

Interview of Professor Halvor Eifring (艾皓德)

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Interview conducted by Julie Yu-Wen Chen

Transcribed by Toivo Qiu (裘瀚雲)

Chen: We usually start by talking about your family background and your schooling experiences before the university, because we want to know what interests you and what drove you into Chinese studies.

Eifring: Well, family background, I think, is the thing that comes closest to explaining my interest in Chinese, because everybody in my family was interested in languages. So, my father taught Norwegian, German and English at high school, my mother taught Norwegian, French and English, my sister, who's older than me, used to teach Norwegian, French and English like my mother before she became a librarian, and my brother, who's also much older than me, started by trying to do something else. He started with mathematics but then switched to political science and then, linguistics, German and English. So, everybody in my family has studied languages, that's, I mean, a trait we have. At high school, at least during that time, I don't know how it works now, we had to choose from these different lines, and my line was the language line or the English line. So, languages have interested me for a very long time. So that was at least part of the reason why I chose to study Chinese; I didn't start with Chinese; when I started my university studies, I first studied one and a half year Norwegian, in other words, Nordic languages, and then for one year linguistics. And only then, after my military service, did I start with Chinese.

C: How about after your university? Did you go to a graduate school for a master's degree?

E: I did my master's degree here.

C: And also linguistics?

E: Also in linguistics. So, in general linguistics, but writing about a Chinese topic.

C: So, maybe I missed something, but from the undergraduate you were already learning Chinese.

E: Yes, from the undergraduate level, but not during the first two and a half years.

C: Who was your professor at that time who taught you Chinese?

E: Well, there were several professors here. There was Christoph Harbsmeier, who you already know about and who was very important for me; there was Trygve Løtveit, who was the teacher of Chinese history but also actually taught some language classes. Then, perhaps the most important teacher language-wise during my first years was Liu Baisha (劉白沙). She has passed away now, but she was a very important teacher for, I think, several generations of people here.

C: Was she from the PRC?

E: She was born in Sichuan. When she was, I think, five years old, her mother brought her to Taiwan. When she was, I think, twelve years old, they moved to America, or her mother moved first and she moved afterwards, I'm not sure how that was. Later, she moved to France, when still very young and then she came here in 1969, began teaching Chinese here and married one of her students. So, she lived the rest of her life here in Norway.

C: So, they were kind of the pioneers of Chinese studies here.

E: Yes, absolutely. In addition to them, there was one other pioneer who had already left Oslo when I started. He was Henry Henne. He was the one who established East Asian studies and especially Chinese studies here in 1966. So, fifty years ago this year. And then, I think, towards the end of the 1970's, he moved to Bergen, which was his original home town, and taught linguistics there.

C: Was Oslo at that time the centre of China studies in Norway at that time?

E: It was the only place where one could study Chinese in Norway until very recently. Now, for some years, one has been able to study China studies in Bergen, too, but I think that Oslo is to this day the only place where one can take a master's degree in Chinese studies.

C: What was the atmosphere at that time? Were the people generally interested in Asia or China, in the society? What was the multiple creating research cluster here?

E: I think in the case of Henry Henne the background for starting this was his linguistic studies and that was at the time perhaps the most common denominator for the languages in the humanities here. It was the interest in language and to some degree literature and the sort of more social and political aspects that came later. That also created some conflicts because some of the students who started in the 1970's were Maoists and they wanted to have textbooks that reflected modern Chinese society, meaning communist society. So, that may have been one of the conflicts that made Henry Henne decide to move back to Bergen.

C: So at that time there was no professor who could offer leftist kind of teaching.

E: No, there were also people here that could teach that. Trygve Løtveit, whom I mentioned, had studied the early history of the communist party, but of course, he wasn't any sort of Maoist in any sense. That was very different.

C: How about the atmosphere in the Nordic countries here? Did the development here coincide with that in Sweden, Denmark or Finland in relation to China?

E: I think it was quite similar. In contrast with America which was very late in getting in real contact with China, here people could even during the Cultural Revolution go to study in China, and especially after the opening of China. So, when I studied almost all students spent a year or more in mainland China. It was partly coincidental but partly my own choice to go to Taiwan instead. There were two reasons. One reason was that I wanted to go to a place where I could stay with a Chinese family. At that time one couldn't do that in mainland China; one had to live in a foreign students' dormitory and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to go to China to live with other foreigners. The other reason was that my professor back then, professor Harbsmeier, had got news about the Stanford Centre which now is a part of the 臺大 (National Taiwan University) but which was at that time run by American universities, but also within the premises of 臺大. He didn't know very much about it, but he thought it would be good, so then I applied and got in and it was a very good and intensive place to study.

