Adam von Trott zu Solz was executed in August 1944 at the age of 35 for involvement in the resistance to Hitler. He worked closely with the Kreisau Kreis around Helmuth von Moltke, Peter Yorck, Hans Haeften and Hans von Dohnanyi, and became a confidant of Count von Stauffenberg. As one of the youngest conspirators he presents a life and written legacy that deserve to be known in greater depth, for Trott, an international lawyer trained in politics, philosophy and economics, thought in transnational terms when planning for the future of Europe and the global order. The substance of Trott’s transnational perspectives, especially regarding the connections between Europe, the U.S. and the Far East, have been neglected and/or misrepresented in accounts of his life and work which generally quote or dispute one another without consulting the primary sources. An unpublished 1999 McGill dissertation by Katherine Sams is a welcome exception, though regrettably it does not go beyond 1940. Trott’s correspondence, memoranda and publications, and postwar reports collected by Clarita von Trott fill 30 volumes at the German Federal Archive in Koblenz; portions remain in private collections not included there.

A brief chronology will contextualize Trott’s engagement with China in the mid to late 1930s. Coming from a family of Hessian aristocrats – his father was Prussian Kultusminister until 1917, his mother descended from a Prussian ambassador to Saint Petersburg and from American abolitionists – Trott studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics in Oxford from 1931–33 as a Rhodes Scholar after completing a Göttingen dissertation on Hegel and International Law. Returning to Germany in August 1933, he began immediately to build connections among socialist and Jewish friends and oppositional circles. He still harbored some hope for an academic, business or legal career; 1933–34 was spent exploring these options, still benefiting from the spate of privileged family, political and academic connections due to his class and race, and not yet stigmatized by nonmembership in the Party. He spent four years in Referendar and Assessor posts in Hesse and Berlin.

A primary focus of Trott’s political activity in the mid-thirties, which I contend is important for his later work in China, is with the Neue Blätter für
den Sozialismus, where he published several book reviews. Once that journal was shut down, its publisher finally agreed to print Trott’s selection of Kleist’s Politische und Journalistische Schriften with a barely veiled scathing attack on Nazi brutality. In 1935 he completed his legal exams. But by 1936 he saw the writing on the wall as pressure mounted to join the Party if he were to enter civil service or academia and began to look for other options than a legal career.

By this time Trott’s interest in China had been piqued through his friendships with two individuals in particular. One was China aficionado Wilfrid Israel, owner of the Berlin department store N. Israel, a London-born German Jew whom Trott met in the spring of 1935. Israel did not emigrate until 1939. Trott is known to have stayed in his flat when in Berlin, though Israel’s frequent missions to Portugal, Spain, and Britain on behalf of resettling Jewish refugees meant that they did not see a lot of each other. Israel wrote to Trott at one point wanting to know if Trott thought an increase in German commerce in the Far East could assist German, Italian and English intervention to end the Sino-Japanese war. The other friend was Julie Braun Vogelstein, widow and biographer of Social Democrat Heinrich Braun. Having completed his Oxford BA in two rather than three years, he was granted further Rhodes funding as well as support from Braun Vogelstein, whom he had helped emigrate to the U.S., for a research tour to China focusing on the «classical Chinese concept of sovereignty.»

The time frame of Trott’s most intensive study of and direct experience in China was the twenty-one months from February 1937 to October 1938. Having met in January 1937 in Leipzig with sinologist Wolfram Eberhard, who agreed to teach him Chinese language, culture and philosophy and accompany him on his travels, Trott left in February via London for the U.S. for preparatory research, arriving in New York March 12. After four months of contacts with experts and studying sources he sailed the Pacific on a British steamer for Shanghai, but the July 7 Marco Polo Bridge incident stranded him at Hong Kong. After traveling to Canton and spending three weeks in the war-torn Kwangsi Province against the advice of General Alexander von Falkenhausen, military advisor to Chiang Kai Chek and later an important resistance contact, Trott took up residence in Peking with Gustav Ecke, professor of Chinese art history at Fu Yen University in Peking since 1928 and editor of a Sinology journal. In October 1938 his father died and he regretfully headed home much earlier than planned. He learned about the November 9 pogroms in Germany on board the ship home, arriving in Germany in late November to what he found to be an atmosphere of «sterile despair,» «guilt and shame.» Despite the disappointment in not being able to com-
plete his studies, he quickly realized events in Europe compelled him to be in Germany and play an active role in the resistance.

