

# Interview of Professor Mette Hansen

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**Interview conducted by Julie Yu-Wen Chen**

**Transcribed by Toivo Qiu (裘瀚灃)**

H: I'm originally from Denmark, where I attended both my junior and senior high school and after I finished my high school in 1981, I first worked for two years in a kindergarten; I didn't want to study. After two years I decided I would like to start studying and I started studying literary science. I studied that for two years and I also got my degree, but at that time literary science was a very post-modern adventure, so I hardly read any literature. It was all post-modern theory. So, I was a bit bored with that and what happened was that I had been travelling in India for three months, so I was very interested in Asia and my father was an artist and he told me that China would be very big in the future and a lot of things are going to happen, so why don't you study Chinese? I actually wanted to study Hindi and India, but there were no Hindi studies at my university, so I thought why not and started Chinese.

I studied Chinese in the University of Århus, Denmark, and I really liked it. The teachers and the environment were both great and we learnt a lot, but already after one year I applied to go to China. So, I went to China for the first time. That was my second year as a student of Chinese and I went to Shandong University (山東大學) in Jinan (濟南) and stayed there for two years. So, from 1986 to 1988, I was in Shandong, which was a very important experience for me. That's when I really started to learn a lot about China and also considered China my second home in a way.

C: Who was your teacher at that time? Was there any important teacher?

H: Yes. I think all the teachers were very good at the Århus University, but the most influential teacher was definitely my supervisor, he's called Stig Thøgersen, I don't know if you've heard of him.

C: Yes, I know [him]. I have some of his books.

H: He wrote some very good books about education in China. He wrote a wonderful book called *The County of Culture* and he was very influential, first, because he was a good teacher and secondly because he really supported my study. I also became very interested in topics such as education, but during my two years in China I actually didn't like to follow the classes so much, so I travelled a lot. I travelled to many ethnic minority areas in China and this was in 1987-88 when a lot of areas in China were closed from foreigners. So, as soon as we heard that some new areas would open for foreigners, we would quickly travel there. So, I went, for instance, to Dali (大理)

and Lijiang (麗江) in Yunnan just when they opened up for foreigners. I visited a lot of places in Xinjiang (新疆) and went to Fujian (福建) province and Hainan Island (海南島). So, we travelled a lot and I became very interested in China's ethnic minorities. That's why I wrote my MA thesis and later also my PhD thesis on China's ethnic minorities and ethnic identity in China.

C: Was there any particular ethnic group you were writing about?

H: Yes, for my Master thesis I went back to China to do half a year of field work. That was in 1991. My oldest daughter was one year old and my husband and I took her to Yunnan (雲南) and we spent seven months there doing field work in Lijiang among the Naxi minority (納西族). And then, later, from 1994 to 1995 we took both of our daughters, the younger one of them three years old, to Yunnan and we spent half a year in Xishuangbanna (西雙版納傣族自治州) and half a year in Lijiang to study the Tai (傣) and Naxi nationalities and especially education amongst these ethnic minority groups. I published that as my first book (*Lessons in Being Chinese*) which was based on my PhD thesis.

C: I wonder if there were any others in your group at that time when you were doing your master degree and also your PhD who later became experts on China.

H: Yes, there were quite a few, actually. When we were studying at Shandong University from 1986 to 1988, most foreigners at that time would study in Beijing or Shanghai. So, the group of foreigners in the Shandong University was quite small; there were only maybe ten to fifteen Europeans and a lot of Russians, North Koreans and Japanese. We became very close friends, and several of my classmates at that time also became established China scholars, for instance, my husband, Koen Wellens, who is also an associate professor of China studies in the University of Oslo. Another person you may know is Rune Svarverud. He is also a professor of Chinese studies in the University of Oslo. Another one is German. He's called Iwo Amelung and he's also a quite well-known professor in Frankfurt University.

C: Ok. So, is that how you became close to the University of Oslo and eventually got to work there?

H: No, that was quite a coincidence, actually. In 1988 when I had been in China for two years I had met my husband. He's from Belgium. We were 同學 (fellow students) in the University of Shandong. He came back to Denmark with me so I could finish my studies. And then, after finishing my Master's degree I got a very good PhD scholarship from the Århus University, but he [Koen] was looking for a job and got one in the Library of the University of Oslo. So, I went with him to Oslo in 1992 and at that time he worked at the University of Oslo and I was doing my PhD in the University of Århus, Denmark, while I was living in Oslo. But then, after I finished my PhD and published my first book I got a post-doctoral scholarship and eventually in 2000 I was hired to a permanent position in the University of Oslo, so we decided to stay here.