C: So, that was your first contact with China, was it?

E: Yes, I came to Taiwan. Actually, my first contact with Asia was, I think, two or three weeks in Japan on holiday on my way to Taiwan. I admired what I saw in Japan very much and when I came to Taiwan, at the beginning I was very disappointed because I had seen these very aesthetic Japanese things and then when I came to Taiwan it was much more chaotic at the time. Now it is different, but at that time it was not very aesthetic.

C: Which year was that? Do you still remember?

E: 1984.

C: What did you do there exactly in Taiwan?

E: I studied Chinese at the centre for two years. My original plan was to go there for one year but then I decided to stay another year because I wasn't satisfied with my progress, although it was okay and the school was very good, but I thought I needed to learn more and just decided to stay another year.

C: Did you also start learning Classical Chinese at that time?

E: After a while, yes. Not at the beginning, but after a while. Actually I had looked at Classical Chinese here before I went, but not very much.

C: So, did you study traditional Chinese characters right at the beginning?

E: I think our textbooks here were in simplified Chinese, but we were taught both of them.

C: So, it was not difficult for you to learn Chinese in Taiwan in terms of the characters.

E: Not in terms of the characters. Of course, some characters are hard to learn whether they are simplified or traditional. It also took some time to learn the Bopomofo (注音符號) instead of the Pinyin which we used here.

C: So, you learned that as well.

E: In Taiwan one needed to learn that, it was the only way to work there.

C: Now it's more flexible.

C: What happened after that? Did you come back to Norway?

E: Yes, I came back to Norway, took a little bit more of Chinese here and an MA degree in linguistics, and after that, a doctorate in Chinese linguistics.

C: Who was your doctoral supervisor?

E: It was Harbsmeier.

C: All right. Could you tell more about your relationship to him; how he influenced you as a student and scholar?

E: I think, for me he was a very important person. As a person he is very open and encouraging so that when he thinks something is good or you're doing well, he will tell you very clearly. That was very encouraging. Also, the fact that he is a very free-wheeling thinker makes it interesting and exciting to work with him. So, I think, in our basic approach to things [we are similar] and in some respects I have learnt directly from him. In some respects, I think, we are also very different.

C: You mean the kind of research you are working on?

E: Yes, some of it. I think that both of us are very interested in getting the basic philology right. In general, I have learnt very much from him and I think he is a very interesting and important person.

C: What was your PhD dissertation about?

E: It's about clause combinations, so how you put 小句 [clauses] together in different ways in Chinese. That was very linguistic, and perhaps partly as a result of the very dry linguistic approach I had at that time, I basically haven't done all that much linguistics after having finished my PhD. For many years I worked on the 紅樓夢 [The Dream of the Red Chamber], in other words with literature, and for many years now, I have been working on a project on the cultural history of meditative practices.

C: Why have you had so different interests through times? There must have been a kind of a conjunction where you decided: "okay, it's time to work on this."

E: Well, language was there at the bottom of my interests in the beginning, but of course, when you study a language you also read other things and I was very fascinated by the 紅樓夢 and decided I would like to work on it and started doing so and, as you know, many people who start doing that never finish. I have written and published things on it but not as much as I would have liked to. So, it took more time than it perhaps should have done.

C: So, are you now done with 紅樓夢?

E: Well, there are things I should have published but I haven't yet published, so I still need to do something about that at some point. I'm not exactly sure when.

C: Why do you like 紅樓夢? Is it because you like the novel or is it because you find something linguistically unique therein?

E: No, I think it was the novel and the many layers of it; both emotionally, psychologically and also to some extent the underlying metaphysics. I thought it was interesting. I still think it is in many ways the most fascinating Chinese novel ever.

C: Are you the only person working on 紅樓夢 in Europe?

E: Not in Europe. There are other researchers in Europe who have also specialised on it. In Sweden there's one who has translated the whole thing into Swedish, so I can't say I'm the only one in Scandinavia, either.