One of the first results of Trott’s China expertise was an invitation by Edward (Ned) Carter of the Institute of Pacific Relations to attend its November 1939 meeting in Virginia Beach. He obtained passage on an Italian vessel, made it through the Straits of Gibraltar after the outbreak of war in September 1939 and spent the fall, apart from attending the ten-day November conference, racing between New York and Washington meeting émigré friends and resistance contacts and attempting to deliver memoranda and messages on behalf of the resistance to business, academic, and human rights leaders and diplomatic and public officials. Traveling with a German passport in wartime, he aroused suspicion; the FBI trailed him and recorded many of these conversations.17

Despite urgings of friends and colleagues not to return to Germany, he sailed from San Francisco on January 12, 1940, for Japan and China, then took the Trans-Siberian Railway via Königsberg back to Berlin, determined to fight the regime from within. He had friends like Albrecht von Bernstorff in the Foreign Office who were deeply involved in resistance efforts and in specific coup attempts and with whom he had been in close touch since his 1938 return.

On May 31, 1940 Trott accepted a low-ranking appointment at the Asian affairs desk of the Information Department of the German Foreign Office18 and a week later married Clarita Tiefenbacher.19 His recognition as an Asia specialist provided valid alibis for his numerous foreign trips to Switzerland, Scandinavia, Holland and elsewhere on behalf of Kreisau and other resistance initiatives to persuade the Allies to support their efforts and plans for a post-Hitler democratic Europe. Trott is known for his near-native fluency in English, his huge network of contacts with influential people in Britain and the U.S. as well as with the ecumenical movement. Friends and colleagues write of his immense capacity for friendship and dialogue, his voracious reading of literary classics, his commitment to socialism and to eradicating war as a means to solving conflict, and last but not least, his profound humor, raucous laughter and ability to defuse the most dangerous situation with ingenious ruses. What has scarcely been addressed in depth is his engagement with Chinese thought.

In the following I will examine Trott’s «reading» of China through his correspondence, research notes and notes from conversations and travel with leading Sinologists in 1937–38, and publications. I will consider how he constructs his narrative of China and the Orient vis-a-vis his correspondents, his transnational views of Europe as conveyed from China after journeying from
China, and, finally, how his engagement with everyday Chinese culture and Daoism may have influenced his thought and action as part of the resistance after his return to Berlin in 1940.

It is not known how early Trott began reading Chinese philosophy. His library contains well-marked copies of Victor von Strauss’ 1924 edition of Laotse’s *Tao te King* and Percival Lowell’s 1921 *Die Seele des Fernen Ostens*; as early as March 1933 he wrote to his father about working on Lord Palmerston’s *Orientpolitik.*

Trott’s contacts in the US and Canada during his spring 1937 study trip range from meeting Felix Morley, former *Washington Post* Far East correspondent, and Henry Stimson, Secretary of State at the time of the 1931 Manchurian crisis and author in 1936 of *The Far East Crisis,* to library visits in Chicago and Cornell. The list of books whose titles Trott noted at the Cornell library, which he called the «best non-Chinese East Asian library in America,* reflect the breadth of his scholarly interest and refute any suspicion that his motivation in embarking on this study was mystical or escapist:

Arthur Probsrain, *Encyclopedia of Books on China* (London, 1927);
Edward Harper Parker, *China, her History, Diplomacy & Commerce* (London, 1917);
Chu His 1130–1200, *Les principes gouvernementaux en Chine: extraits de Tchou-hi* (Firence, 1888);
Foreign Policy Association of New York, *The Rise of the Kuomintang* (1928);
Chai Chun-chieu, *Essai historique et analytique sur la situation internationale de la Chine* (Paris, 1829);
Liu, Ta-chun, *China’s Industry and Finance* (Peking, 1927);
Hsieeh, Pao Chao, *The Government of China* (Baltimore, 1925);
Research Department of the Bank of China, *The Financial Situation in China & Japan* (Geneva, 1933);
Lee Chou Ying, *The System of Chinese Public finance – A Comparative Study* (London, 1936);

