



A UNIQUE FELLOWSHIP AT THE
WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG ZU BERLIN
GUOXIANG PENG

Guoxiang Peng is a Distinguished Professor of Chinese Philosophy, History, and Religions at Zhejiang University, China. He was Professor at Tsinghua University and Peking University and a visiting professor, scholar, and research fellow at various institutions around the world, such as Harvard University, Wesleyan University, and the University of Hawaii in the United States; Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB), Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, and Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Germany; and the National University of Singapore, the National University of Taiwan, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong in East Asia. He serves various academic organizations and is a board member of several international academic journals. The awards he has received include the 2016 Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the North (USA) and the 2009 Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award (Germany). His publications include eight books such as *The Methodology of Doing Chinese Philosophy*, *This-worldly Concern of the Wise: The Political and Social Thought of Mou Zongsan (1909–1995)*, *Revision and New Discovery: Historical Study of Pre-Modern Confucianism from Northern Song till Early Qing Dynasty*, *Confucian Tradition: Between Religion and Humanism*, *The Unfolding of the Innate Good Knowing: Wang Ji and the Yangming Learning in Mid-Late Ming*, etc., and numerous articles. – Address: Philosophy Department, Zhejiang University, 866 Yuhangtang Road, Xihu, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310027, PRC. E-mail: guoxiang.peng@gmail.com.

Each of the various fellowships I have received in the world is unforgettable and has its distinctiveness. My 2019–2020 fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, I would say, is a

unique one. This uniqueness is not simply shaped by the global pandemic due to COVID-19, but also defined by the experience only a Fellow of Wiko could have. Every year, Wiko has Fellows from more or less all over the world, senior and junior, with various ethnic and disciplinary backgrounds. Beyond shared memories, however, there must be different personal feelings. So, let me make a report from my own perspective. As a record of my personal experience at Wiko, it is not only about what I did, but also about what I felt and feel.

My research proposal submitted to Wiko in the very beginning was “the entanglement of Confucianism and political culture in contemporary China.” The focus of my fellowship was accordingly on this topic. Given that it involves not only Confucian political thought and practice in history, but also the changing political culture in contemporary China, I did not plan to complete this research project by the end of my fellowship. For me, it would be successful as long as I could fully make use of my stay at Wiko to collect needed materials, specify relevant questions, and write down what I think. Besides this, my interaction with other Fellows contributed to my research. For instance, Prof. Dr. Wolf Lepenies became interested in my work after an enjoyable lunch chat. He then contacted me for an interview aimed at the political and social situations and implications of Confucianism and contemporary China. Our talk was wonderful, not long but thought-provoking. His questions were inspiring. Based on the interview, Wolf then published an article titled “Der innere Konfuzius” in *Die Welt* (December 17, 2019). In addition to some of his own observations, it conveyed ideas to German readership about what I have been thinking concerning the entanglement of Confucianism and political culture in contemporary China. Although not all of what we discussed during the interview was included, I think the ideas I expressed in the article were helpful to more or less clarify some misunderstandings or clichés about the relationship between Confucianism and political power, which unfortunately are still prevalent in the West and in China as well. Some deliberate omissions in the article were not due simply to the space limitations of the newspaper article, but to concerns for my safety. In this regard, my heartfelt gratitude goes to Wolf first of all for his well-intended considerations.

Besides working on my proposed research project, I participated in various activities organized or coordinated by Wiko. Needless to say, every Tuesday Colloquium is the core and routine program for our Fellows. Given that our Fellows are distinguished or promising scholars in various disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, participating in such colloquiums is absolutely an interesting, exciting, and challenging intellectual journey for me. In addition, what could constantly bring our Fellows

together were the weekday lunches and Thursday dinners, which, I believe, were particularly designed by the leadership of Wiko to create more chances for Fellows to be together more. Countless ideas were generated not only during the colloquium discussions, but also in the process of enjoying delicious food and fine wine well prepared by Dunia Najjar and her team in Villa Linde's cozy dining room at Wallotstraße 19. No other similar institutions in my fellowship experience so far have established this lunch-dinner gathering model as a way of fostering intellectual exchange for residential Fellows. This model, I believe, well features the uniqueness of Wiko as one of the institutions for advanced studies in the world. That Wiko allows our Fellows to invite colleagues to have lunch, dinner, or even seminars at Villa Linde is also very impressive. This policy, considerate and helpful, enables Fellows to create and accordingly enjoy a broader academic community.

The German course provided by Wiko is another distinctive benefit not easily obtained elsewhere. Unfortunately, it was terminated by COVID-19 in March and I missed a couple of classes before its completion. But I must say this wonderful program is very useful. My German teacher, Ursula, was not only responsible, but also "sehr nett zu allen Teilnehmenden."

In addition to activities for all Fellows, Wiko especially created chances for me to have intellectual exchanges, including meeting scholars related to my fields and visiting other academic institutions in Berlin. For example, I remember how Prof. Dr. Daniel Schönplflug one day contacted me about having lunch with Prof. Dr. Klaus Mühlhahn, a professor of Sinology and Chinese History and Vice President of the Freie Universität Berlin. To my knowledge, there are not many scholars in Chinese Studies in Berlin, to say nothing of scholars in Chinese Humanities. So, this special arrangement was to facilitate scholars' exchanges in Chinese humanities. Daniel not only set up the meeting, but also joined the lunch, which was truly enjoyable. Also, I remember that Daniel introduced me to the Mercator Institute for China Studies, which I had never known about before. Although I did not get a chance to meet Dr. Pieke and Dr. Shi-Kupfer, two experts in China Studies, due to our schedule conflict, I add the Mercator Institute to my inventory of China Studies in Germany. Without Daniel's introduction, this could not have happened. I appreciate what Daniel, on behalf of Wiko, has done for me.