C: So, people do have dialogue with you, because this is widely studied in other parts of the world.

E: Yes, kind of. I also have many contacts in both China and Taiwan.

C: How about the meditational practices? Looks like a very different project.

E: In many ways it is, but it is another part of my life. I have been practicing meditation since I was sixteen years old and have also been quite involved in teaching it.

C: In the university?

E: No, not in the university, only during my free time. And actually, when I was studying in Taiwan, I started what became a sort of Taiwan branch of a Norwegian school of meditation, Acem.

C: All right, it's a Norwegian style of meditation.

E: In a way, yes. It's a modern style in the sense that it is not tied to religion, it is more sort of technically oriented. It works.

C: How does that fit into your academic research?

E: Well, now it fits quite well in a sense that I look at some of the historical backgrounds of meditational practices in China and also other regions and cultures.

C: Are you also looking at the philosophical and religious background?

E: Those too, but also the practices.

C: Are you also teaching that in the university?

E: I don't teach that directly, but I sometimes teach about the history of self-cultivation in China, so maybe part of it.

C: About your teaching here, your curriculum; what do you teach here?

E: Well, this semester another scholar and I collaborate on a course of Classical Chinese for BA students. It is a course that tries to teach Classical Chinese at least to some extent by how it is used in Modern Chinese, because there are many Classical Chinese phrases in Modern Chinese, whether they are 成語 or just fixed expressions that come from Classical Chinese. Today at class we just

looked at some of the signboards saying 違者罰款 which is Classical Chinese. Another one is 請勿打擾, where the 勿 is Classical Chinese, but is also used in Modern Chinese.

C: How do the students like it?

E: It seems they are gradually beginning to like it. Today they also looked at two very short texts from the old classics, one from 孟子 (Mencius) and one from 莊子 (Zhuangzi). They worked very seriously with them and I gave them the story of Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly. They had different groups working on it.

C: Did they interpret it?

E: Yes. They interpreted what the language said and they managed pretty well, much better than I would have expected.

C: Are they undergraduates?

E: Yes, undergraduates.

C: How many students do you have?

E: In this class we have about twenty students.

C: Are they all majoring in Chinese?

E: Yes.

C: You have quite a large group, I think. What kind of textbook do you use?

E: With this class there is no textbook. We are using this grammar, "Du's Handbook of Classical Chinese Grammar", but we are using it very freely and adding our own stuff.

C: Okay, I will take a picture of it.

E: This is the first semester we tried it, so we haven't done it before.

C: So, this is published in China?

E: No, I think it's published in Great Britain.

C: What do you think about the quality of new students you get now? Or maybe there's a difference between the past and present.

E: I think the quantity is much larger now than it was ten or twenty years ago. When I started studying Chinese, I was the only regular student that whole year. There were some others who came and went, but I was the only regular student.

C: Now you have twenty-something.

E: Actually, in the beginning we take up almost seventy, but then some of those seventy never show up, so maybe somewhere between fifty and sixty, and then, some of them drop out along the way, but I think that when I say twenty-five, that is a conservative estimate. Perhaps almost thirty.

C: What do you think are the reasons why the students want to study Chinese nowadays? It's a drastic increase of students. There must be a reason for that.

E: Yes, it's true that it's a drastic increase of students. But it's also true that during the past three or four years the number of applicants has actually come down, but it's still more than we can take in. So, the number of applicants has gone down during the last few years.

C: Why do you think so?

E: I don't think it's a general trend, but maybe the Chinese dream isn't anymore as seductive as it once was and perhaps due to the bad relations between Norway and China caused by the Nobel Peace Prize, there has been quite a lot of bad press about China in Norway. There are critical problems between Norway and China and we also hear a lot about the repressive aspects of the Chinese society. We also hear about the pollution. So, there's quite a lot of negative focus in the press alongside the more positive reporting on China.

C: I'm curious, as I think you have Japanese studies here.

E: Yes.

C: Do they have more students than the Chinese studies?

E: They don't have more students, but they have more applicants.

C: That's interesting. In Finland we have more students in Japanese studies. The difference is quite large. There are not many students who take Chinese studies. I'm also very curious, as you seem to have different professors here. You are on classical studies and literature but I think there are also people who work more on society and politics.