C: Right, and you also started to learn Norwegian?

H: Well, I speak Danish and most Norwegians understand Danish; if you can just adapt your Danish a little to a Norwegian style, then they will understand it.<sup>1</sup>

C: Okay. I'm also curious about the style of Chinese characters you used. Did you learn Simplified Characters?

H: Yes, I only learnt simplified Chinese and only started to learn Traditional Characters much later. I started learning them on my own when I became interested in what was being published in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

C: I'm curious about your first visit in China. Did you have a cultural shock or different expectations?

H: When I was eighteen years old, I travelled to very poor areas of India and found it very interesting. So, when I first came to China, I had first expected it would be a bit like India, but I found it to be very different and there were many things to adapt to, but it was not a cultural shock, I don't think I'm so easily shocked. So, I found it very interesting, but there were certainly many things I found very difficult to adapt to, for example the classes, the teaching style and the way of studying. I was just so bored that I couldn't follow the classes. So, maybe that was why I have later sat in a lot of classes because I have studied the Chinese education system. So, I had to follow a lot of classes later, but when I was a student myself, I found it very difficult to adapt to the teaching style. But apart from that I really liked [China]. I especially liked rural areas. I liked the villages much more than the big cities. I also liked a lot of the minority areas and places many others [in China] would call "too backwards".

C: And why? Was it because you like nature?

H: Actually, it was not really because of the nature. Nature is nice, of course, but it was mostly because of the people. I found that for instance in Jinan, when we were students there were very few foreigners and very few westerners. So, if you walked around in Jinan and stopped, there would immediately be a huge crowd of people around you looking at you. Not necessarily talking to you, but just looking at you. For some reason I found that when we came to the rural areas, people were also very surprised to see you, but they were a lot easier to get into contact and they were very friendly and more relaxed. I found that more interesting; maybe because I also found these areas more different from what I was used to at home and in Europe. However, I think that the most important thing for me was that people were more relaxed and very friendly.

C: What was the situation back in Europe when you said you wanted to do ethnic studies? Was that considered some kind of a popular or interesting topic in the European universities at that time?

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<sup>1</sup> The standard forms of the three continental North Germanic or Scandinavian languages, Swedish (The grammar, lexicon and especially the pronunciation of the standard forms Swedish spoken in Sweden and Finland differ to some extent.), Danish and Norwegian (Norwegian has two standard written forms, Nynorsk and Bokmål.) are so closely related that they are to large degree mutually intelligible, especially in their written forms. Linguistically speaking, these three languages form a dialect continuum of a single language stretching from Jutland via the Danish islands through the Scandinavian peninsula (Sweden and Norway) all the way to the Swedish-speaking coastal regions of Southern and Western Finland, and historically, also to the Swedish-speaking coastal regions of Estonia.

H: At that time, in the early 1990's, there were not so many people studying ethnic minorities in China, but my supervisor, who was Stig Thøgersen, was very supportive. He told me that it was a very good idea and he really encouraged me to do fieldwork. So, he told me, not to study my subject just from the books or texts, but to go there [to the field] and live there for a longer period. So, that's why I took my whole family, including my two children, to those areas, and I found it to be very nice to stay there with children because, again, people were more relaxed; they did not only have one child so they would let their children play on their own. I found that I got a lot of support for writing about [inter-]ethnic relations and when I came back, there was a lot of interest in this topic. So, I always found a lot of support for that, actually.

C: Did you write your dissertation in English?

H: Yes.

C: Okay. What other kinds of topics were people writing about at that time? By that I mean the other PhD candidates.

H: At that time, most of the people I knew from my studies in Jinan, China, were writing about more classical or traditional topics of sinology. In Denmark and Norway, some were writing about political topics, some were studying the traditions of acupuncture – many different topics. There were not so many people that I knew of who were studying ethnic relations, but there were some. It was a period of time when more and more people in Europe, like in the United States, started to become interested in contemporary China, in what was happening then. People were starting to become interested in topics like politics, the opening up and the reforms, the 改革開放, and then, after 1989 with the whole Tian'anmen incident, many people were really interested in studying China's political path; was China on a path towards more democracy and what was happening with all the human rights issues. All in all, people were becoming more interested not only in the traditional topics of sinology that had influenced the academic situation in Europe very much, but also in understanding what really was going on in China at the present.