In short, Wiko arranged various activities for our Fellows. I tried to participate in all of them, although I had to miss a couple of them. All the activities in which I participated were significant and pleasant. I am sure this feeling is shared by many of our Fellows.

Furthermore, I got a lot out of the freedom ensured by Wiko. The manageable time and comfortable environment enabled me to maximally enrich my academic life. Let me

give but two examples. During my stay at Wiko, I completed a book manuscript on the methodology of doing Chinese philosophy. As a collection and revision of my ten relevant articles and one interview published from 2003 to 2019, it is going to be published by a prestigious publisher in China. Moreover, I accepted a few invitations to deliver lectures at universities in Cambridge, Paris, and Reykjavik and went to participate in a couple of conferences at universities in Berlin and Ljubljana. I tried to limit this kind of activities to make sure the focus of my work conducted at Wiko was not disturbed. On the other hand, I know that a certain interaction with a larger intellectual community is academically productive. This balance could not be achieved without Wiko's focused yet flexible policy and schedule, which are appreciated.

Another unforgettable experience at Wiko is its library services. My research could not be well conducted without the convenience provided by the library staff. Wiko's library service is one of the best library systems I have ever experienced. I know it is not easy to get Chinese books outside the Chinese-speaking world, especially those traditional Chinese books published before the 20th century. Hence, I was trying to avoid consulting Chinese texts too much. But I still have to use some Chinese books once in a while. Impressively, almost all the Chinese books I requested were available. This means the collection of Chinese books in Berlin is rich. It is also undoubtedly a result and example of the excellent service Wiko's library team provided.

Due to the abrupt outbreak of COVID-19, our normal life at Wiko changed so much since early March 2020. The Thursday dinner had to be cancelled. The lunch get-together was then adjusted to feature small tables for fewer people and was eventually cancelled, too. All our Fellows finally had to have lunch in our apartments, separated from each other. When only two or at most three Fellows had to share a table for lunch, I took a few pictures of the peculiar scene in order to record this unfortunately historic moment. I recalled that I once told Achille and a couple of others that this situation was presumably unprecedented in Wiko's history. I did hope it was unprecedented and will never happen again in the future.

As a result of the global pandemic, not only did our communal way of life at Wiko dramatically change, but some of our Fellows even had to terminate the fellowship early in order to fulfill family obligations and meet the requirements of some international travel restrictions. I myself unfortunately became one of them. Given such a special situation and hard time, my premature departure request was kindly approved by the leadership of Wiko, especially Prof. Dr. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger and Dr. Thorsten Wilhelmy, and well taken

care of by kind staff including Vera Pfeffer, Nina Kitsos, Daniela Wendlandt, and others. Taking this opportunity, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to all of them.

My fellowship at Wiko was completed. Looking back, I wish I could stay there longer. Why? Because I am certain that the nearly 10-month fellowship would substantially contribute to my career and my life. It is highly rewarding. I spent a wonderful time with such brilliant minds from all over the world and cherish our shared experiences. There are quite a few vivid memories in my mind: having lunch with Altay at Landhaus Grunewald, a fine restaurant near Villa Walther where we live, and exchanging ideas about the collapse of the communist regimes and its aftermath, consequences, and possible developments in the future; sharing childhood experience, especially the experience of fear, with Georgi during lunch, in addition to playing table tennis together; consulting with Felix about Christian theology while lunching; having coffee together with Alon in response to his curiosity about Confucianism; exchanging my Chinese tea with Jeanne's that she brought from Saint Petersburg; enjoying dinner and chatting with Holger, Nicole, and Sharon at a nice restaurant in the downtown area; meeting again with Zhiyi, the only other scholar in Chinese humanities at Wiko, whom I met in Frankfurt in 2014 for the first time; chatting, exchanging ideas, and discussing with Achille, who kindly chaired my colloquium via Zoom, which presumably was the first unconventional one in Wiko's history; and chatting with almost all the other Fellows on various occasions. Every image reminds me of my associations with 2019–2020 Fellows at Wiko.

I do not need to enumerate each case in my memory and try to paint the whole landscape. Indeed, "unexpected encounters inspire new ideas." It was such diversified conversations with Fellows and staff at Wiko that made my life in Berlin rich, colorful, and inspirational. Let me add one more example. Going for a stroll after dinner or lunch is part of my daily life. It was truly an enjoyment to do that in beautiful Grunewald full of trees and lakes. In such an environment, the impulse to compose poems is irresistible. I did compose some fifteen old-style Chinese poems during my stay at Wiko. It was my new personal record. Most of them naturally came into being while I was taking a walk in the pleasant scenery of Grunewald.

The last words of the fellowship introduction at the Wissenschaftskolleg indicated on Wiko's website are: "the Wissenschaftskolleg offers a maximum of intellectual freedom, and the Fellows return the favor by making the very best of it for themselves." I believe it is indeed a pertinent depiction and epitome of my experience and feelings at Wiko and I sincerely extend my endorsement.