

Wulf Noll. Part 2: Border crosser between Europe and Asia

Text: [Wulf Noll](#) and [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [Border-crossers](#)

Overview: Part 2 consists of an interview with the border crosser between the cultures of Europe and Asia, especially Japan and China.

Wulf Noll, as can be seen from the biographical outline, you have spent a large part of your life in Asia. Please give us an overview at the beginning of our interview.

Professionally speaking, I spent eight years in Japan and more than two years in China. As I've been married to a visual artist since 1990, I've also spent a lot of time in Japan on a private basis. I also went on a reading tour and gave lectures at universities and scientific congresses.

Two professional years (2009–11) in China were followed by another major trip there in 2012, which also took me to the province of Inner Mongolia. The crowning glory was a guest professorship as Poet in Residence in 2017, which I was able to take up at the renowned Ocean University of China in Qingdao.

Another overview can be added in a moment: What are your most important literary texts relating to Japan and China?

About Japan: *Woanders Pachinko! Ein japanischer Reiseroman* (1994) [*Somewhere else Pachinko! A Japanese travel novel*], *Momotarostraße* (2003) [*Momotaro Road*], *Crazy in Japan. Flanieren in zwei Welten* (2005) [*Crazy in Japan. Strolling in two worlds*], *Den zuckenden Kugelfisch überlebt. Japanische Lesereise* (2007) [*Surviving the twitching puffer fish. Japanese reading tour*].

About China: *A trilogy*, a veritable epic on a thousand pages, has been published in its entirety by Austrian publisher Bacopa Verlag since 2023. Volume 1: *Schöne Wolken treffen. Eine Reisenovelle aus China* (2023) [*Meeting beautiful clouds. A travel novella from China*], Volume 2: *Drachenrausch. Flanieren in China* (2019) [*Dragon rush. Strolling in China*], Volume 3: *Mit dem Drachen tanzen. Erzählungen aus China und Deutschland* (2020) [*Dancing with the dragon. Tales from China and Germany*]. The first volume appeared last as an updated new edition, as it had already been published elsewhere.

How did your fascination with Asia develop?

My interest in East Asia goes back to my school days at the Herderschule in Kassel. I wrote papers on the economy and culture of Japan, China and South Korea. But my first trip to Asia in 1968/69 was overland to India and the neighbouring countries. Both the director of the Herderschule (Hermann Klitscher) and Marlene Höcherl, the daughter of the German Minister of Agriculture at the time, provided me with addresses so that I found good places to go in Bangalore and Calcutta. There is also a book about this: *Reise nach Indien. Dann, gute Nacht, Madame!* [*Travelling to India. Good night then, madam!*] (n.d.)

You are concerned with “intercultural understanding, the perception of other cultures”. I would ask you to define your interests a little more precisely.

The early papers on the economy and culture of East Asia were soon joined by the literary influence of Hermann Hesse and American beat literature (Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg). East Asia,

mostly China, but also Japan, was praised as a haven of wisdom. It was all about Zen; high mountains were climbed both physically and symbolically. Tied to one's own experience, spiritual, philosophical and psychological perspectives opened up.

Later, in Berlin, after I had already travelled to India (which may have been influenced by Hesse), I acquired knowledge of cultural philosophy at the Free University, where names such as Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer and the cultural anthropologist Michael Landmann, who was one of my teachers, could be found. However, I didn't become a cultural scientist; in the background was the idea of travelling to Asia again.

Was the desire to travel linked early on with an interest in reporting on these journeys, in becoming a travel writer?

Yes, of course! Travelling, especially to unknown places, is overwhelming. Recording impressions, experiences, encounters ... in words is part of self-enlightenment and the pursuit of education. On the one hand, you have to recognise what is going on, what characterises the country and its people, and on the other, it is about getting yourself through initially unknown territory. You could call this experimental. Adventurous traits cannot be denied. But it is about literature. Not every linguistic fixation is literature. As I have always read a lot, including historical works such as Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, Heinrich Heine's *Italienische Reisebilder* [*Italian travel pictures*] or Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, travel literature is also about achieving and maintaining a certain literary level in dialogue with predecessors. But it's not about imitation, it's about innovation. Times change, even if the cultural vigour remains. Travel literature, sometimes already declared dead, has regained momentum as postmodernism. I'm not as short-fused as many contemporary writers. I'd rather read Sterne, Heine, Benjamin or Franz Hessel ... than Kehlmann, Kracht and other postmodern border crossers ... My own motivation takes centre stage. My protagonists (and the author) want to get out into the open. They want to have experiences and get to know foreign places. Journeys (sentimental journeys) are journeys into the open, amazement and esprit are accompanying factors. I have and had no problem with being the first stranger somewhere, which can still happen in Japan, China and in remote areas of India. The foreign and distant can be brought close and vice versa. Love, or at least being in love, also plays a special role, as it charges experiences with intensity.