C: As you work on ethnic groups, how do you define yourself? Do you define yourself an expert on China or an anthropologist or something else?

H: That's always a problem for me when people ask me that. I never actually know what to answer, because I have also formally studied anthropology. I have a minor subject in anthropology, a minor subject in literary science and then I majored in China studies. My whole set of methodology is taken from the academic discipline of anthropology but at the same time I have really been primarily trained in China studies. So, I would probably say that I'm a China anthropologist. That's my only way of solving this problem because for me the idea of having an academic identity, which is so important for many people, is not so important. I do what I do and I pursue the topics I'm interested in and those happen to be topics that somehow mainly fall within the field of anthropology.

C: Okay, but how would you define yourself when applying for a job? Would you search for a job in the field of anthropology or the China studies? Was that ever a question to ponder for you?

H: I have applied for jobs both in departments of anthropology and departments of China studies. I have also been judged competent in both fields, but the place where I really wanted to work was actually the department of China studies in the University of Oslo and there are several reasons for that. First of all, I was staying in Oslo with my family, but also because I think that environment has always been very open-minded and not fixed on insisting on that one had to do certain studies or had to study in one specific field. They have been very flexible and it's also a very friendly environment. We do get quite a lot of support in that department, so my first priority was to try to get a job at the University of Oslo, but during the period before I got a tenure position, I did also apply for jobs in other places of the world and I was also invited to interviews and judged competent both in China departments and anthropology departments.

C: So, you first got your post-doc in Oslo, right? What was the situation back then in the department of Chinese studies? How many professors and post-docs were there?

H: Well, I first got a post-doc in Denmark, but then, soon after I was also offered a post-doc in Oslo, so I changed and pursued the Norwegian one. At that time I thought it was important to get out of the China department for a while and into another department. So, I got my post-doc position in what is called the Centre for Development and the Environment which is also part of the university but not the China department. There I did a three-year post-doc about Han-Chinese migrants to ethnic minority areas and that was based on fieldwork in the Tibetan area of the Gansu province and also again in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan. I wrote my second book based on that project and I think that for me it was very important to get out of the China department and into this more inter-disciplinary department where I was the only one working on China. At that time there were very few people in the China section and most of them or all of them, I think, were working on historical or more traditional topics of Sinology.

C: I assume you had economists and political scientists in this more inter-disciplinary department working on the different regions of the world.

H: Yes, exactly.

C: Did that influence you? Did you try to cooperate with them?

H: Yes, that influenced me quite a lot. That milieu made me very interested in trying not to see China as an isolated or very unique place but also to see how one could use theories developed in other parts of the world on the China case and how to bring China into more comparative studies. I became more interested in it, but I also have to say that I felt that my main competence was really to try to understand China from within. However, I still have very good friends and colleagues from that time at the Centre for Development and Environment and it was really a very good place to be at as a China scholar because it was very healthy to get out of the sort of China environment where everybody feels that when one is talking about China everyone knows what one is talking about. I think it is very good for everyone to be able to explain China without making it into a very specific case. That is, making China talk to all the other regions of the world.

C: Did you also teach at that time?

H: When I was a post-doc, I did a little bit of teaching for the China section and at that time the department was getting interested in getting more people working on contemporary issues related to China, because that was in fact the thing most of the students were interested in, but they did not yet have any teachers working on it.

C: What was the name of the department at that time? Was it cultural studies or something else?

H: No, at that time up to 2004 the name of was “Department of East European and Oriental Studies”.

C: That’s very strange.

H: Yes, it was mainly a department for people who were working on Eastern Europe, or in other words, former communist states, and in addition for people working on Asian countries and the Middle East.

C: It was very ideological how they defined the department, wasn’t it?

H: Well, I really don’t know how they came up with the idea of that department, but most people at that department were working on languages and linguistics and very few people were working on issues of society or politics.

C: How did the department then evolve into what you have now, the department of cultural studies?