The initial driving force of Trott’s study was to study «why subjects obey.» One undated outline titled «Herrschaft und Charakter» suggests that the unique contribution of ancient Far Eastern attitudes toward state sovereignty is located in the transition from personal morality to the structure of sovereign obedience («der Übergang von persönlicher Moral zur loyalen Herrschafts- gestaltung»), and that this would help one understand the prevailing forces of the present time. He relates this question to Europe: «es ist eine Frage, ob Europa sich ihnen [den geistigen Kräften der Gegenwart] gewachsen erweisen wird.»

In notes for a comparative study of ancient Far Eastern and Western views of sovereignty (cf. his letter of 10 Feb 1938 to Julie Braun Vogelstein, cited be-
low), Trott defines sovereignty as «Verkörperung der eigenständigen Macht und der letzten politischen Gehorsamspflicht eines Volkes,» as «höchste Rechtsquelle für die inneren und äußeren Beziehungen eines Staates.» The concluding line of the notes names «das Tao des Menschen» as the primary building block of all personal and political relationships.29

Trott sought out numerous Chinese scholars to whom he had letters of introduction. Typed notes from three meetings with a Professor W. Hung in late December 1937 and into 1938 show that Hung affirmed Trott’s purpose and was advising him in detail about Chinese resources to whom he could turn. Hung believed that „meine Aufgabe, einer staatstheoretischen Interpretation (Namengebung) der politischen und philosophischen Zusammenhänge jener Zeit (des Konfuzius) noch nicht versucht worden, sei auch nicht sinologisch, philosophisch, sondern nur staatstheoretisch möglich.»30 Hung refers him to a Chen Chui, possibly the assistant to whom Trott refers in his February 1938 letter to Braun-Vogelstein below, who should help him with textual criticism especially of the last ten of the 100 Li and consider how best to compare Chinese concepts with analogous Western concepts. Trott’s notes from his third conversation with Hung suggest the direction of the work he was doing at this point. He is clearly attempting to make responsible generalizations about the evolution of Chinese thought as it compares to the particular aspects of Western political culture that concern him most:

[I] need to weigh the relative significance of the different elements [of sovereignty]… the conflict between the moralist and the mystical concept of emperor […]

Chinese thought has been formed over centuries in adaptation to natural process, while Western thinking with its «cubist» forms of technologically-oriented civilization often uses violence to force the object into pre-conceived categories […]

Chinese materialism is ‹heiter›, in contrast to western materialism; apart from this Hung finds in Schopenhauer certain resemblances to Daoism.31

Trott’s correspondence from China, despite his isolation from everyday events in Europe, demonstrates his characteristic acute awareness both of his own position as observer32 and of the language, interests and vulnerabilities of his Gegenüber.

To Julie Braun-Vogelstein in February 1938 he describes his fascination with ancient Chinese philosophy with the caveat that the constitution of the observer defines the limits of the study. He urges her to read Martin Buber’s translation of Dschuang-tse [Zhuangzi] if she has not done so, as it would give her «einen Begriff von den Gegenden, in denen ich mich zur Zeit bewege,» phrasing that suggests the integration of the intellectual, spiritual, geographical and physical aspects of his experience. The letter goes on to describe the young «Mitarbeiter» with whom he is working through the classical texts.
Coming from an ancient Mandarin family in Fukien and studying the classics since age four, his assistant had a profound relationship to Chinese philosophy. Trott adds that the young man is also at home in European history and «some of our problems.» The letter then emphasizes how much more directly he is experiencing Taoism’s inspired view of nature through his ongoing study of Chinese martial arts than through «translated» ideas.


