

Rudolf Wagner, The Making of a Scholar of His Time

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Acceptance speech on behalf of Rudolf G. Wagner on his award of the Karl Jaspers Prize, November 14, 2019, reworked November 25, 2019

Dear Mr. President, dear Mayor, dear members of the Heidelberg Academy and the University, the awarding of the Karl Jaspers Prize to Rudolf Wagner is a great honor. He received the news of his winning this prestigious award with excitement and gratitude. Today, I represent him in accepting this prize and expressing his heartfelt thanks to the three granting institutions: the city of Heidelberg, the University of Heidelberg, and the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences.

Before Rudolf Wagner passed away in late October, he had already begun to write his speech for accepting this award. Sadly, he was unable to complete it. Based on his notes, however, I would like to highlight some of his key ideas and thoughts.

The first time I met Rudolf was in the early 1980s, when he gave a lecture at Harvard University, the subject of which was the impact of Soviet literature on the works of modern Chinese writers. At that time at Harvard, this was a very unpopular academic approach to take, as Chinese literary studies were singularly focused on understanding Chinese culture and literature through an exclusive “Chinese lens,” thereby upholding the so-called “China-centered approach.” In stark contrast, Rudolf’s lecture emphasized intercultural engagement as the condition underlying the flow of knowledge and literary forms. He argued that the development of literature was through a process of dialogue and its production the result of such interaction. His lecture was a revelation for me. Growing up in China, familiar with its contemporary literary scene, it became immediately clear that Rudolf’s analysis reflected my own immediate experiences.

Forty years ago, advocating a transcultural approach made Rudolf Wagner a relatively singular (and lone) voice in Chinese studies. Although quite isolated as he struggled against the cultural essentialists in the China field, he never wavered. Much of his steadfastness is a reflection of the times in which Rudolf came of age. Looking back at his scholarly endeavors, the transcultural core is embedded throughout. This transculturalism was not only a question of perspective or the application of a particular methodology, however. Rather, it expressed a world outlook, one that embodied a shared heritage

of the generation Rudolf grew up with in the aftermath of the Second World War. Many of this generation are intensely committed to a Germany that is an integral part of Europe, and to understanding the country within a wider global paradigm. As many of his generation, Rudolf was intensely anti-nationalistic.

Rudolf's commitment to transcultural studies grew out of his interest in and study of hermeneutics, which led to his going to Heidelberg University in the 1960s to study with Prof. Hans-Georg Gadamer. During the early years of our acquaintance, Rudolf first introduced me to the theory of hermeneutics, which was, as he explained it, the attempt to understand phenomena—including events, texts, art, and people—by reconstructing the historical and cultural “horizon” (contexts) from which they had occurred. In other words, ensuring that one's own time-sensitive world outlook did not come to be imposed upon the interpretation or understanding of the phenomenon being studied, but instead applying historical context and data to reveal that phenomenon's own inner logic, contradictions, and workings. One's criticisms and critiques—which necessarily reflect the concerns of one's own time—had therefore to be based upon this historical context and cultural understanding.

Hermeneutics thus provided a whole generation of scholars with a methodological means to break out of the “prison house of nationalism,” and to become critically engaged in the study of other peoples, cultures, and pasts.

It is not hard to see the link between hermeneutics and transculturalism: both require that any study or investigation have no particular set of social concerns or values imposed up-front upon them, such as the nationalism inherent in using a “Chinese centered approach.” The scholarly commitment inherent in both is shaped by the set and type of questions being raised as the means to elicit answers from the past, the present, and even the future. Such a commitment offers the topic under investigation channels of communication and creates space for dialogue with the object of study. As Rudolf often stressed, when one imposes questions driven by one's own ideological commitment, the subject under study will respond with silence.

The link between Rudolf Wagner's world outlook and transcultural scholarly tendencies and Karl Jasper's philosophical contribution is clear. In Rudolf's unfinished acceptance speech, he begins by establishing this link by talking about the Cluster building and the Cluster's legacy:

When you come to the building of the Cluster, you will see a sign at the door: The Karl Jaspers Centre. When we founded the Cluster, Karl Jaspers was, from the beginning, in the select choice of those scholars after whom we wanted to name the building. In this respect, my current scientific activity in Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies is directly connected with the name Karl Jaspers.