H: Yes, today the department is called the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages. So, what happened was that from 2004 the whole faculty was reorganised and it was decided to have fewer but larger departments. Then some of us argued that Asian studies should rather be part of the Department of Cultural Studies instead of being with languages or linguistics, because if we had become part of a “Department of Languages”, we would have been more pressed to work with linguistics and things many of us were not that interested in at the time. So, eventually middle eastern studies and all the asian studies were merged with cultural studies and religious studies, which in a way makes sense. It’s a very diverse, but also a very nice department. It’s nice to have colleagues who are working on very different things than yourself, especially when these things are still somewhat relevant to your own work.

C: Because you are currently at the China section, can you tell me about the composition of people there? How many professors, doctoral students etc?

H: At this time, considering the size of China studies elsewhere in Europe, we are actually a relatively big section, I think. Right now we have three full professors and two associate professors; so that’s five people with research competence in tenure. Two of us are women and three men; two are working on more sort of historical topics; one is working on policies, so political science; and two of us are working on more anthropological subjects. Then we have two full-time language teachers and right now we have three PhD students who are all part of a large inter-disciplinary research project which I am directing and which is called “Airborne”; it’s about air pollution and includes fourteen scholars from different parts of the world. So, we have three PhD students and also a post-doc student who is based in the department. In addition, we have one more post-doc

who's working on languages. All in all, that is seven tenure positions, three PhD-students and two post-docs.

C: Where did you get the funding for this "Airborne" –project?

H: The "Airborne" –project received very generous funding from the Norwegian Research Council. We have a four-year funding from the research council, and then, in addition, we received a special grant from what is called Centre for Advanced Studies in Oslo where we get money to invite all our project members to stay in Oslo for a whole year, so that we can discuss and publish together. So, we will get offices together, we will be based in a very nice house in Oslo and they will then stay here between two and ten months.

C: Wow! Is this Centre for Advanced Studies part of the university?

H: There are several universities in Norway who partially fund it together, but the primary funding comes directly from the government. It's a very special unit which was started, I think, twenty years ago because the minister in charge of research at that time felt that Norway had to do something to support some of its best research projects and they should then get very good funding for one year and be able to invite whomever they wanted to invite and do whatever kind of research they wanted to do during the period of one year. All in all, that's a very special opportunity we have and we will be based in there beginning from August this year.

C: I just wondered, as you were previously working on ethnic minorities and this current project is about environment, what's the connection here.

H: I think that inside my head, at least, there's a connection between all the topics I've been working on, so in the beginning of my career I was mainly working on ethnic relations and minority education. While I was doing that, I became ever more interested in the Han Chinese who lived in minority areas, because everybody who was studying minority areas would study minorities, while in fact there was a lot of Han Chinese who had migrated to those areas. So, I became very interested in them and my second major project was about Han Chinese migrants in minority areas. And then, when that project was finished, I had become very interested in the Han Chinese themselves. So, my third project was about Han Chinese who lived in Han Chinese mainstream areas and who hadn't received any education. So, I did fieldwork in factories amongst young people who had never received education. Then I went back to education and my latest book, which was published in 2015, is a book about one high school in a rural area of Zhejiang province where I did fieldwork during a period of several years in order to see what students learn about themselves as individuals in Chinese society. During this period when I was doing this fieldwork, topics about environment and environmental destruction surfaced again and again and it was becoming an ever more important topic in China. I am therefore interested in doing research on topics about which I feel it to be very important to get more information and which I feel may really have an impact on what the future looks like. So, I discussed this with some colleagues and we decided to formally launch this "Airborne" –project and to set focus on air pollution in China. The aim was to study air pollution from a political perspective and from the perspectives of society and individual perspectives, and to integrate all these different academic disciplines, including natural sciences,

into the project. So now three of the seven permanent staff in our department are involved in this project in addition to the three PhD students and one post-doc student.

C: My understanding is that this project is more related to social sciences and humanities. Is there anyone involved in this from natural sciences?

H: Yes. We have four chemists, one of them from the Tsinghua University, one Norwegian chemists and two from Zhejiang University. So, we work closely with them and we also do some real measurements of household air pollution in rural areas of Zhejiang.

C: So, the case is mainly the Zhejiang province and not the other parts of China?

H: Our main case is Zhejiang province, but we also have a student who is just finishing his PhD and is now doing studies in Chengdu, and one of our PhD students is doing fieldwork in Beijing. We also have sub-project which is based in Tangshan, which is actually one of the most polluted cities in China.