A letter of November 24, 1938 from his ship back to Europe from China to his Jewish friend Diana Hubback from Oxford days exemplifies both Trott’s romantic projection of China in correspondence with a close friend, and secondly his coded reference to the November 9 pogroms by referring to their mutual friend Wilfrid Israel:

Oh, how I wish you could see China and Peking for yourself. The wide ancient plain with its graves and temples and peasant huts, stretching out to the Western hills where the guerilla’s domain begins. Though there is war, there is an eternal presence of serenity in these fields and forms and faces. You and Wilfrid [Israel – should go there together. – My thoughts have been with him very much these last weeks – do you know where he is, how I can reach him? Give him my love if you can. You know that it is we who are humiliated by what has passed and it is for us to wonder whether our former friends wish to have anything more to do with one who, after all (in my case through my very absence) has to accept his full share of responsibility. I know that our friendship is too deeply rooted to be affected by all these developments, but I know of hardly another one I have abroad that in some way or other is not. This I think will be my hardest discovery on returning to Europe after these eventful months. I shall have to face it and set to work in other directions.

Between his two China trips and after his second return in 1940 Trott consistently made connections in his writing for diverse audiences in Britain, the U.S. and Germany – despite the profound distrust caused by the fact of his traveling on a passport from Nazi Germany – between the substance of his reading of China and the Far East and the substance of his thinking about Germany, Europe and the future economic, political and cultural global order. His memorandum *Far Eastern Possibilities* was distributed first in English in June 1938, then in German as *Ostasiatische Möglichkeiten* in early July to a selected list of German and British officials and close friends. In the English version, but not in the German, Trott states «as a German observer» that his purpose is «to defeat the fatal notion, increasingly dominating
Anglo-Saxon opinion, that Germany can only be regarded as an unsettling force and not a potential cooperator toward a better order of international relations.»

Trott sees the changes in Pacific alignments taking place with the deepening Sino-Japanese conflict as having profound repercussions for the European situation and world politics and decisive for the chances of peace in the rest of the world in the next decade. This June 1938 analysis argues that the Chinese resistance in the hinterlands is based on strong agricultural communitarian models of economic and political cooperation, education and land reform (here we see parallels to the themes of Kreisau planning in 1942–43) despite the chaos caused by wartime banditry and dislocation; he argues that the «ideological solidarity» of Japan and Germany must not be misunderstood; Germany wants a role in constructing a tolerable Far Eastern peace agreement by limiting the fatal consequences of an extended Japanese campaign in China.

By contrast, in a January 1940 American foreign policy monthly out of New York, Amerasia, Trott positions himself not as a German but as a member of the International Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations, arguing for American neutrality in the war in an article called «Euramerasia.» The neologism in Trott’s title itself suggests his motive in addressing an American audience concerned with American interests in Asia. Typical of Trott’s dialectical skill as well as noteworthy for his willingness to publish statements not in line with his government’s official position is the following argument from this article. Appealing to the power of America to «turn the scales in a state of the world in which all other important powers are involved in a major conflict,» he warns that if the U.S. effectively condones Japanese imperialism in the East, «the whole vital fabric of Chinese popular resistance will become irretrievably allied to Russia, revolutionary unrest will be perpetuated in China and may spread all over the Asiatic continent.» If America enters the European war, China would be driven to seek help from Russia and with the U.S. busy in Europe, Russian influence would become the most powerful external factor in the Far Eastern conflict. Arguing from an empathetic perspective with Chinese «bitterness against the barren shallowness of Western pledges to weaker nations and an exasperated realization of the cynical dialectic underlying Western progress since Manchuria,» he sees grievances against Western imperialism currently submerged under Sino-Japanese hatred, but warns that if the U.S. enters the European war it will greatly strengthen the chances of unified anti-Western power in the Pacific during and after the war. His conclusion is that neutrality should be considered «a basic national interest of America between Europe and Asia.»
Yet another audience for Trott the Asian affairs specialist is of course that within Nazi Germany after his return from Asia. One publication comes out of Trott’s Berlin China connections and is clearly addressed to that audience, with corresponding cautions, yet without sacrificing the argument. In his March 1940 lecture to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Foreign Public Law and International Law, «Der Kampf um die Herrschaftsgestaltung im Fernen Osten,» Trott’s analytical approach is similar to that of his acutely political 1935 introduction to his volume of Kleist’s political writings. In describing the struggle for sovereignty in the Far East he locates the contemporary struggle for authentic power in the capacity of peoples to muster their last available resources, not in the predictable power games played by Western-style power brokers. With typical transnational orientation Trott predicts that the current conflict over sovereignty in China «wird weit über den betroffenen Kontinent und die orientalischen Völker hinaus – für die politisch-wirtschaftliche ebenso wie für die geistige Neuordnung unserer Welt von tiefgreifender Bedeutung sein.»

