

Obituary

In memory of Helmut Martin (1940–1999)

Bonnie S. McDougall and Michel Hockx

In the months before his shockingly sudden and premature death on June 8, Helmut Martin appeared fit and vigorous. He was looking forward to his retirement and the chance it offered him to pursue new subjects and new ways of working. He was also busy with revising, updating and preparing for re-publication articles and papers on a wide range of topics that had occupied him in previous years. At the same time, he was supremely conscious of the present: ever ready for a meal in convivial company, ever generous with advice and assistance to friends, colleagues and students. His good humour, his mastery of many languages and his profound and meticulous learning won him friends wherever he travelled – he was one of the most internationally respected Sinologists of his generation.

Helmut Martin studied Chinese and Slavonic languages in Munich, Belgrade, Paris and Heidelberg. At Heidelberg, he obtained his doctoral degree in 1966 under the supervision of Wolfgang Bauer. His Ph.D. thesis, *Li Li-weng über das Theater (Li Li-weng on Theatre)*, remains the fullest introduction in any Western language to the dramaturgy of the famous 17th-century playwright and critic, Li Liweng [Li Yu]. The “Preface” to his dissertation opens with a note on the need to overcome the isolationism of Sinology and introduce East Asian literary theory into the mainstream of general literary criticism. The wish to have the works and ideas of Chinese writers and intellectuals accepted in Western countries in their own right and not out of a sense of exoticism or political correctness, remained a central ambition throughout his academic career.

Before settling down in Bochum, where he took up the chair in Chinese language and literature in 1979, Helmut Martin spent an extended period of time in Asia, especially in Taiwan. Some of his most remarkable academic accomplishments, such as the 15-volume critical edition of Li Yu’s work, *Li Yu quanji* (1971), and the two-volume index to the He collection of comments on poetry, *Suoyinben He shi lidai shihua* (1973), date from this period. Also from this period is one of his earliest contributions to the study of modern Chinese literature, a privately printed critical edition of Wang Yingxia’s letters to Yu Dafu, *Gei Yu Dafu de xin* (1970).

After 1979, Martin’s main research interests fell into three broad categories: the political and intellectual history of Chinese narrative literature from the Ming and Qing to the present; literature and literary history in Taiwan; and human rights in China. He was particularly at home in exploring the political factors affecting the course of literary history on the Mainland since the 1950s. A typically fine example of such a work is the long essay, “‘Cultural China’: irritations and expectations

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at the end of an era," in Maurice Brosseau *et al.* (eds.), *China Review 1997*. Much of his groundbreaking research was related to Taiwan, where he enjoyed wide-ranging friendships and all aspects of daily life. His pioneering study of the process by which literary histories of Taiwan came to be written, his rediscovery of Eileen Chang [Zhang Ailing] at a time when her work was out of fashion, and his willingness to be guided by the taste of local readers, rather than that of critics or scholars, in pursuing literary trends, are all testament to his exceptionally direct, thorough, innovative and inspirational approach to literary research and scholarship.

Martin was an accomplished teacher and lecturer, always clothing his highly original viewpoints in modesty and wit. Although literature was his main focus, he insisted on the need for Western Sinologists to be as fluent in the Chinese language as he was himself. Under his leadership, the Chinese language programme at Bochum has become one of Europe's finest. He was also a tireless editor, urging writers, publishers and funding bodies to publish new work as well as translations into English and German, writing prefaces to others' works, arranging visits and tours, and otherwise promoting cultural understanding between East and West. His knowledge of Russian led to a series of excellent introductions to Soviet Sinology at a time when communication between West and East European academic communities was minimal. (See, for instance, his article "Soviet scholarship on Chinese literature of the Ming and Qing Dynasties," *C.L.E.A.R.*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2, 1986.) The two series he initiated for the Projekt Verlag, *Edition Cathay* (46 volumes to date), and *arcus chinatexte* (14 volumes), contain a richness of translations and studies of (especially modern) Chinese literature that is unrivalled in any other Western country.

Perhaps as an outcome of their shared belief in the universal values of truth, justice and compassion, Helmut and his wife, Tien-chi Martin-Liao, became deeply involved with the cause of human rights in China, especially after 1989. Trying to work out appropriate reactions to political repression on the Mainland is a problem that has exercised many Sinologists, especially those in contemporary studies. In the 1990s, most felt it advisable to maintain their contacts in China; a few chose not to visit the country at all. Martin's solution was typically forthright: he applied to visit China on several occasions, but did not abate his human rights campaigning or his support for Taiwan. As a result, most recently on the occasion of the May Fourth literature conference in Beijing in May 1999, he was refused a visa.

We are fortunate that the six volumes of Martin's collected works – for which Projekt Verlag started a new series, *Chinathemen* – have been reaching print in the last few years. Martin's contribution to modern Chinese studies is substantial in its bulk as well as its quality: he plunged into his primary materials and he never skimmed on sources. His infectious enthusiasm, his vitality and warmth, his solicitude and sympathy are equally valued by all those who knew him. We shall miss him greatly.