C: Are there any governmental actors involved when you were doing this study? It was in China and Nordic countries. Is the government supportive of your project?

H: What do you mean?

C: I mean the authorities [in China]. Are they aware of your research?

H: Yes, they are very much aware and we could not even have such a large research project without them knowing what we are doing. In addition, this project has also been accepted by Zhejiang University. First of all, we do a lot of interviews amongst officials and government departments in Hangzhou. Two of our scholars are mainly working on that. Also in the fieldwork we do in the rural areas we need to be in close contact with local authorities about what we are doing. Even the things we do not think they know we are doing are probably under their surveillance. They really know everything. We report to them and try to have good contacts with them.

C: How are your cooperative relationships with those Chinese scholars? Is it easy to work with them and do you write with them?

H: You know, as I am so old now, I hand-pick the people for my projects. I only want to have people in the project who I know I can work with, who are open-minded and nice and who are supportive to each other. So, the people for this project have all been asked to join it because I think it would be great working with them. It's a fantastic project because everybody are very serious scholars and very interested in contributing to the project. We recently had nine people going to the American Association of Asian Studies in Seattle and presenting our papers. Most of those papers are co-written, so many of them are co-published by two people together. So, I have also directed larger projects before, but this is the first time, I think, that we have managed to create a truly interdisciplinary and cooperative project where people really work together and not just a project where everyone is doing their own thing under one umbrella. And that includes all the Chinese participants we have in this project, and all of them [the project participants] are coming to Norway to stay for a longer or a shorter period of time when we will be based at the Centre for Advanced Studies.



C: And the Chinese we very capable of writing papers in English?

H: Not necessarily, it depends on individual experience. We are planning to publish in China and we are also writing for an international audience but when we publish in China, our Chinese colleagues will have the main responsibility for formulating the papers in Chinese. When we write for a high-level international academic audience, we mainly write together, but I think it's sometimes the American or European scholar who will take the main responsibility for the formulations in English. However, everyone knows English, but at different levels.

C: When you say publishing in China, what journals or publishers are you targeting?

H: I don't remember the journal or publisher, but there is a book being planned, I think it's the Shangwu Chubanshe (商務出版社). I'm not sure if it's that, we have a contract, but it's my Chinese colleague who is in charge of that. I think it's the Shangwu Chubanshe, but I'm not sure [it is Shangwu Chubanshe!].

C: Apart from the "Airborne", do you think there's any project you are in charge of worth mentioning?

H: Now, for me, I have decided only to handle one large project at a time. "Airborne" is a huge project for me. So, I'm putting all my working time into that project and I'm also going to continue working on environmental issues in the future, because I think it's the main topic for China. I think it's actually the most important topic in the world right now and that's why I want to continue my studies in that field. As I said, I just finished a book about education and individualisation and the theoretical topic of individualisation processes in China continues to interest me, but I will pursue that in connection with the topic of environment. So, I have done a lot of research on education but I find myself to be finished with that now; I would really like to concentrate on the environment in the future.

C: Is this also kind of a strategic choice? In the University of Oslo this is a very important topic, isn't it?

H: Well, many people have asked me that question and frankly speaking it may be strategically a very important topic, but I really do not think that is the main personal reason for me to start studying this topic. I really chose this topic, because I think it is a really big problem in China and elsewhere in the world that we don't find good ways of dealing with environmental destruction. This is really going to be the main problem for us, but especially for our children and grandchildren and that is my main reason for working with this topic. I want to work on topics that I really think are useful. I don't think that other subjects are useless, but for me this feels like the most meaningful.

C: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think your MA programme is related to the Zhejiang University. The student has to spend some time in Zhejiang. Is that correct?

H: Well, they don't have to, but they can, if they want to. They can apply for it and we have a double degree master programme with Zhejiang University. So, some students will study two years in Norway and we encourage other students to study one year in Oslo and one year in Zhejiang

University and then they will actually get two degrees, one from Zhejiang University and one from the University of Oslo.

C: When was this double degree set up?

H: A few years ago. It was set up in cooperation with the University of Copenhagen and Århus University. We were the three universities who started this programme together and then, later on, Stockholm University joined us. However, I think the first group of students went there [Zhejiang University] in 2012.

C: And this was before you started your cooperation with Zhejiang University scholars.