Given the limits imposed on correspondence by the need for secrecy and by awareness of the censors, Trott’s war-time correspondence offers scant substantive information but frequent hints, often coded references, and do document where he was and often what he sent whom when. A February 1941 letter to his wife Clarita signals, for example, how consciously Trott weighs what assignments he can accept as a Far East expert in the Foreign Office without compromising his ultimate purpose. Reporting that his «Ostasienbericht» (Ostasiatische Möglichkeiten) is now with Ambassador Stahmer, he then refers to a publishing assignment he will possibly accept if the other contributors are «Kapazitäten […] die mich nicht zu sehr komprimieren.»

What does Trott’s reading of China mean, then, for his participation in the plot to overthrow Hitler? Katharine Sams maintains in her thesis on the development of Trott’s political thought that the China experience functioned to prepare Trott for political action in Germany and Europe. Trott had written to Sheila Grant Duff in 1936 that he would go to the Far East and «come back a mandarin of the new order,» meaning the new order of labor in Europe. How did he return, when he did so in 1938 and again in 1940?

I will not rehearse here the history of the attempted and failed plots against Hitler from 1939 to 1944. Surely of significance are the moral and ethical as well as social and economic questions that occupied the diverse network of Kreisauer in planning the elimination of the regime as well as a future democratic Europe. Studies such as that by Ger van Roon began to document these deliberations in the 1960s. Trott, like theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others with foreign contacts attempting to get Allied support for the resis-
stance, were constantly disappointed by their failure to gain trust abroad and of course by one after the other failed plot prior to July 20 which led to the arrest and death of Trott and scores of others. I will focus here on a few documents that indicate specific impulses Trott gained from his China experience and how he felt China equipped him for this work.

Among the conversation partners Trott visits a number of times were Sinologists Hellmut Wilhelm and Dr. Bidder of the German Embassy in Peking. His notes of an August 1938 conversation with Botschaftsrat Bidder, primarily in response to Trott’s question whether Bidder thought the Chinese could master modern industrial technology given that their culture is based purely on agricultural practices, demonstrate Trott’s eagerness to use his counterpart’s expertise while formulating his own conclusions. Bidder is optimistic that industry would be built into the continuity of the tradition of Chinese culture and philosophy and not be «broken» by modern developments. Following a paragraph in which he notes Bidder’s expectation that Western administrative economic practices will be integrated with the help of Western experts into traditional Chinese practices, Trott notes his skepticism about this perception and reaches a significant conclusion about the relationship between the moral and the political in Europe:

Was die psychische Kraft altchinesischen Ideengutes angeht, möchte ich ihm Recht geben, was ihre heutige soziologische Realisierung anbetrifft, glaube ich an die Notwendigkeit radikalener Adaptierung, um Chinas agrarisches und militärisches Problem zu lösen, wonach dann allerdings die Möglichkeit eines organischeren Einbaus der Industrie, als wie sie dem Westen gelungen ist, sehr wohl denkbar erscheint. Es gilt hier [in China] eine moralische in eine politische Kraft umzuwandeln, während bei uns das umgekehrte notwendig ist.