Specifically, Rudolf points to Jaspers's Axial Age concept and identifies Jaspers with the beginning of consecutive philosophy:

With the concept of Axial Age (*Achsenzeit*), Jaspers argued in 1949 that Greece, India, and China—at about the same time—were undergoing a deep spiritual transformation, the result of which was the origin of philosophy. Apparently independent of each other, these three cultures each developed new conceptual apparatuses that would shape the subsequent centuries and millennia. Jaspers proposed a unified history of mankind in which the three founding cultures of Eurasia moved in the same rhythm without hierarchy or interdependence.¹

Rudolf further emphasizes the historical setting of Jaspers's theory and its significance as well as limitations:

This thesis had already been presented during the war by Alfred Weber in his *Das Tragische und die Geschichte* [The tragic and history], but it met with little response.² Neither Weber nor Jaspers developed a philosophical argumentation for this coincidence of cultures. The main intention of their argumentation was apparently to point to the similarity of these developments and thus to refute Eurocentric notions of a European superiority.

Jaspers helped articulate a unified history of humanity without hierarchy, but as a product of its time, neither Jaspers nor Alfred Weber offered any explanation or philosophical derivation.

The approach pursued by Jaspers is in this respect comparative. He did not pursue the possible connections between the three cultures that could have resulted in exchange processes. It may be argued that any written sources are missing so that the question could not be answered. On the other hand, the connections across Eurasia are so well documented in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE that this possibility cannot be ruled out and, as Gadamer so beautifully said, philosophy is so exciting because it raises the questions that cannot be answered.³

1 Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1949), 18–42; Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 1–21.

2 Alfred Weber, *Das Tragische und die Geschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1943).

3 Thomas Sturm, "'Rituale sind wichtig': Hans-Goerg Gadamer über Chancen und Grenzen der Philosophie," *Der Spiegel* 2000.8 (February 21, 2000): 305.

Putting aside the issue of possible connections between these cultures and refusing to engage with “cheap criticism of the Sinological and Indological sources used by Jaspers,” Wagner wanted to devote his talk to methodological questions.

The intentionality of Jaspers’s approach is well illustrated by a parallel one. At present there are extensive discussions about the question of modernity. As opposed to a triumphant narrative of a European conquest of the world through institutions, concepts, and practices, some scientists attempt to develop a theory of multiple modernities. This theory assumes that in different societies modernity originates from inner sources and that exchange factors are only secondary. Here, we have a situation with overwhelming source material on transcultural exchange processes; however, due to social and political considerations and motivations, scholars deliberately treat them as secondary. The presence or absence of source material does not seem to be the deciding factor.

To fully understand the reasons behind Jaspers’s comparative approach, one must situate his thinking in the period within which he lived—a time when the call for looking at the world as one entity was being loudly articulated by writers, philosophers, and politicians alike:

The historical context of Jaspers’s book may provide a key. He wrote it in Germany in the immediate post-war period and such a book would have been in itself a political statement at that time. Similar to the period after World War I, when President Wilson’s ideas about sovereignty, democracy, and peace spread in the midst of the carnage of the war and reached peoples and social strata that were not previously considered active participants in world affairs, we see a worldwide desire for a peaceful post-war order.

A good example of this is the book *One World* by Wendell Willkie from 1943.⁴ Willkie was the opponent of President Roosevelt in his 1940 election campaign, where he pleaded for an isolationist course of the United States. His actual political attitude, however, was internationalist. After Roosevelt’s election victory, the president sent his opponent on a world tour through the war zones. His book, distributed in millions, described a world

4 Wendell L. Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

in which peoples claim an active role in world politics whose voice had so far had little importance.⁵

ONE WORLD

BY

Wendell L. Willkie



SIMON AND SCHUSTER, NEW YORK

1943

Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the sixth printing of the first editions of Wendell L. Willkie's *One World* (1943).