E: Yes, we have a sort of society and politics part, we have especially Mette Halskov Hansen and Anna Ahlers – and also Koen Wellens, who is more oriented towards the religion.

C: So, you have four persons.

E: Actually, five because we also have also one more. He is Rune Svarverud, whose background is more similar to mine, classical studies, but who is now more involved in early modern conceptual history, so late Qing and early Republican Era.

C: So, five professors.

E: Yes, five professors and two university lecturers.

C: What are the lecturers doing, only language?

E: Yes, language, but they are very good.

C: Where are they from, from PRC?

E: One from Norway and one from Taiwan.

C: Okay. Are they all hired by the university? You don't have Confucius Institute here.

E: Yes, they're all hired by the university.

C: Is the latest recruit Anna?

E: Yes.

C: She focuses more on the contemporary.

E: I think we are probably the biggest China-oriented place in Scandinavia.

C: Oh, even bigger than Sweden and Denmark. In Denmark they also have NIAS (Nordic Institute for Asian Studies).

E: Well, NIAS isn't a language based research institute.

C: Yes, more about politics and society. So, [you are the largest] language-based and classics-based [place in Scandinavia].

E: Not necessarily classics-, but language-based.

C: So, the largest language-based.

E: Of course, in Sweden you have several places, Stockholm, Uppsala, Lund and to some extent, Gothenburg (Göteborg). So they have at least four places with real China studies, whereas we have Oslo and soon, Bergen, but that has taken some time.

C: How many professors are there who are doing Chinese studies [in Bergen]?

E: There is basically one, Zhao Shouhui, and I think they are in the process of hiring a second professor.

C: So, you are the centre.

E: So far, yes. I think it's good that we get competition from Bergen.

C: So, you think there's competition.

E: In a good sense, yes.

C: They have a Confucius Institute in Bergen.

E: Yes, they've got one in Bergen, not in the University of Bergen, but in the university college. And then, they collaborate.

C: Interesting. But here you don't want the resources from the Chinese government. Do you receive funding from the Chinese government in terms of research?

E: Not on a permanent basis. I have been in China a long time ago on money from the Chinese government. I spent a half a year at the Peking University. That was very generously funded by them. And then, we have other collaboration, of course. We have collaboration with the Zhejiang University. Some of our MA students go there for one year and get a double-badged degree, both the Zhejiang University and University of Oslo degree. And then, Mette and Anna especially, but also I, have a lot of research collaboration with China.

C: OK. How about doctoral students? How many do you have?

E: One just finished and one is open for application, so not many. (We now have three.)

C: What kinds of topics do they work on?

E: The ones who are here now all work on contemporary topics.

C: So, their supervisors are like?

E: Mette, Anna.

C: Is it easy for someone with a PhD in this area to find a job after they graduate?

E: I think it is easy to find a job, but the question is if one can find a job where one can use one's expertise.

C: Do some of them move to other countries in order to find opportunities?

E: Some do, but some also find work here or in Norwegian institutions and businesses in China, also.

C: But not necessarily many in the academia.

E: No, but some do.

C: It's not easy. This is kind of what we already discussed, but maybe I can go a bit deeper, so, the sources of research funding over time. Do you receive funding from the Norwegian government or the Nordic Council?

E: The University itself is of course largely funded by the government and then the university spreads it out on to the different faculties and the faculties spread it out to different departments and the departments spread it out to us.

C: Is the funding generous?

E: It varies a lot from year to year, but I think for some of us, we have been able to secure the funding for what we need to do, I mean, basic research, money for travelling and money for participating in conferences and perhaps arranging conferences. But if you want to do big things you may have to depend on money from the research council which, of course, is also government money, but comes through other sources.

C: So, then you have to also compete for the money?

E: Yes, you have to compete very fiercely and even if you are extremely good, you may not be able to secure the funding. So, that's a problem and the low number of PhD students also has to do with that because for several years there were almost no possibilities at all to get a PhD here unless one could get money from the research council through a project.

C: So, the PhD students are paid, they have salary.

E: Yes, the PhD students have a full salary, a very generous one. So, the ones who get in, I would say, are very lucky, but there are also few of them.

C: Yes, but there's no pressure for you to try to fight for more money and to get a larger intake of PhD students.

E: To fight for more money, definitely. We try it all the time. We have applications in there; we will see how it goes.