Trott mentions Daoism and Chinese thought a number of times in his correspondence with family members, in particular the value of the Daoist concept of *wu wei* and the paradox *wei wu wei*. The literal meaning of *wu wei* is «without force.» It is often expressed by the paradox *wei wu wei*, meaning «action without force» or «effortless doing.» According to James Miller, the goal of *wu wei* is alignment with Dao, revealing the soft, invisible, but fundamental and indomitable power within all things. Masters of *wu wei* can control this invisible potential, the innate *yin*-action of the Way. In ancient Daoist texts, *wu wei* is associated with the yielding nature but also the strength of water to move earth and carve stone. Daoism does not see the root of disharmony or evil in conflict between human wills, but in the imbalance between human wills and the natural universe.

To his mother Trott writes from Peking in August 1938, „Wenn man etwas von der orientalischen Weisheit lernen kann, so sollte es das sein, dass die in-
nere Welt des Menschen so weit und prekär ist wie die äussere und dass man
nicht mit schnellfertigen Massstäben, vor allem nicht von sich auf andere, zu
richtigen Schlüssen kommen kann.\textsuperscript{51}

Writing to his mother from Berlin fifteen months into the war in December
1940, Trott invokes \textit{wu wei} in advising her about a situation in which she was
uncomfortable participating in the preparation of a lavish family celebration
during wartime. Acknowledging her gifts of empathy and self-sacrifice, he
reminds her of the British celebrating amidst German bombings and encour-
cages her to adopt a Chinese attitude:

Die Engländer haben neulich im Keller der Guildhall ihr berühmtes Banquet abge-
halten. Es gehört eine gewisse Tapferkeit und Selbstverleugnung dazu, sich andern
zuliebe, ohne es selbst zu können, mitzufreuen. Wenn Du es so auffaßt – resigniert
und ohne moralische Erwartungen und Bedingungen (\textit{WU WEI!!!}) – dann hast Du
auch bestimmt Kraft und Humor genug, trotz schlimmer Müdigkeit alles gut zu
überstehen.\textsuperscript{52}

In a 1943 letter to Clarita a similar contemplative side of Trott emerges as
he looks to Asian art to explain a truth he sees in how people respond to the
evils occurring in the present time. While some blame the «evil times» for the
events of the present, Trott finds nature and truth itself actually «time-less,»
and it is the task of human beings to be at home in them so that there is balance
between earth, ideas and their fruits. His reflection shows his eagerness to
synthesize oriental and Western thinking from the political and philosophical
to the spiritual:

Mit dem Zeitgeschehen ist das so eine Sache: allermeistens wird man in den Men-
schen, die darüber seufzen, ein gut Teil Nicht-fertig-Werdens mit ihren eigenen
unmittelbaren Lebensaufgaben feststellen, wofür dann die «böse Zeit» beschuldigt
wird. Die Natur, aber auch die eigentliche Wahrheit, ist ja doch «zeit»-los, und in
ihnen soll man […] daheim sein. […] So bewahrt sich das Elementare eines gegene-
ten Erdreiches auch in Blüte und Frucht und dem, den sie dann damit speist. Und
wie mit der «heutigen Zeit», so ist es mit vielen großen Ideen und Begriffen, denen
diese unmittelbare Wahrheit der Existenz fehlt. In ihnen vergibt und erschöpft sich
die Seele und läßt ein Gefühl hilfloser Uferlosigkeit zurück, während im Umkreis
des Greifbaren und natürlich Bewährten die großen Wahrheiten sich auf einfache
und geheimnisvolle Weise spiegeln. Hierin liegt ein guter Teil vielleicht der asia-
tischen Kunst, den chinesischen Bambusblättern oder der frierenden Kiefer im
Winterwind und hier im Westen – die Kraft des empirischen, skeptischen, ja oft
auch des sensualistischen Denkens der Angelsachsen und – anders – der Franzosen.
Den Deutschen wird die «Idee» immer wieder zur Gefahr, wenn sie auch nicht ohne
sie auszukommen versuchen sollten […] [M]ir ist dies zeitweilig wohl beinahe zum
Verhängnis geworden, denn so «greifbar» ist eben die Wahrheit doch nicht; es muß
sich tiefer hervortun und nicht so sehr erarbeitet, als gegeben werden.\textsuperscript{53}
It is typical of Trott the poet and political being that he could write such prose during the same weeks that he is conducting secret missions and negotiating with fellow conspirators about how Germany and Europe should be organized politically and economically after Hitler. Between the outbreak of war in September 1939 and his execution in 1944 he traveled outside Germany scores of times, on missions each of which had some sort of Foreign Office cover but primarily the goal of informing Allied and ecumenical contacts of resistance plans and pleading with them to formulate clear aims and recognize the conspiracy. His transnational orientation and his understanding of international affairs defined all his writing about Asia, whether directed to American, British or German leaders or opinion-makers. All focused on that vision for balance in the structure of sovereignty that he had first investigated in his book on Hegel. His attempts to interpret the complex realignments he saw occurring between China, Japan, Russia, the U.S., Great Britain, Germany and the rest of Europe were all deeply colored by his experience and reflection during 15 months in China. This transnational vision eluded most national leaders as well as many of his friends in Britain and was not heard due to the force of events at the time of his return to Germany in 1938, but he engaged in it with a different perspective about the power and authority of individuals and communities vis-à-vis a state authority out of balance with «Heaven.»