This was also the time of the founding of the United Nations, where the ideal of “one world” was institutionally put into practice, including in 1948 with the drafting and passing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as commissioned by the newly formed UN. Meanwhile, in Europe, in *The Peace* (German title: *Der Friede*), written in 1943 during the Second World War by

5 Rudolf Wagner, “Wendell Willkie, competing for the US presidency with F. D. Roosevelt in 1940 on an isolationist platform, switched sides after his defeat, and was sent off by FDR in a government plane to present a survey of the state of the world. In a fine example of the importance of war in transcultural interactions, he came back with the assessment that the people all over the world, including the colonies, had awoken, were ready for, and eager for a cooperation and development within ‘one world.’ His book, which was wildly popular in the US at the time because given the strict censorship it presented a very rare first hand report about many sites of war (Egypt, Russia, China), actually is the first to come up with the term ‘united nations’.” Email to Monica Juneja and Catherine Yeh, December 16, 2014.

Ernst Jünger and published abroad in 1947, the author pronounces the coming of a new European post-war order that will be built upon the friendship and alliance between France and Germany.⁶

This one world idea and ideal emerged out of the short-lived historical window that briefly opened at the end of World War II, but shut with the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, and was subsequently forgotten. The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s caused its resurgence. Central to this “one world” reawakening has been the role of the globalization of media.

Rudolf’s acceptance speech notes further reflect his critique of the weakness—due to its intrinsic arbitrariness—of the comparative studies approach used most widely in the social sciences. In response, and as heir to Karl Jaspers’s legacy of creating a unified history of mankind, the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” offers a new approach. Building on Jaspers’s philosophical outlook, this approach examines history through the transcultural investigation of the dynamic engagements between cultures. Using evidence-based research and fruitful collaboration across fields for which transculturality has long been a given (e.g. linguistics, epidemiology, studies on ancient DNA of humans, plants, animals, and pests, as well as climate history, archaeology), the Cluster has catalyzed and broadened the application of transcultural studies, including into newly emerging academic fields. Within this context, it has helped to expand the study of CULTURE beyond the constraints of its text/image/object focus.

As outlined by Rudolf, the first step the Cluster took in initiating this new transcultural studies approach was to explore the theoretical framework of the dynamics of asymmetric cultural flow. Of greatest relevance for the humanities in general and transcultural studies in particular, this framework is a tool for the exploration of human perception and the agency released by it. As Rudolf argues elsewhere, the dynamism of asymmetric cultural flow is generated by the perceived asymmetry in the functionality (an umbrella term for suitability to the given purpose) of information available to the two sides and, thus mobilized, the agency needed on the local level to overcome it. This approach helps shed light on the very processes of the revitalization of culture through engagement. The issue asymmetric cultural flow confronts is the arbitrariness of the method of comparative cultural studies. In contrast, the transcultural method of studying the dynamics within the historical processes of cultural transformation and change, helps reveal the hidden interaction and the very dynamism brought to the processes through local agency. “The use of this concept is therefore an abstract modern formulation that still qualifies as hermeneutic because it is taking up this internal dynamics rather than being

6 Ernst Jünger, *Der Friede: Ein Wort an die Jugend Europas; ein Wort an die Jugend der Welt* (n.p.: self published, 1945 × 1947).

an *ex post facto* imposed concept such as those used by the social sciences for comparative purposes.”⁷

The second step taken by the Cluster was to challenge the notion of the nation-state as an analytical model within transcultural studies, where by default culture was seen and defined within the prism of national borders. Using the metaphor of the “Trees and the Forest,” Rudolf introduced a new paradigm. In a lecture he gave in November 2018 at the Cluster, Rudolf elaborated on the reason for using the “trees and forest” metaphor in discussing and studying cultures, “Because their relationship provides a good model for analyzing the dynamic relationship between CULTURE (the forest) and cultures (the trees) instead of focusing on the particular relationship between some given cultures and pondering the vast bestiary of concepts (*métissage*, entanglement, etc.) developed to somehow catch their elusive relationship.”