H: Actually not, because I have a very good friend who is an anthropologist in Zhejiang University and I've known him since 2004. So, I've already been working with him for many years. My former PhD student also came from Zhejiang University, so I have had contacts with Zhejiang University for many years.

C: What do you think about this cooperative relationship? Are you satisfied with the teaching being offered [in Hangzhou]?

H: We have many challenges in that programme. Generally speaking, I think it's a very good option for our students, I think it's very important for us to have this option and I also think our Chinese colleagues put a lot of effort into this programme and help our students a lot. I think the main problem is that the teaching in the Zhejiang University is only for our students, so the program is not well integrated with the programmes of the ordinary Chinese students and that's something we struggle a little in figuring out what to do with it, but I think, generally speaking, this option is very good for our students.

C: Do students have to pay tuitions to both universities?

H: Well, in Norway, there are no tuition fees for students, and we have an agreement with Zhejiang University at top level, which means that the Zhejiang University sends every year a number of students to the University of Oslo. They start with economy, medicine or whatever and we can send our students to this programme in the Zhejiang University. So, there are no tuition fees for the students.

C: Right, so, in a way, the Chinese students who come over can get various kinds of training. I don't think they will go to the Department of Chinese Studies.

H: No, they don't come to the China department. They can come to any other department, and they do come.

C: I want to move to other question on my list. How about the number and the quality of your students over time? Have you observed a change? I mean, in the past there were of course fewer students.

H: Yes, there were a lot fewer students. I was hired in a 50 % teaching – 50 % research position in 2000. However, then I have had a number of projects, so I have been away on research periodically.

I have also been the head of the department four years and I have been the dean of research for four years, so, I have been teaching, but I have also been out of teaching. We have a lot more students now than we had fifteen years ago. That also means that we have to teach in other ways than we used to. I think it's nice to have more students and more MA students.

I think that there have maybe been two major changes if I look at the way the students have developed over these past fifteen years. The first one is that the students are much more concerned about what kinds of jobs they will get after their studies than they used to be. So, when we started to study, we had no idea whatsoever what we would have as our job, and didn't think too much about it either. That, I think, was typical for students for quite some time. However, now, and I can really understand why, the students are much more concerned about what kind of job they can find after their studies.

The other major thing is, and maybe these two things are connected, that the students are much more interested in what will give them study points or ECTS, what will help them in the exams, and I find it, and I know my colleagues also find it, very difficult to convince students to read if it's not directly relevant for their exams, and that is probably a change. However, I can also in a way understand that change. I have children myself who are in the age of students and I do understand why they feel this way. However, it still makes teaching sometimes a bit different in comparison to what it used to be.

C: So, in the past you didn't have those concerns. You were just happily learning.

H: Well, I mean, that is probably a bit of an exaggeration, but I think that we actually were a bit less concerned and even studying Chinese was already such a strange thing that when I was a student, if you told others you were studying Chinese, they would always ask why. I think it has become much more mainstream to study Chinese. People nowadays understand very well why students would study Chinese. However, that also means it has become much more normal and, therefore, people will also have expectations regarding a normal job. I mean, we had no idea what kind of a job we would be able to get, and indeed, it could now be a bit difficult to find a job if one only had a background in China studies. Especially with the bad relations between Norway and China, many businesses are not so keen on starting up in China and I think that's also influenced the students' way of thinking.

C: So, you mean that Norwegian businesses do not want to start things in China?

H: No, they are more careful and when they start up in China, they may run into problems and there's also a lot of media attention towards the bad relations between China and Norway, so many students feel this could have a bad influence on their prospects of getting a job after graduation.

C: Has this been a problem particularly during the recent years because of the human rights issues in China?

H: Yes, that is especially a problem. Since 2010, when Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) got the peace prize, the relationship has been very cold and that has had an impact on the companies' desire to expand to or start up in China.

C: I have questions concerning your connections to Nordic countries, especially as you are originally from Denmark. That's the first question. The second question is about your Hong Kong connections, as I think you have been there before. It's up to you with which you want to start.

H: Well, what are you interested in about knowing the Nordic connections I have?

C: Well, about connections with other scholars.