While most accounts focus on the failure of Trott’s and his resistance colleagues’ diplomatic efforts and the mistrust they encountered abroad, his largely unknown personal correspondence of 1940–44 – however fragmentary and fraught with the issues known to all who deal with texts written for the censor – indicates he grasped that the political reality of the present is about accepting what must be done for the sake of humanity and the future in face of incomprehension at home and abroad. What counted was maintaining calm while preventing further genocide and attempting to rid Germany and Europe of Hitler, while considering the profound moral implications of doing so. In the following letter, without his naming *wei wu wei* explicitly, I think that is his reference point. In June 1944, in full awareness of yet another plan to assassinate Hitler and certainly knowing his neck was on the line, he wrote to Clarita:

> Läßt sich unser christlicher Kinderglaube […] ausweiten und auf die ganze Wucht und Intensität unserer heutigen Probleme einschärfen? Fast scheint es mir, als ob das alte China noch ein […] Scherflein hierzu beitragen könnte. Hans [Haeften] sagte neulich, die Kenntnis dessen, was er ‹Weltangst› nennt, gehe mir ab. […] Hier liegen (vielleicht seit China) wirklich Abgründe […] wenn auch alles letzten Endes nicht gewollt und gemacht, sondern geschenkt oder versagt sein wird. Gnade oder Tao.
This article is based on a paper given at the 2008 German Studies Association conference in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I am indebted to my colleague Mary Rhiel at the University of New Hampshire and others at the session «Germans Reading China» for their comments and questions.


Materials in the Trott Collection at the Bundesarchiv are cited using the standard notation BArch N1416 followed by the Ordner and volume number. Materials not at the Bundesarchiv are indicated otherwise.

Adam von Trott zu Solz, *Hegels Staatsphilosophie und das Internationale Recht*, International Law and Diplomacy Series, University of Göttingen, ed. Herbert Kraus, 1932. Reprinted in 1967 with an Introduction by Hans Rothfels. Trott claimed that his experience of China finally helped him work through his fundamental dissatisfaction with Hegel's understanding of the relationship between a state and its people. Part II of Trott's book is recognized as a significant contribution to Hegel criticism. It is my contention that while most accounts of Trott dismiss his «Hegelianism» as an early intellectual phase there is far more continuity to his thinking about the problem of sovereignty than previously acknowledged and that his China sojourn pushed this understanding beyond its Western limits and prepared Trott for the decisions he made about his participation in the conspiracy against Hitler, the ways he viewed it and articulated that in his correspondence and conversations.


Published by Protte, Potsdam; a forum for leftist intellectuals including Paul Tillich and the younger generation including J.P. Mayer, Curt Bley, Johannes Gaidies and Adam von Trott. Ceased publication in late 1933.


Ibid. 104.
11 Trott’s correspondence with Julie Braun Vogelstein is held at the Leo Baeck Archive, New York, hereafter LBI.