C: Are you thinking that other universities are fighting for more income nowadays?

E: To some extent, yes, but not very pushy yet, but there is some. If we are able to get some external financing, that will be a very big plus.

C: Since you have a lot of cooperation with Taiwan, do you also get money from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (蔣經國國際學術交流基金會)?

E: Yes, some. The conference in 2010, which started this meditation project, was partly funded by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation. We also got some money from here, but also from Taiwan.

C: This question is probably interesting: Involvement in academic debates on China studies concerning human rights in specific. We talked about it, but I think in the Norwegian context we can delve further.

E: It's a very important question. You know, another part of the University of Oslo is a human rights institute and they have a section on China and at least one of my colleagues here used to work there. In 2010 when Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) got the Nobel Peace Prize, many of us were asked by the media about this Peace Prize. So, many of us also talked quite freely about that in the media.

C: In general, what is your stance on such issues? You, know, on China's human rights situation.

E: I think there are severe problems with the human rights issues in China.

C: Does your view also echo those of your colleagues?

E: I don't know; you will have to talk with them; they will present themselves.

C: It's my observation that some China scholars are more sympathetic; I don't say they are ignoring all the human rights problems; but they are more sympathetic about why the Chinese think a different way.

E: In some cases that's relevant, in other cases it is not.

C: So, you don't cooperate with the human rights section. I met one of their researchers before and I think they are in the department of political sciences, but I'm not sure. They had a project.

E: There might be some people doing that in the department of political sciences.

C: So, you don't really interact with them.

E: No, that's not my field of research. I may sometimes write about things like that but that's not my research.

C: So that means there are also other people working on China, probably in other departments of the university.

E: Yes, surely there are.

C: I would like to ask about your involvement in transnational research projects. I don't know if you have cooperation with Taiwanese scholars. Writing books together, maybe?

E: Yes. Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓 at 清華大學. There was a conference we arranged in Taiwan with Yang Rur-bin and the Japanese Mayuan Changye 馬淵昌也 (Masaya Mabuchi). This book was published by 臺大出版中心 (National Taiwan University Press): *Dōngyàde Jìngzuò Chuántǒng* (東亞的靜坐傳統). This was an East Asian thing with scholars from Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong. So, that is one sort of transnational collaboration. In my own work here I have had collaboration with people from various places in America, Europe and Asia on this "Cultural History of Meditation" project. I'm now starting a project called "Two Thousand Years of Mind Wandering".

C: What is it about?

E: It's also about meditative traditions and how they treat their thoughts when they don't go the way they intend them to go and how it is related to various sorts of contemplative traditions of our time. We are trying to establish the project with scholars from, basically, America and Europe. So, it's also transnational.

C: I'm still trying to understand how this meditation thing fits in your research project. Sorry for my ignorance. So, you are also going to deal with the cultural context and philosophies of meditation.

E: Yes, the texts.

C: There are so many questions here. Maybe this: Involvement in policies and consultation in the public. I don't know if you do that. It's probably Anna's job.

E: I don't usually do that. I mean, sometimes if there are cultural things I may be involved to some extent.

C: The relationship between the Norwegian and Chinese governments; we've kind of dealt with that, but we can maybe go a bit further. Was there a honeymoon period in the past, I guess after the founding of the PRC? I think the relationship was quite okay, wasn't it?

E: In the 1950's. I think Norway like other Scandinavian countries was quite early in recognising the PRC. I don't know if there was a honeymoon, but I think both the Norwegians and the Chinese used that for a long time to point to the good relations between our countries. Of course, that came to a very abrupt end with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

C: So, that was the turning point, not before.

E: Yes, there may have been some ups and downs before, but that was the real turning point.

C: I think there have been a lot of Chinese who were nominated but not really rewarded, so I think there always was tension when somebody was nominated.

E: Yes, that would increase tension but as long as they wouldn't get it, it would be fine, but when Liu Xiaobo got the prize, then they made it into a very serious political crisis.

C: How do Norwegians look at this? Do they look at this as a Chinese intervention into your own decisions?

E: I can't of course speak for all Norwegians, of course. I think some Norwegians would say: "why are they so angry?" Also, some find the insistence of the Chinese on treating it as a national or a state affair, which is not true, as the Nobel Committee is not part of the state administration at all, irritating. Of course then there are some, especially people in business or interests therein, who would say that this is really not worth it; they shouldn't have given the prize to Liu Xiaobo. It has influenced the relations too much. That's also a way at looking at it.

