

# OBITUARY

Walther Heissig

(5 December 1913—5 September 2005)

In Memoriam



**T**HE EMINENT scholar of Central Asian studies, Walther Heissig, passed away peacefully at his home at Rheinböllen after a fulfilled life at the age of 91 years and 9 months.

Born and raised in Vienna, Heissig felt a deep inclination toward Central Asia since his youth. Among the subjects he studied at university, prehistory, ethnology, Sinology and Mongolistics, it was the last subject in particular which fascinated him—he was to pursue it for his entire life. In 1941, five years after he began his studies, he earned his doctor's degree in Vienna. When he became lecturer of Mongolistics at the Fu Jen University in Beijing, he used this as an opportunity to acquire his first practical experiences with Mongol life and culture. After returning to Germany he earned the qualification of academic lecturer (*Habilitation*), became an unsalaried lecturer at the University of Göttingen, and worked on the catalogue of the Royal Library in Copenhagen. With his appointment to the University of Bonn in 1954 he began that part in his life that was distinguished not only by intensive activity in research and publishing, but also in numerous other activities, such as organizing scientific events. In the same year he established the Permanent International Altaistic Conference. Through its annual meetings and publications the Conference has fostered the interdisciplinary exchange among related fields of research. This exchange became extremely fruitful. He developed the Institute of Linguistic and Cultural Sciences of Central Asia (*Seminar für Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft Zentralasiens*) at the University of Bonn, which also owes its establishment to his initiative, into a center for Central Asian research of international standard. Numerous scholars from that part of Asia studied and pursued their research at the Institute, which produced a number of well-known scholars.

Heissig established a monograph series, *Asiatische Forschungen* (published from 1954 to 1957 as *Göttinger Asiatische Forschungen*), to which he added a new journal in 1967. This journal, *Zentralasiatische Studien*, published non-monographic scientific work and later became the official specialized publication of the "Sonderforschungsbereich Orientalistik mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Zentralasiens," a special research project established in 1969. These institutions

and their publications made Bonn into a center of Mongolistic and Tibetan studies.

Here I intend to appraise Heissig's research and achievements in the area of non-literary culture, especially in the field of oral traditions of Central Asian peoples. His interest in this field appeared in his earliest works, but he initially left it aside in favor of his research concerning the history, the translation activities, and the literature of the Mongols. In all this Heissig always intended not to publish only with the scholarly community in mind, but to make the history and culture of the Mongols accessible to wider circles. There are two monographs that need to be mentioned particularly in this context: *Ein Volk sucht seine Geschichte* (1964) and *Die Religionen der Mongolei* (1970).

In 1962, a collection of stories based on a long oral tradition, the *Helden-, Höllenfahrts- und Schelmengeschichten der Mongolen*, appeared in the Swiss Manesse-Verlag, followed a year later by the publication of the volume *Mongolische Märchen* in the series *Märchen der Weltliteratur*. The generous financial assistance for special research projects at that time enabled Heissig to initiate a project for the study of epics in 1978 and make the research concerning this genre of oral tradition into a focus of his Institute. In the years that followed, the project provided the appropriate environment for six international symposia to be held. The materials of these symposia were published by Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden: *Die mongolischen Epen. Bezüge, Sinndeutung und Überlieferung* (1979), and five volumes of *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung* (from 1981 to 1991). Due to Heissig's efforts, five volumes of texts, *Folklore mongol*, by B. Rinčen (Ulaanbaatar) were published between 1960 and 1972. These were followed by a series of thirteen volumes of epics, *Mongolische Epen*, which contain eighty-six specimens of narrative poetry. The specimens differ in form, size, and character, some of them being *märchen* rather than epics, but all are published together with translations, which made them accessible to international comparative folklore researchers.

This, however, was not enough for Heissig. Next to his activities as editor, he also published a number of monographs. It is impossible to introduce them here in detail, but at least their titles should be mentioned: *Geser Rëdzia-Wu. Dominik Schröders nachgelassene Monguor (Tujen)-Version des Geser-Epos aus Amdo* (1980); *Geser-Studien. Untersuchungen zu den Erzählstoffen in den "neuen" Kapiteln des mongolischen Geser-Zyklus* (1983); *Erzählstoffe rezenter mongolischer Heldendichtung 1-2* (1988); *Individuelles und traditionelles Erzählen. Der mongolische Erzähler Čoyrub (Čoyirub) aus Ordos (1912–1989)* (2000), and *Motive und Analyse mongolischer Märchen* (2003). Heissig's impressive number of published works concerning oral traditions is further supplemented by smaller monographic work, next to numerous articles, such as *Die mongolischen Heldenepen. Struktur und Motive* (1979); *Westliche Motivparallelen in zentralasiatischen Epen* (1983); and

*Heldenmärchen versus Heldenepos? Strukturelle Fragen zur Entwicklung altaischer Heldenmärchen* (1991).

