on China whom George Taylor assembled at the end of World War II. Those were the days when, as a wag put it, John Fairbank was emperor of the East and George Taylor was emperor of the West. George and Franz Michael taught a course called The Far East in the Modern World, for which they jointly composed an excellent textbook superseding in quality all others then existent; at least once Hellmut gave George's Modern Chinese History course in his absence. Li Fang-kuei supervised the teaching of the Chinese language and himself taught advanced courses in Chinese linguistics, supervising work up to the Ph.D., though obtaining the Ph.D. from him was no easy task. Erwin Reifler taught ancient Chinese literature – and was especially noted for his etymologies of the so-called particles in Chinese, which he translated sometimes by English words and sometimes by such actions as thumping his fist on the table. Some of his colleagues did not accept the etymologies but still admitted that the mnemonics accompanying them stuck with the students. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, who arrived a little later, provided a monument of one who reached the summit of achievement in the study of both Western and Chinese political thought, and taught introductory (elementary is scarcely the word) as well as advanced courses

in that subject. Vincent Shih (Shih Yu-cheng) taught Chinese philosophy in the Far Eastern Institute because our philosophy department was not then inclined to the view that there had been or was any philosophy at all outside the West. Then there was Chang Chung-li, who taught the economy of China and returned to the mainland, eventually to become president of the Shanghai Academy of Social Science, and Jimmy Wu, who also went back to the PRC to become (again, I suppose) Wu T'a-k'un and represent Communist Chinese historiography in a variety of contexts. In a class by himself was Karl August Wittfogel, whose controversial *Oriental Despotism* was finally published here and whose widely admired *History of Chinese Society: Liao* antedated it. Isabella Yen lent her magic to producing usable oral facility in Mandarin in recalcitrant students; some may remember Richard Yang, in whose classes I had my own first Chinese language instruction. Ruth Krader presided over the building of a superb Chinese-language collection in the Far Eastern Library. I have not exhausted the list of those who contributed to the Chinese program of those years.

The remarkable thing was how Hellmut was respected, indeed revered, by all of them, and got along with all of them, although there were some sharp disagreements in approach among certain of those I have mentioned. It is true that an atmosphere of outward civility was generally maintained, among the specialists on China and throughout the Institute, and Hellmut bore no small responsibility for that circumstance. He was always gentle and often admirably diplomatic, but he could also be firm. I quote from a memorandum he wrote George Taylor that is undated but must have come from early 1960: regarding the Union Research Institute in Hong Kong, an agency which many of us knew and admired, but which had weaknesses as well: the URI, Hellmut wrote, is "engaged in a political battle with which I am in complete sympathy", but their general approach to Communist China, he added, is "colored by day to day strategic considerations and oblique emphases, and wishful thinking will thus necessarily ensue". I think that passage well represents the combination of qualities I have just referred to.

Hellmut had a profound attachment to the Institute and a profound loyalty to its faculty, its students, and its intellectual integrity. In the mid 60's (as well as other times) the question was being discussed of exactly what areas of the world the Institute should study and whether it should expand those areas. At that time East Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe, and South Asia made up the focus of the Institute. Some though the Institute's leadership wanted to expand indefinitely; one witticism had it that "when George Taylor reaches the gates of Vienna, we have to make a stand". But such imputation of motive were by no means well founded. At a meeting in Dean Philip Cartwright's office in the spring of 1967 Hellmut declared that if it was to add Africa, Latin America, Australia, and so forth, the result would be "to explode what we have and there would be no feeling

of scholarly fellowship any more”.

Scholarly fellowship was of vital importance to him, and he was one of the chief creators of such attitudes in the Institute, especially as they were manifested in the three great seminars or colloquia: the Modern Chinese History Project, the Russia in Asia Project, and the Inner Asia Project – he was an enthusiastic and solid contributor to all three, which together generated the liveliest, most fruitful, and most exciting intellectual atmosphere I have ever seen – an atmosphere whose equal I have not encountered on any of the fifty campuses on which I have lectured or in the University of Washington since that time. We discussed, we argued, we disagreed, on occasion we shouted, but the upshot was a string of remarkable books, articles, speeches, conferences, and courses – for the research findings of all this found their way into teaching, exactly as they are supposed to do and often, alas, do not.

All of this was meat and drink to Hellmut, and it was therefore natural that he was a supporter of the idea of having a large-scale 20th anniversary celebration for the Far Eastern and Russian Institute in 1965–66; it seems that he tried to raise money from the foundations for such an event or series of events – something I did not know, by the way, and discovered it only from digging in University archives. He failed, and tried then to aim for a 25th anniversary celebration in 1970–71.

Unfortunately that did not come about either, at least partly as a result of the fact that in that year we had people sometimes described as concerned idealists occupying Thomson Hall, deshelfing books in Suzzallo library, breaking down doors in search of the “CIA files” which existed only in their imagination. Fortunately someone, I cannot remember who, narrowly managed to save Hellmut’s own library in his office from a concerned idealist who was about to burn it by persuading the person that these books might help to liberate something or other – I forget what.

Hellmut was a scholar, whose tireless support of the highest standards of scholarship found actualization in the published work both of himself and those whose graduate work he supervised as well as in relations with his colleagues, in the seminars I have described and elsewhere; a teacher boundlessly admired by generations of students, who were made to realize that they needed to know French, German, and Japanese as well as Chinese if they were to be specialists on China; a colleagues’ colleague, always supportive, always constructive even when he found it necessary to be critical, tolerant of the infinitely wide range of views and commitments other scholars might have, always protective of the precious jewel that the Far Eastern and Russian Institute and specifically its China program were, academically speaking, in the crown of the University of Washington. Many of us feel his loss, many of us are inspired by his memory, many of us share and cherish his immortal ideals.