

Hellmut Wilhelm, Sinologue and Teacher

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Like Fritz Mote, my first meeting with Professor Wilhelm was memorable for me, but an encounter that he probably did not remember. I was a high school student, with visions of becoming a chemist or biologist. China was for me still *terra incognita*. I knew a bit about Chinese history, gained mainly from reading Luther Carrington Goodrich's *History of Chinese Civilization* and the Franz Michael-George Taylor *Far East in the Modern World*. However, the world of Chinese books and literature was very much closed to me. I had no notion of the Chinese language or what might have been written in that strange script. I then had the good fortune to attend a lecture by Professor Wilhelm, who visited our high school to discuss two books the students had been assigned to read, Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* and Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy*. Although I had already heard a number of college professors' lectures, Professor Wilhelm was singularly impressive. Not only did he give a highly illuminating interpretation of both works and their relationship to the times in which they were written, he displayed a remarkable literary sensitivity. I was shocked to learn that the translation of *Rickshaw Boy* that we had read had drastically altered the ending – to end happily rather than tragically to conform to Western tastes. Although my career interests at that time were in science, my first love was language and literature. After the lecture, Professor Wilhelm kindly sat down with several of us to answer our questions. I immediately was impressed with Professor Wilhelm's patience. The questions must have seemed silly and immature to him, yet he remained with us for at least an hour. I was equally impressed with Professor Wilhelm's first-hand knowledge of China. Here was a man, born in China, who had lived in China during critical times of the modern era, well-read in Chinese history and literature, and able to bring his vast learning down to the level of high school students.

It was shortly after this encounter with Professor Wilhelm that I began to reconsider what field of study I should pursue in college. Although I still had a naive conception of what Chinese studies was all about, I decided that I must begin formal study of Chinese history, language and literature. I thus began my undergraduate studies at the University of Washington, not as a chemist or biologist, but as a major in Chinese. It was not until my third year that I was advanced

enough to take one of Professor Wilhelm's courses. The first course I took was his year-long History of China. The following year I took his History of Chinese Literature. Both of these courses were lecture courses, and following the practice common at the time, Professor Wilhelm lectured five days a week. There was no text book, no assigned readings, no mid-term, only a final exam and a term paper. Students were free – in fact were encouraged – to read whatever interested them. And what an array of interesting material we were presented with! Each lecture began with Professor Wilhelm writing on the board the titles of books and articles pertaining to the topic of the lecture. These included works in English, French, German, Chinese and Japanese. This was for an undergraduate upper division course! I think it would be no exaggeration to say that Professor Wilhelm had the most comprehensive command of Sinological scholarship among Sinologists of his generation. Thus, his lectures, in addition to the illuminating and informative accounts he gave of historical and literary matters, were a veritable history of Sinology. Professor Wilhelm was able to put living faces on the books with dry and convoluted titles. We heard about great Sinological controversies – von Zach and Pelliot, Creel and Boodberg, Erkes and Achilles Fang – as well as the noble French and German Sinological traditions, upon which our twentieth century field of China Studies was founded.

Through his courses, I discovered that Sinology was indeed a discipline. Professor Wilhelm often referred to Sinology as “our science”. He was of course using science as the English equivalent for the German *Wissenschaft*. Professor Wilhelm viewed Sinology as an outgrowth of the European philological tradition. Another of his favorite definitions of Sinology was “Chinese philology”. Professor Wilhelm did not conceive of philology in the narrow sense of linguistic and textual study. Rather, philology meant the study of literary, historical, religious, and philosophical texts to explore major and minor themes of Chinese intellectual and literary history, and as well to relate those themes to the modes of thought and complex workings of the human mind in pre-modern and even modern China.

The range of Professor Wilhelm's scholarship was extraordinarily broad. He is best known for his work on the *I Ching*, admirably summarized by Professor Mote. His doctoral dissertation was on the early Ch'ing dynasty thinker Ku Yen-wu, and from time to time Professor Wilhelm would come back to the late imperial period, including a study of the Po-hsüeh hung-ju examination of 1679, an article on late Ch'ing thought, a piece on Ming orthodoxy, and among his more recently published works, several studies of Tseng Kuo-fan.

In his later years, Professor Wilhelm's main interest was classical Chinese literature. Before his retirement from this University in 1971, Professor Wilhelm concentrated solely on teaching Chinese literature. After his retirement, he spent

many years in his tree house study writing a detailed and comprehensive history of Chinese literature. Professor Wilhelm's studies of Chinese literature are truly broad and wide-ranging: the Han *fu*, the Han *yüeh-fu*, Six Dynasties literary criticism, T'ang-Sung *tz'u*, Sung poetry, T'ang prose, Yüan drama, Ch'ing novels, even modern literature. The most striking thing about Professor Wilhelm's work on Chinese literature is that he did not select the easy or familiar works or literary figures about which to lecture and write. As Michael Gasster has said of him, "Wilhelm avoided the famous names and major success stories".⁸ In his history of Chinese literature, he always had detailed accounts of the writers that were usually left out of conventional histories. This does not mean that he neglected the major literary figures. His lectures on Li Po and Tu Fu were truly inspiring, and included illuminating comparisons with two German poets that Professor Wilhelm intimately knew – Schiller and Goethe. Nor was Professor Wilhelm reluctant to express value judgments about literary works – he had a declared preference for Li Po over Tu Fu. Su Shih probably was his favorite Chinese poet.

Professor Wilhelm was among the last of the universalist China scholars, who knew China at first hand and from its great books. He was the embodiment of the Chinese ideal of the *chün-tzu*, a princely man and gentleman of learning and high moral character. Although he has passed away, long shall he live among his friends, colleagues, and his students.

⁸ "Hellmut Wilhelm, Sinologue", p. 35.