12 Typescript, BArch N1416/17 China: Exzerpte, Notizen, Bruchstückhafte Entwürfe.

13 MacDonough 97.

14 Sams 358. AvT to Diana Hubback 11 Aug. 1937: «History is closing in on me even on these continents.»

15 Sams 404–07 dates an important consultation of Trott and Albrecht von Kessel with Falkenhausen in Dresden on 3 September 1939 (Malone and others thought it to have been in July) proposing an assassination plan. Trott had met Falkenhausen in August 1937 in China (letter of 17.8.1937, Hong Kong, to Julie Braun Vogelstein – LBI); however, shortly after Trott’s return to Berlin they also both attended a China-Studien-Gesellschaft dinner in Berlin to welcome the new Chinese ambassador, 27 March 1939 (BArch N1416/20 Teilnehmerliste).

16 AvT to Sheila Grant Duff, 6 December 1938, BArch N 1416/25.

17 BArch, N1416/3 (fol. 1) Laufende Monographien.

18 Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv, Personalakte Trott.

19 CT 150.

20 Von Trott Restbibliothek, Wildeck, Hessen, thanks to Verena Onken von Trott, July 2008.

21 Sams 176.

22 March 27 or 28, 1937; AvT to Sheila Grant Duff, BArch N 1416/25; F. Morley diary entry 31 March cited in letter to Clarita von Trott, 24 Dec. 1957, BArch N1416/Berichte.

23 Sams 332.

24 BArch N 1416/17.

25 Adam von Trott, «Amerikanische Eindrücke» Barch N1416/1, 19.

26 Based on dated and undated notes in Trott’s hand, BArch N1416/17 Gespräche mit China-Fachleuten.

27 Undated outline, BArch N 1416/17.

28 BArch N1416/17. Marginal notes in AvT’s handwriting on this ms. list as sources: 1) Tao de King (Strauss) (i.e. Victor von Strauss’ 1924 Leipzig edition), 2) Sze Shu; 3) Finno Tuno Shotoki (?); 4) Sawakichi; 5) Franke etc; 6) de Groot.

29 Ibid. Undated notes, ink, one-half page in AvT handwriting: «Vergleichende Studie über die altorientalische und die westliche Souveränitätsauffassung.»

30 BArch-N1416/17. Notizen von Gesprächen mit China-Fachleuten (10 pp.)

31 Ibid.

32 «Die vergleichende Befassung – wobei das Adjektiv nicht allzu schwer wiegen kann (es ist durch die Constitution des betreibenden Subjekts schon gesetzt!) – mit der altorientalischen Philosophie ist ungeheuer interessant.» AvT to JBV, 10 February 1938. LBI.

33 AvT to Julie Braun Vogelstein, Peking, 10 February 1938. LBI.

34 AvT to Diana Hubback, on board the SS «Ranchi», 24 November 1938. English original, LBI.

Krosigk, Professor Albrecht von Haushofer, Prof. x Franke, Prof. x [E.F.] Schumacher, Prof. Theodor Strewe (China-Studien-Gesellschaft), Adalbert von Unruh, Albrecht von Bernstorff, Ernst-Friedemann von Münchhausen, Paul Leverkühn, Hans von Dohnanyi, Fritz Jessen, Josias von Rantzau, Friedrich Schmidt-Ott.

Malone 586–87.

Ibid.


«Euramerasia», AvT draft typescript, p. 3, BArch N 1416/17.

Ibid. 4.

Ibid. 5.


Ibid. 283.

Berlin, 15 February 1941 to Clarita von Trott. CT, by permission.

Sams 290.


Ibid. 17.

Ibid. 19.

AvT to Eleonore von Trott, 30 August 1938. BArch N1416/15 Briefe an die Eltern 1933–44.

British cities were experiencing heavy German bombing raids at this time. The London Guild Hall was destroyed in December 1940 (Wikipedia) after this letter was written. Coventry Cathedral was destroyed the day this letter is dated. It is unknown what specific bombings Trott was aware of as he wrote; the reference suggests finding a way to celebrate amidst one's own and others’ hardship.

AvT to Eleonore von Trott, 14 November 1940, BArch N1416/15 Briefe an die Eltern 1933–44; cf. CT 210f.


CT 212.