C: How is the Norwegian government's relationship with Taiwan?

E: Almost nonexistent. That's a great frustration for the Taipei representative office here that they don't really get anywhere and some may have hoped that this might change when the relations with China became so strained, but I think the opposite happened. I think the Norwegian government has been very eager to show that they have very good relations with Mainland China and are therefore even more scared than the neighbouring countries, Sweden and Denmark, of having any relations with Taiwan.

C: Oh, that's very interesting. Actually, I just remember what I wanted to ask you. Do you also study 閩南話 (Southern Min Chinese)?

E: A little, but I can't speak it.

C: Okay. It's just because I see you have collections here and thought I should ask.

E: I'm interested in it, you know, basic language interest.

C: Do you learn it?

E: Yes, a little bit. It's not that easy.

E: This is my textbook.

C: I see. That's what why I thought I should ask.

E: 閩南語, 大陸的閩南語教程

C: Do you sometimes offer Taiwanese classes?

E: No. But what I have done here in the past is; the first year students have had a sort of general introduction to the Chinese language where one of the classes is on the Chinese dialects and I have sometimes used Southern Min as an example and taught them to sing 心事誰人知 (Taiwanese song) in order to sort of pick up the different phenomena that you can notice in that.

C: And they can sing it?

E: Yes, some of them learn to sing it.

C: How about Cantonese?

E: I don't really know Cantonese.

C: There are never any courses on Cantonese here.

E: No.

C: What is your self-perceived contribution to China or China studies?

E: Self-perceived contribution, that's some 大話. Well, I think my doctoral thesis is a contribution at some level to some questions within Chinese grammar and syntax. I don't think it has really revolutionised anything but I think people who want to study some aspects of Chinese grammar will get it.

C: By the way, did you write it in English?

E: That was in English. I also think that my studies into the Dream of the Red Chamber, which approach reading the novel from a psychological aspect, differ somewhat from what has been done by others before, so in that sense I have a small contribution in there as well. Not a big one, but something. Then I think of my studies of the cultural history of meditation; they have taken a long time to take shape, so it was a new thing for me, too, when I started, but I think I am doing something there that no-one has done before. So, that is in a sense establishing a field that hasn't been a regular field before; I mean, there are many people who have studied meditation within one tradition but not so many have done scholarly comparison between different traditions. So, that's what I'm trying to do.

C: What are your self-perceived problems of past research?

E: Lots of challenges of course. I think in the case of my linguistic research one could perhaps argue that it's too nitty-gritty details and the large principal questions are insufficiently addressed. That also has its advantages, but that might be an issue. I think the biggest problem with my 紅樓夢 research is that not much of it has been published yet.

C: Why not?

E: Because I'm dragging my feet. There are lots of things that need to be done before it can be published. Then I'm also doing other things and some of it has been published, but the sort of larger things haven't been published yet.

C: I'm curious about your psychological approach. What do you mean the characters' psychology?

E: No, I mean more of an analysis of the novel as a whole. If one sees the novel as an expression of a psyche, an analysis of the novel as a whole, where the characters may represent different characteristics of a single mind in a way, is possible. You can see the book as representing one mind whether you see it as a representation of the author's mind or of whomever. So, one can see how these different psychological elements play with each other in the novel as a whole. The ones who are concerned with the 情 are very sensitive but also in a very dangerous state because when the 情 overflows it often kills them. Whereas those who don't have very much 情 but have very much 色 instead just continue to play around with women and never have a problem. So, it's having the sensibility which makes it dangerous. There is a kind of fear here.

C: So, actually you are analysing 曹雪芹's psychology, the way he looks at life.

E: I'm analyzing 曹雪芹 in the way we see him in the novel. We can't say that's he as man, because while that may be a side of him in the way he comes out in the novel, he may also have other sides as well. So, that's what we call the implied author, the author as he is manifested in the text.

C: My next question is about your evaluation of China pedagogy in Europe and in Scandinavian countries and the future thereof. This is a big question.

E: If you think about language pedagogy, there are two basic methods. In one, learning the language will go together with learning culture, texts and literature and all that at the same time, which will of course make things progress slower but at the same time it will facilitate going deeper. That's one approach. The other one is: "Make it simple to learn basic language first and then those who are interested can also go learn these other things later."