In the 1990s Heissig organized two more academic symposia in Bonn, which were not focused on Central Asia. These were *Formen und Funktionen mündlicher Traditionen* in 1993, and *Die Bedeutung oraler Traditionen. Ihre Archivierung, Publikation und Index-Erschließung* organized together with Rüdiger Schott. The contributions to these symposia appeared in print in 1995 and 1998 respectively.

Heissig's enthusiasm for oral "literatures" and his limitless and impressive dedication to this "wide field" could not go without influencing his students. Especially among those in his Institute studying Tibet (Tibetologues) intensive field research in Tibet was initiated under the guidance of Dieter Schuh. This research produced, among other results, recordings of linguistic materials, which at the same time are samples of oral tradition. From 1982 until 2005 seventeen volumes of *märchen*, jests, and other narratives of various Tibetan populations were published in the series *Beiträge zur tibetischen Erzählforschung*, edited by Dieter Schuh (the texts are published in German translation, some of them are accompanied by the Tibetan vernacular). Also, non-Mongolistic contributions to narrative research were published in the *Asiatische Forschungen*, which Heissig edited together with others. Examples are S. Herrmann, *Kesar Versionen aus Ladakh* (1991) and A. T. Hatto's monumental work *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff* (1990). The inclusion of this work brought Central Asian Turkology into the series.

When Heissig was already very advanced in age he collected his essays and articles concerning non-literary culture in several volumes. These works, spanning half a century, had been widely dispersed and were often difficult to come by. The last of these volumes, *Motiv und Wirklichkeit* (1993), brings together essays on various aspects of the epic poetry of Central Asian populations and others on correspondences in thought and narrative tradition of Central Asia and Europe. The second volume in the series, *Götter im Wandel. Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Synkretismus der mongolischen Volksreligion* (1996) contains contributions to a variety of cults and ritual texts, and is dedicated to Nikolaus Poppe, Heissig's friend, colleague, and collaborator in the field of research into epics. The first volume, *Schamanen und Geisterbeschwörer in der östlichen Mongolei* (1992), brought together contributions on shamanistic cults and ritual texts. This volume also includes the essay in which Heissig first touches on the field of folk traditions, which later became the topic that came to dominate the second half of his productive time: the volume's topic, shamans and enchanters of spirits, not only provided its title, it also signaled Heissig's return to his folkloristic beginnings, although it included a few minor variations. The essay with this title appeared 1944 in Beijing in the third volume of *Folklore Studies*. With this publication, Heissig fully closed the circle.

I have always regretted the fact that the circumstances which dominated the second half of the twentieth century prevented me for thirty decisive years from maintaining a normal scientific contact with Walther Heissig. A first, and for a long time the only—even illegal—conversation with him took place at the Congress of Mongolists in Ulaanbaatar in 1970. What could have been more natural than an exchange between colleagues working in the same field, since I had earned my doctor's degree with a dissertation on Mongolian *märchen*? Once in a while we exchanged letters, but not all of them reached their destination, and some of them I discovered later as copies between covers for legal documents, yet the exchange of publications was possible to a certain degree. I also received Heissig's invitations to his symposia on epics, but I was not allowed to take part in them. However, I was grateful for the fact that Heissig and his contributions to oral traditions, a field of research dear to me, existed at all. This fact alone prevented me from becoming discouraged. This was because at the place where I was working, this kind of research was lightly disparaged as "hobby research." (It was only later I learned that Heissig's work with epics was initially considered to be nonsensical by his colleagues and was also criticized as such.) But because he was blessed with a long life, it was possible to meet him on a number of occasions and to participate in meetings he initiated. There were also opportunities to spend many a good hour filled with stimulating conversation in his hospitable and friendly home in Rheinböllen in company with his wife Annemarie to whom we owe a great debt for providing the appropriate environment for him to work, publish, and participate in academic life for such a long time.

Walther Heissig does not leave behind a vacuum, but he is missed very much nevertheless. Many people all over the world, not the least many Mongols, remember him, as I do, with friendship, affection, and admiration, not only as an eminent scholar, but also as a generous and kind person, and a stimulating, passionate, and relentless scientific worker. Among the Tuva, in the farthest west of Mongolia, people say in a blessing at the occasion of the death of an old person:

Now, my children,  
 A person after a long life has become a Burgan.  
 Born again in the realm of the Burgan  
 May he find the realm of truth!

Erika TAUBE

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