The inspiration for Rudolf came from Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016).⁸ The advantage of applying this metaphor to transcultural studies is that it highlights the dependency of knowledge and its understanding on the overall framework of analysis being used. It asks in what ways do a forest’s trees and other organisms interact, and through this interaction, produce results inaccessible to the isolated examination of just one given tree. It furthermore reveals the range of interactions by, amongst, and with all the other organisms within the forest, the all-encompassing interconnective nature and mutually interactive impact of the “wood wide web” lying beneath the forest floor, and the diverse factors driving each.

The potential harvest for transcultural studies includes the direct application of this forest/culture metaphor as a dynamic interactive process, where the “wood wide web” corresponds to a cultural worldwide web, web processes are self-regulatory, and interactions are largely invisible, and occur in many different forms and languages. Both webs are held together by a common origin, a continuous interaction in all domains, the need to find responses to challenges, and the common destiny of mortality. The forest’s/culture’s main constituents—discrete trees/cultures—are no longer stand-alone units, but interconnected and mutually interactive. Their lifeline and vitality are as part of a larger dynamic ecosystem. Stand-alone trees have low survival rates and life expectancies. Their ontogenesis is an ongoing process that comes with constant renewal, which in turn drives and sustains on-going interactions.

7 Rudolf Wagner, “Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction,” in *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, edited by Laila Abu-Er-Rub et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019) 15–38.

8 Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016).

For Rudolf, the benefits of this new paradigm for transcultural studies include the forest/trees metaphor as the model of processes driven by internal dynamics rather than the exercise of “power.” While disbalancing asymmetries constantly occur (e.g. fires, human forestry, pests without natural enemies/epidemics, occupation of lands, monopoly, concentration of innovation, etc.) and may give individual actors an inordinately large influence for a short time, the self-regulatory mechanism of the wider web usually generates responses that effectively flatten these asymmetries over time. The understanding that emerges is that all cultures are subsets of a worldwide process of Culture, thus moving transcultural interaction from an awkward footnote to the center of research, and from a binary comparative model to that of a multi-layered global interaction.⁹

Finally, Rudolf’s acceptance speech notes posit that the third step the proponents of transcultural studies could take would be the development of a theoretical framework for the study of “the world we live in.” In other words, our exploration of the duality of nature and culture should be founded upon the premise that we all live within one connected and shared environment. Thus the need, going forward, for transcultural studies to adopt a wider, ecosystem embedded (as opposed to anthropocene biased) view of our history, culture, and totality.

My last point centers on what made Rudolf’s scholarship and personality so extraordinarily lively and creative—his capacity for and joy in fantasy. It was Rudolf who first introduced me to *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. Rudolf’s fantastical capacity opened up myriads of pathways that provided him with different perspectives of understanding, gave him the freedom to discover alien worlds, and created alternate spaces to explore new ideas that initially might seem a bit outlandish, but over time might also yield great harvests. Given his immense knowledge and learning, Rudolf’s ability to imagine without constraint or fear—spanning from the wondrous to the absurd—brought to the scholarly world something unique, unparalleled, and identifiably all his own.

We have deeply benefitted from Rudolf Wagner’s commitment to and the development of transcultural studies, including the approach and methodology that underpin it. Today, Rudolf’s thinking has been largely accepted by the young generation of scholars trained in different area studies and academic disciplines. The establishment of the Cluster—of which he was one of the founding members—was a critically important advancement in the institutional recognition, acceptance, and spread of transcultural studies.

9 Rudolf Wagner’s lecture, “Of Trees and the Wood, Cultures and CULTURE,” given at the International Workshop: “Recalibrating Culture – Reconfiguring the (Trans-)Cultural,” Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg, November 22–23, 2018. In this lecture, Wagner also discussed in great detail “The Culture of Nature,” which I did not include in this article.

We will all miss you my beloved friend and intellectual partner. The void you left behind cannot be filled. But we will carry on, and through our continuing efforts in the field of transcultural studies, we will strive to stay true to and advance your philosophical approach, and in doing so, stay close to you.