H: For me, connections with other scholars are actually of crucial importance. I don't think one can do any serious research in isolation. I really think one needs a lot of context to be able to discuss one's research, and that's why I think it is so nice to also direct projects. So, for instance with this "Airborne" –project we have a lot of opportunities to invite people to come to Norway and to take part in discussions to organise workshops. In addition to this, I draw a lot of on my contacts in the Nordic countries; I have very good colleagues in China studies and also friends from Denmark, Sweden and from Finland, also, and I find that very important. I find that in the Nordic countries we do have a kind of, how do you say, community. It's nice when we get together and we support each other and help each other when we do, for instance, evaluations of MA and PhD theses. However, then, of course, I stayed in Hong Kong for one year in the department of anthropology and I think they did a wonderful job. I also remain in contact with some of the people from that time. So, in general, I don't think it's so important where the people I work with come from. The main thing is that they are open-minded, can engage in discussions in an interesting way and are nice to be with. Then they can come from wherever they come from.

C: At which university were you in Hong Kong?

H: The Chinese University of Hong Kong (香港中文大學), department of anthropology.

C: Did you learn Cantonese there?

H: No. I already have enough problems with my Mandarin Chinese. I'm never satisfied with the level of my Chinese and at one point I tried learning a little bit of Tibetan and I would have liked to learn Cantonese, but for me it's more than enough trying to keep my Mandarin Chinese alive, so no Cantonese for me.

I have also stayed in Taiwan for the past half a year. That was also a wonderful experience.

C: Where in Taiwan?

H: In the Academia Sinica (中央研究院) in Taipei, in the institute of ethnology.

C: The last question is your self-perceived contribution to China studies. So, what do you think you have contributed to our field? It's a big question, I know.

H: Well, it's difficult to say. I think maybe what I have contributed is serious fieldwork and sort of in-depth study of how people live etc. Then, I try to use that material to think theoretically, but I am not a big theoretician. I mean, my main strength is not theory, but I think that I do quite good fieldwork and I have come up with some research on minority education that had not existed before

and I also think that I have with my latest book contributed with insights from the Chinese high schools which have not been published before.

C: And your approach is really anthropology-related.

H: Yes, I think so.

C: Another question is if you perceive any problems in Chinese studies in general; you know, any challenges that our field is facing, maybe in Norway, in Europe or the world in general.

H: It's a big question and we have many questions at many different levels and some of them are problems we have discussed for years and which remain the same and that has of course got to do with the way one organises Chinese studies. How do we make sure that on one hand we really use our competence to understand China, to understand it from within while on the other hand we connect this knowledge with the rest of the world and more general theories? How do we prevent China from being isolated as a research topic? That has always been a question and I think that's *the question* and I think with regard to organisation I would have liked to see China studies organised in a way that Anna [Ahlers], for instance, would be half of the time in the China section and half of the time in political science, I would be half in the anthropology and half in the China section; I would like to see it organised in a way to facilitate more contacts between us and the academic disciplines we are closest to. However, that is a matter of organisation and also a matter of time. However, I think that is one of the main problems with China studies.

C: Yes, I think it's a common problem in many universities. How about the question of culture and language? What must the student really master in the Chinese language in order to get a degree? Was that ever a question?

H: Yes, I think that has also always been an important question. Personally, I think that if we are to legitimise the very existence of China studies, it has to be based on the knowledge of language and I think that if you look at the anthropologists, for instance, who have written any interesting or serious publications about China, they all have at least basic skills in the Chinese language, because otherwise it really doesn't work. So, I try to tell our students why the way they are studying makes sense and to make them conscious of what they know and are capable of. One of the big advantages they have is really that they learn the language and can use the language; they can read material and talk to Chinese people in their own language. I think that's very important and we need to stick to that and keep insisting on it. There have been many suggestions that we should have a master programme not requiring a knowledge of Chinese language. Of course, we would have much more students if we organised that kind of master programme. But in that case, I don't see why we should have a China studies section. So, for instance the programme we have with the Zhejiang University requires that all the students know Chinese for this master programme and a lot of the teaching will be in Chinese. I don't think we should give up on that. I think we must insist on that and otherwise we would not have a reason for existence as a China Studies programme.

C: So, you mean they will take courses entirely in Chinese in Zhejiang.

H: Yes. Some of the courses are entirely taught in Chinese.

C: What kinds of courses are they? Could you name some examples?

H: Yes, for example, Chinese film or Chinese economy or different topics of the Chinese philosophy. That really depends on the teacher.

C: I wonder if the Chinese teachers will intentionally slow down when they teach your students.

