

## **Obituary**

### **Jürgen Domes (1932–2001)**

Eberhard Sandschneider

On 22 September 2001, Jürgen Domes passed away after a week of fighting a sudden illness. It was six months before his 70th birthday. Within hours of the news spreading, tributes flooded in from China scholars all over the world, colleagues and friends mourning his passing and paying their respects to one of the leading figures of contemporary China studies in Europe. Indeed, Jürgen Domes was one of the first German political scientists to work on contemporary China. He approached his subject from a strictly disciplinary perspective, his fluency in Chinese allowing him to base his analyses on primary sources. For almost four decades, he was one of the most internationally renowned German scholars working on contemporary China.

Jürgen Domes was born in Lübeck on 2 April 1932 and brought up in northern Germany. After studying political science, history and theology in Marburg and Heidelberg between 1952 and 1959, he joined a research team on parliamentarianism supervised by Dolf Sternberger at the University of Heidelberg. He received his PhD from Heidelberg in 1960 and worked as a research assistant there until 1962. Then, after six months working as a freelance journalist for *Deutsche Welle* in Köln, he went to Taiwan for Chinese language tuition and to conduct research as a visiting associate professor at the National Chengchi University. In March 1964, he joined the Otto-Suhr-Institute for Political Science at the Free University of Berlin. In 1967, Domes became the founder and first director of the newly established Research Unit on Chinese and East Asian Politics, which he continued to head until September 1975.

During the turbulent years of the student movement in (West) Berlin, Jürgen Domes belonged to those who insisted on academic standards. He became known not only for criticizing the Cultural Revolution in his academic work, but also for opposing those who easily fell victim to *People's Daily* propaganda in order to push their own personal interests. It must have been a difficult time for him, which he himself never mentioned except for the occasional short, sarcastic comment. He suffered many blows in silence but finally left Berlin unbroken in his attitude, although looking back to his time there with bitterness.

In October 1975, he accepted a chair for political science at the Saar University in Saarbrücken, where he immediately established another Research Unit on Chinese and East Asian Politics. The Saar University and the Faculty of Law and Economics became his academic home. He enjoyed immensely the personal and academic climate of his new *alma mater* for which he served as Dean and Vice President while simultaneously promoting the international reputation of his research unit. For over twenty years, Jürgen Domes worked to establish a small but

effective Institute of Political Science. When he retired in 1997, he had achieved this goal, although he could not prevent the university from making the disastrous decision to close down political science at the Saar University after his retirement.

To his students, Jürgen Domes was an impressive figure: strict when it came to punctuality and formal behaviour, but generous with his time, reliable in his advice and untiring in his help – a gentle man whose personal qualities were invaluable to every young student who had the chance to meet him. First and foremost, he taught us the importance of factual knowledge, and through his personal approach to the study of Chinese politics, proved the necessity to verify the data basis for any analysis. In seminars and lectures, he exemplified the method of a highly structured presentation of complex data. Generations of students are grateful for lessons learned from him.

As a scholar, Jürgen Domes remained sceptical of communist systems and their domestic and international behaviour. Knowing about the importance of elite politics in highly hierarchical structures, he concentrated on the observation of top level elite factionalism. Together with Father Ladany in Hong Kong, he gained an international reputation for his detailed knowledge of factional strife, coalition building and elite behaviour in Beijing. Much of this meticulously acquired knowledge was due to the exhaustive reading of documents published in Taiwan and his interviews with refugees in Hong Kong. In times when access to primary data about China was difficult, he steadfastly relied on Taiwanese sources. He gave a lively and reliable account of China's domestic politics in his major books on the decade of KMT rule (1927–1937) (*Vertagte Revolution*, 1969); on Communist China (*China after the Cultural Revolution*, 1977 and *Socialism in the Chinese Countryside*, 1980); and on post-Mao China (*The Government and Politics of the PRC: A Time of Transition*, 1985). Fascinated by the man who challenged Chairman Mao in 1959, he added a biography of Peng Dehuai (*The Man and the Image*, 1985) in which he once again proved his ability to demystify Communist China's esoteric communication codes.

The events of 1989 both infuriated and inspired him. He was furious about the events of 4 June in China and – together with his wife, Marie-Luise Näth – wrote a last major book on “China's Awakening” (*China im Aufbruch*, 1990). But he was also inspired and satisfied to see the collapse of communism in Europe and Germany reunited.

From the beginning of his studies of Chinese politics, Jürgen's interests focused both on the PRC and on Taiwan. He earned international prestige for not only following the ROC's development, but also for encouraging many young scholars to undertake research on Taiwan, its specificity, its transition to democracy, and the reference it represents today for anyone interested in the future of China. What had started with a first visit in 1962 turned into a lifelong relationship of interest and affection for Taiwan's political and economic development. In the end, he saw Taiwan's young democracy being established while still struggling for its future.

Jürgen Domes established high standards in his approach to the study of Chinese politics. As one of his colleagues wrote: “He was a brilliant, tireless student of Chinese elite politics. His irrepressible enthusiasm, detailed knowledge and encyclopaedic memory made him a unique Sinological resource. His loss will be deeply felt.”