C: Which approach do you have here?

E: I think we have a mixture. It very much depends on those two university lecturers who are both very good. The one who comes from Taiwan was the top one of 150 applicants from Taiwan, America, Mainland China and Europe when he got here. There were really lots of applicants and he was undoubtedly the best of them. He's just very good at teaching the language. He does that extremely well and does involve culture to some extent but not in the academic way of culture studies, that's not his interest. His interest is to get these people to speak proper Chinese and he is exceedingly good at that. The other university lecturer, who is from Norway and studied here before and got more of a grammar background and all that, combines this with teaching them the culture in combination with the language in a more academic way. So, we have in a way both methods here.

C: And there's never any debate about which way is the better one here.

E: Of course there is a lot of debate but it has kind of found a balance.

C: Do the students have to pass a certain level of Chinese before they graduate? Is that a regulation here?

E: In a sense yes, they have to take the exams here, but not the likes of HSK and so on. The exams are here, not in Mainland China or Taiwan. Taiwan does also have such a test.

C: I'm curious about your students. Do some of them have very minimal skills of Chinese but have studied more of the Chinese politics, society and other social science aspects?

E: Of course there are differences but everybody must have a certain level of language skills.

C: Are they also encouraged to do Japanese or Korean studies?

E: Some of them will do, but not necessarily, and it is up to oneself.

C: So, it seems you are really more focused on our traditions. Some universities are more disciplinary.

E: If you ask Anna or Mette, they will have a very different approach from mine, but they are very clear that they want to have language as a basis, but at the same time Anna is basically a political scientist and Mette an anthropologist. Koen does religious studies more in an anthropological approach and this is definitely a part of our teaching and I think the majority of the students are interested in the modern society rather than the classics. So, we have both. We have of course two different MA programmes; one that is Chinese society and politics and one that is East Asian culture and history where you can specialise either on Chinese, Japanese or Korean, or actually Tibetan also.

C: What about the evaluation of different Chinese study communities within different Nordic countries and Europe?

E: I think we are lucky to have here, as you see, first of all five professors and these two full-time lecturers and have in that sense a very good environment and the fact that we have people both on the language, philology and history part and people doing modern society and politics and that we talk together. I think it is a very good asset of this programme.

C: So, you are the number one in Norway.

E: In Norway, definitely. In Scandinavia we'd argue that we are at least the largest language-based programme of China studies.

C: I'm not so sure about Stockholm.

E: In Sweden, they have Marja Kaikkonen, who is originally from Finland, and they have Arny Schweiger who is originally German and both of them are doing research on basically Chinese literature. Johan Lagerqvist studies modern Chinese political culture and media, including the internet. They have others as well and of course they have people who are retired now like Torbjörn Lodén and even earlier, Göran Malmqvist (馬悅然).

C: I will talk to both of them this month. It was hard to find them, but I managed. How about Finland; what's your impression of Chinese studies there?

E: I don't know much about it. I know that there used to be things in Turku about modern society and I of course know and very much respect Juha Janhunen, but his primary interest is not Chinese as such, but minority languages inside and outside of China. I would very much like to have contacts there.

C: How about your view on China's future?

E: Let me phrase it this way. Of course on the one hand many people here hope that China will eventually become a more democratic country. What I hope just as much is that China will develop into a culture where both the economics and the traditional culture can live side-by-side. You definitely need both. I think the one thing that would be good for China would be to be less politically dominated and I'm not just thinking about repression and things like that but also the thing that politics play such a great role in almost all contexts. I think that's a bit of a pity and it makes things a little more difficult in China than they need be. With every political system they go by. What is nice in China and I hope they will keep is the sense of being a big country and having a big responsibility. If you compare that to Taiwan, Taiwan has much more a sort of island mentality, a small place where 國家大事 is not really very 大.

C: The Chinese government has been trying to revive 儒學.

E: That's fine but when it becomes a part of a political programme, then it becomes more difficult. Just as it used to be for 蔣介石 in the past. When it becomes a part of a sort of political campaign then the freer and more open approach to the classics and traditional culture becomes more difficult. I mean, there are very good people in China working on the traditions but I think in that respect, the less politicised, the better.