H: I think they will and we also had a problem that some of the teachers found that the students' Chinese skills were not good enough and they would start talking English instead. However, the intention behind that programme is to really boost the level of our students' skills in Chinese and in order to achieve that they have to be confronted with classes in Chinese. They really already know quite a lot of Chinese, but if they are to improve, they really have to be exposed to something more difficult than their actual level. So, we try to insist that at least the majority of the classes be taught in Chinese.

C: Roughly, how many students from Norway are studying in the Zhejiang University?

H: This year we only have one, actually, but last year we had five. So, from all the Nordic universities we try to have a class of a minimum of ten students. It's very small actually. We have had between one and six students going to Hangzhou.

C: If only one person is going, will the Chinese open the classes only for this person?

H: No, because you have to remember we are together with the Århus, Copenhagen and Stockholm Universities in this programme. All these students take classes together. So, this year there are ten students in total.

C: Right. So, those students from Norway will get a degree from the University of Oslo.

H: Exactly.

C: I want to confirm, so when they start undergraduate studies, there's a lot of emphasis on training them in their linguistic abilities.

H: Yes.

C: When do you start adding other elements like geography, history and politics?

H: Well, right from the beginning. That is because what we have experienced is that while students come to learn the language, most of them want to learn the language as a tool. It's not necessarily because they are interested in linguistics or in language in particular, but they want to study the language because they want to study China. So, if we were only to teach language, they would really quickly get bored. So, during the first semester they have language training and a course of two hours a week on Chinese society and politics and another two hours a week on Chinese history. So, that starts right in the beginning and throughout the years they study Chinese they will have a combination of language and all the other aspects of China studies.

C: Are they also allowed to take courses of other departments?

H: Yes, there is some room for that, but I have to say that they really are kept quite busy. That's once again a problem with time, because we would really like them to have more disciplines. For instance, I would like the students to take more theoretical disciplines like political science or anthropology or sociology, and they can take some courses, but there is too little time. The problem really is that they have to spend so much time learning the language and then they have all the other courses in Chinese studies they have to take that there is very little room left. I think that they can maybe take thirty to forty points in other departments.

C: I understand that one of your language teachers is from Taiwan. So, does this person teach in Traditional or Simplified characters?

H: He, too, teaches in Simplified characters.

C: Okay, so the textbook is in Simplified Characters.

H: Yes, everything is in Simplified characters only. We have a course in Classical Chinese and that starts after they come back from China. They first study for one year in Oslo, then they all go to Peking University for half a year and then they come back and then they have a course in Classical Chinese.

C: So, the Peking University is your partner university.

H: Yes. We also have cooperation with the Würzburg University in Germany and Århus University in Denmark, so we are three universities together who organise this special programme for all our students in the Peking University.

C: Why is there a German connection here?

H: That's again because we know people there and when we were setting up a programme and they were too and they were looking for partner universities and then some of us were friends with some of them and then we found out, why not, it would be a good idea to do it together and we found out that our students were pretty much at the same level so we could combine this. When you have small universities, it's easier to do these kinds of projects together instead of doing them on your own.

C: Is the University of Oslo small?

H: The China section is still small. I mean, we still don't have that many people and we want to do a lot of things and are without the time to do everything on ourselves. And also, as I said, we only have one student in the Zhejiang University and nobody would arrange classes just for her, so we need to cooperate with other universities. In addition, I think it is very important for students not only to meet the Chinese in China but to also meet students from Germany, Denmark and other places. I think it's also a very good way for them to build larger networks.

C: My last question, I think, is your view on China's future.

H: I saw that question on your list. I thought that you really moved from very personal to my view on China's future.

C: Yes, it's very broad.

H: Very broad indeed.

C: It could be anything.

H: Indeed. I think that I need to be optimistic because otherwise I would have difficulties working with China if I didn't remain optimistic. I think there are some good developments and there are also some very problematic developments. I think for the future China needs to handle the problem of environmental degradation and that's not only air, but also water, food, soil; it's really a major issue. The way the authorities respond to these issues is in a way rather positive, I think. Now, at least, they are really trying to do something. So, I'm cautiously optimistic about the world and China in that respect. Then there are the areas I'm a bit worried. I find it hard to say what they are. There are many things that need to be solved politically.

C: Okay. Thank you very much for your time. It was very informative to interview you.