



A REPORT FROM THE CULTURAL  
INTERSTICE  
RUDOLPH WAGNER

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Born in 1941 in Wiesbaden. Professor of Sinology, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. Publications: *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (2000). “The Early Chinese Newspapers and the Chinese Public Sphere.” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1 (2001). *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi’s Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (2003). – Address: Sinologisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg, Akademiestraße 4–8, 69117 Heidelberg.

Sinologists are people who can legitimately be questioned about the motives that might have prompted them to plough such a strange field. In my case the answer is simple. It was the easy alternative. Torn between the option of trying to resuscitate a crumbling family foundry in the backwoods, the daydream of spending a few years in a Japanese Zen monastery, and the fear of getting bored in fields such as Greek literature with a small body of works and generations of bright minds who had worked on them, Sinology was the natural thing to do. I would learn to read the Zen Buddhist texts in the original, suffer from an overdose of texts and a dearth of top scholarship, and the whole enterprise would keep me busy enough for years to come to keep me off the foundry and help me unlearn whatever relevant skills I might have had in this domain.

After a detour to student politics in 1968, the birth of two daughters in 1972 and 1975, a belated decision to buy a Walkman and supplement my Classical Chinese with modern Mandarin, and years of blissful pure research at the US universities Harvard, Cornell, and Berkeley (1969–71, 1980–87), life landed me in Heidelberg, where I was happily joined by Catherine Yeh. For the next years I made some major efforts to develop what was a small

teaching collection into a center for Chinese Studies able to sustain advanced research and to finance this enterprise, very generously helped in this by a Leibniz Award from the DFG and an institutional development grant from the Krupp Foundation.

One of the pleasures that attracted me to, and kept me in, Chinese Studies is the option to develop new interests. After having worked longer years on the third-century commentator-philosopher Wang Bi than this young man had even lived (23 summers), and having supplemented my classical focus with studies on the role of religion in the historical action of the Taiping Christian millennial movement in the nineteenth century and the relationship between literature and politics in the PRC in the latter half of the twentieth century, I took up a youthful dream coming out of my reading Habermas' study on the rise of the public sphere in 1963 and started work on the early Chinese-language newspapers in 1990. Such papers developed in the latter third of the nineteenth century and mostly came out of the International Settlement in Shanghai. These commercial papers, which were not under the control of the Peking Court, changed the entire dynamics of public discourse in China, opened up avenues for educated members of society without official positions to take part in policy debate, and allowed for the first time public ventilation of opinions on many subjects that would define China's stance toward the international challenge and that of "modernity". A research group soon formed, and while its young members raced ahead with their studies, three of which have already been published in impressive volumes, I limped behind with my efforts to finish my research on an Englishman named Ernest Major, the founder of the *Shenbao*, the most important of these newspapers.

While one might claim that Major's impact in China certainly bests that of Matteo Ricci or any other foreigner coming to Imperial China, he has not even been honored with a single dictionary entry. He had disappeared into the practice of his labors and into the linguistic interstice between English and Chinese, where scholars of "imperialism" would not work on him because all the publications by his companies are in Chinese, and Chinese would not work on him because he was not a *bona fide* Chinese.

The invitation to join the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin came at a very propitious moment. It allowed me to focus on this research and to attack one of the main obstacles in my way. Major was an eminently practical man, running, besides his newspaper, the most important new-technology Chinese-language publishing house, starting an illustrated paper, spreading reproduction of Chinese art with lithograph prints, and doing import substitution by producing matches directly in Shanghai. But he took no interest in his own posthumous life (which he could have done by writing his memoirs or simply putting

a rubber string around his papers and sending them to the local library for safekeeping). The problem thus was to enrich the most miserably meager data on his family, upbringing, thinking, and acting so as to extract an underlying driving force and agenda in a man who looked like the direct antipode of the overdrawn caricatures of the much-maligned imperialists.

The sojourn in Berlin with the admirable staff of the Institute allowed me to go for this data enrichment in a grand style. I read profusely on anything from “practical enlightenment” attitudes among new merchant groups in the British Isles since the eighteenth century to the strange interior decoration of “gentlemanly capitalism”, from school records of the Clapham district where Major grew up to Scottish Enlightenment writers who might have had something to say to this young man. On the side, I went through the scattered sources that provide information on the Chinese readers of his paper and their role during the tumultuous last decades of the Chinese Imperial state. While I blush at not to having lived up to the challenge of some of the other Fellows who actually got their manuscripts done before leaving Berlin, I managed at least to sketch the basic grit of the argument into which my previous research could be integrated in what seemed to me a surprisingly convincing way.

I will not even mention the rich discussions, the museum and theater visits, and unending delight of Stefan Litwin’s musical interludes.

It was a good fellowship, and I am deeply grateful for this year.