But ultimately, the writer and the philosopher in me want the same thing: the special and extraordinary must be elucidated, and the benefit lies in promoting intercultural understanding. Telling, enlightening, challenging, abandoning preconceptions and prejudices, changing, but also entertaining ... are useful mental activities. Over time, oral narratives for friends have become literary narratives for everyone, at least for those who are interested in literary and philosophical travel literature that allows for subjective and fictional elements, which is different from mere documentary travelogue.

In w/k artist interviews, the aim is always to determine the respective artistic programme and the background convictions that underpin it as precisely as possible. What general artistic goals do you pursue as a travel writer?

As a travel writer, and I have also written other things, I try to penetrate foreign cultures. Japan and China have become my main focus. This was influenced by my many years of professional activity in these countries. First of all, I had to gain comprehensive knowledge of the everyday culture as well as the high culture that was transmitted, through experience *in situ*, through extensive travelling, through

conversations with people and through reading.

Do you place particular emphasis on illuminating other cultures, on trying to achieve mutual understanding?

In Tsukuba at the Department of Comparative Culture, I realised that the ancient Chinese influence on Japanese high culture could not be ignored. What Greco-Roman antiquity was to Europe, ancient Chinese antiquity and high civilisation was to East Asia. There is a fascinating connection here that has been little analysed by Europeans to this day.

This broadened my interests and I included China. My overriding interest remains a literary and philosophical one, which consists of promoting the enlightenment and illumination of other cultures, which should lead to better understanding and communication. However, it was not only the academic perspective, but also life on campus and communication with young people that helped to create a fresh, youthful image of Japan and later also of China.

What role does criticism of prejudices and enemy stereotypes play in your literature programme?

In my travel texts, I repeatedly deal with hostile stereotypes that were and are built up towards the East. At the beginning of the 20th century, China and Japan were still seen together as a *yellow danger*, until China became a *red danger*. However, *Japan bashing* (environmental sinners, whale catchers, hierarchical society ...) can be contrasted with admiration for Japan (fascinating culture, remarkable economic performance, self-determined youth). This also applies to China. *China bashing* (the most negative reporting possible, for example castigating supposedly repressive measures and the supposed oppression of minorities, including environmental sinners), which is repeatedly perpetuated by the media, is contrasted by a *China admiration* (accelerated economic development, complete abolition of poverty, high educational motivation, emancipation of women in professional and social life, promotion of minorities, ecological agriculture, e-mobility, harmonious behaviour, self-confident young people, recognition of diversity).



Wulf Noll, City performance in Ningbo, China (2017). Photo: Archive of the author.

Please demonstrate the realisation of these goals with a representative example.

As far as my literature programme and the reduction of prejudices are concerned, young people and communication with them play a special role in both the Japan and China stories. There is far more understanding for each other in that area than through contact with functionaries. In the Japan novel *Woanders Pachinko!* [*Somewhere else Pachinko!*], the visit of two Germans to an international music commune in the Japanese Southern Alps, which cultivated good contacts with Allen Ginsberg, is amusing.

In the China stories, there are events with young people on the campus and numerous trips together that extend to the most remote autonomous regions. In addition, there are numerous homestays that provide insights into family life and social conditions.

Eroticism obviously plays an important role in your programme of travel literature. Why is that?

It's no secret that erotic culture is much more developed in East Asia than in the West. Western compatriots are particularly grumpy when it comes to eroticism. One reason is to be found in Christianity (asceticism, sin, the sacrament of marriage). Even if Christianity hardly applies any more, these inner attitudes are strongly anchored in the bourgeois consciousness, even if my generation wanted to see it differently. Make love, not war and flower power played a role here, even though German ideologues were more eloquently striving for a sexual revolution, knowing full well that

revolutions could hardly be realised in Germany.

Let's now turn to your philosophical activities; your new postmodern book is the reason for the two-part w/k article, and the dissertation on Sloterdijk has already been mentioned. How did you become interested in philosophy and how have you developed?

I've had an interest in philosophy since I was at grammar school and university ... My training began in Göttingen and focussed on phenomenology, i.e. Edmund Husserl and the Husserl school; here I studied the aesthetician Moritz Geiger with Harald Delius.

In Berlin, I also studied with Michael Landmann and Jacob Taubes.

In Düsseldorf I got to know Rudolf Heinz, who had turned away from phenomenology and towards psychoanalysis. There is also a connection to your 1992 book *Postmodernism/Poststructuralism*: I want to recognise and investigate connections using philosophical means. Even though I favour the dialectical method of the Frankfurt School, I do not exclude analytical and post-structuralist methods in order to arrive at a balanced result that has gone through a hermeneutic circle. Postmodern philosophers rightly assume methodological pluralism.

From a systematic point of view, you can say that you enrich the approaches of Adorno and Benjamin with elements of other positions - especially postmodern thinking?

That is true. The reason for my reference to the Frankfurt School lies in my preference for aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. After Baumgarten, Kant and Hegel, my starting point is Adorno's aesthetic theory, which has become the model for modernist aesthetics. The goal is an enlightened and unprejudiced perspective. In a global world, you don't have to continue to look at others through European, American or German glasses. The others are not strangers; they are not so different from yourself. Not the Japanese, not even the Chinese. This would be the leitmotif of my essay *Nötig ist der Blick nach Osten [We need to look to the East]*.^[1] If politicians can no longer manage this with diplomacy, writers and philosophers must provide enlightenment and intercultural understanding.

Were you also involved in philosophical teaching?

In Tsukuba, I organised colloquia attended by research students and colleagues on the subject of postmodernism and recent German philosophy. In Okayama, at the Institute of Philosophy, I was able to focus on media philosophy, especially Vilém Flusser's theories. In Japan, I wrote many essays that were published in academic journals. In the end, I had collected so much material that I was able to write my philosophical aesthetics in 1996-97.

As our conversation concludes, we should talk about your involvement with Japanese and Chinese philosophy.

With regard to Japan, I have compared recent German philosophy, which begins in Japan with a reception of Nietzsche, and trends in Japanese philosophy with German philosophy, for example Kuki Shuzo and Martin Heidegger.^[2] With regard to Chinese philosophy, I owe most of my inspiration to the works of Wolfgang Kubin and his ten-volume work *Klassiker des chinesischen Denkens* (2011-2020) [*Classics of Chinese thinking*], beginning with Confucius' *Gesprächen [Confucius' Talks]* and ending with Mo Zi's *Von Sorge und Fürsorge [Mo Zi's On Care and Concern]*. In addition to the early social philosopher Mo Zi, I am particularly interested in Daoism, not only Lao Tzu, but also Zhuang Zi. I find the paradoxical orientation of Daoism, which, as in Zen, provides psychological and psychoanalytical insights, spiritually stimulating.^[3]

Wulf Noll, thank you for this interview, which has shed light on your impressive life.

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Featured image above the text: Wulf Noll at the Ocean University of China, Qingdao (2017). Photo: Archive of the author.

[1] *Nötig ist der Blick nach Osten. Zur Kritik des kulturellen Eurozentrismus* [We need to look to the East. A critique of cultural Eurocentrism]. In: minima sinica. Zeitschrift zum chinesischen Geist, 29.2 (2017), OSTASIEN Verlag, Großheirath-Gossenberg 2018, 83-102.

[2] *Vergleichende Philosophie: Über Beziehungen und Entwicklungen des japanischen mit dem deutschen und des deutschen mit dem japanischen Denken* [Comparative Philosophy: On relations and developments between Japanese and German & German and Japanese thought]. In: Orientierungen. Zeitschrift zur Kultur Asiens, 30 (2018), OSTASIEN Verlag, Großheirath-Gossenberg 2019, 157-170.

[3] *Von der „Freude der Fische“ (Zhuang Zi): Ein Plädoyer für interkulturelles Philosophieren mit Blick auf Wolfgang Kubin* [On the „Joy of Fish“ (Zhuang Zi): A plea for intercultural philosophizing with a view to Wolfgang Kubin]. In: minima sinica. Zeitschrift zum chinesischen Geist, 30.1 (2018), OSTASIEN Verlag, Großheirath-Gossenberg 2019, 17-36.