



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Unraveling the Mysteries of Ancient China: Looking at Classical Texts, Nationalism, and Comparative Antiquity with Martin Kern

In this episode, Fred Lawrence speaks with Professor Martin Kern, a leading scholar in Chinese antiquity and a professor at Princeton University. Kern shares his unique academic journey, from growing up in post-war Germany to studying in Beijing during a period of political transformation. He discusses the complexities of interpreting ancient Chinese texts, the challenges of nationalism in historical scholarship, and his passion for comparative antiquity. The conversation also explores the richness of classical Chinese poetry, the evolution of historical narratives, and exactly how he ended up studying ancient Chinese manuscripts in the first place.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and

present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Martin Kern. Professor Kern is the Joanna and Greg Zeluck professor in Asian Studies at Princeton University and specializes in the study of Chinese antiquity. The author and editor of numerous books and articles crossing the disciplines of literature, history, religion, and art, Dr. Kern studies the practices of textual composition, transmission and hermeneutics in the Chinese manuscript culture of the first millennium BCE. He recently served as president of the American Oriental Society and directs the International Center for the Study of Ancient Text Cultures at Renmin University of China in Beijing. Welcome, professor.

Martin Kern: Thank you, Fred, for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Fred Lawrence: Martin, I want to start with your childhood, which is typically where we start discussions of people's background, but yours is a little different. It's a route that begins in Germany where you grew up, in retrospect, not that long after the end of the Second World War in the 1960s. I'm sure as a kid it felt like a long time afterwards, but we can say with the benefit of hindsight, it wasn't that long. So what was it like growing up in what was then West Germany and to what extent did that overhang of the Second World War play a role in your childhood?

Martin Kern: I grew up in a town named Solingen, which is pretty much still in the Rhine River Valley, which puts us at the very west of West Germany. One is very quickly in Holland or in France or in Belgium. I don't think when I grew up there in the 1960s as a boy that the memory of World War II was still a major topic. Perhaps it was less a major topic than it became later when a new culture of memory took hold, of course, related also to the student demonstrations in '68. But at that time I was six years old, so my memory is a little foggy.

Fred Lawrence: This was happening someplace else, and maybe it played some backstory, but hard to say. So tell us a little bit about the evolution that's going to lead you to University of Cologne?

Martin Kern: When I was about 10 years old, I was sure I would be a journalist for the rest of my life. I wrote for the student newspaper, I wrote for the church newspaper, and as I graduated from high school, I got a job with the local newspaper right away. Two years later, they offered to hire me as a regular editor on a permanent position, and at that time, I decided after I had been so convinced for at that time, 10 years, that this is exactly what I wanted to do, I decided, no, it's not.

Then I thought I might become a literary writer, and I tried that out for another two years, and then I thought, even if I'm halfway good at it, I'm certainly not good enough. Then I decided, "Okay, I want to do something else." I did not have a plan. I'm very

sympathetic to our young students when they come into my office at 18 or 20 and they are struggling to have a plan for their life.

And I say, "Well, your life doesn't get decided today or tomorrow." It took me much, much longer than that. And so I got interested simply through friends in far eastern culture as I felt that's what it was. I didn't even have a clear idea about China or Japan, but I thought, okay, China must be the most important one of these, and I was interested in Buddhism and in calligraphy and so on.

And then I just enrolled at the University of Cologne, and the following year after just one year of study, I applied to the German Academic Exchange Service, the DAAD, to go to Beijing for two years, and they let me go. And so after two years in Cologne, I found myself all of a sudden in the middle of Beijing. So this was 1987, and something that's really, really important about this time, so I was there from 1987 to 1989 right into the Tiananmen situation. At that time, there were few cars in Beijing. There were wide roads that were practically empty except for buses and a couple of taxis.

Fred Lawrence: And bicycles, I suspect. Right?

Martin Kern: We were all on bicycles, of course. But you could take a cab from Peking University, which is in the northwest of the city to Tiananmen Square, and you'll be there in 25 minutes. But at that time, I think this was the single most open time in Chinese history in the second half of the 20th century. There was an enormously lively community at the university. There was art, there was music, there was poetry, there were political discussions every day, every night.

It was a tremendously exciting place to be there at that time. It had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with what we see today in that neighborhood, which is the kind of high-tech neighborhood today.

Fred Lawrence: At that time, were you thinking that the study of China itself would become a future path for you, or you were thinking more about the specific subjects you were studying themselves?

Martin Kern: No, I had no idea. In fact, at that time, my field in Germany was called Sinology. My mother for decades had difficulties explaining to her friends what her son was doing.

Fred Lawrence: Well, she must have asked you to give a quick sound bite so that she could at least marshal for conversations with them. So what was the soundbite and then what was the fuller version of it?

Martin Kern: He does something about China.

Fred Lawrence: Something about China. That's a soundbite.

Martin Kern: And he is learning Chinese. At that time, however, I was very interested in contemporary China, the contemporary China of that particular moment. So I started out in contemporary poetry, contemporary literature. I was always interested in literature. This is what I do.

Fred Lawrence: I should think that of all the things to study in a language to which you are not native, poetry would be the hardest because it's not just knowing what the words mean, it's the nuance. It's the symbolism of them. It's the way in which they fit together. If you will, it's both the lyrics and the music. What gave you the nerve to think that you could engage in the study of Chinese poetry?

Martin Kern: Before I even went to the university and where I look forward to returning to maybe sometime later after I get out of the trenches of daily teaching, I just have a fundamental interest in language and in poetry, and I find that the Chinese language and the Chinese writing system to some extent, but the Chinese language, really classical Chinese language, is a language that allows for poetic expression that is incredibly rich, incredibly open to overtones and undertones and keeping multiple meanings in the balance at the same time, because it is not a language like German or English or French or Italian that are all pretty much grammatically over-determined in every line.

So when you say something in classical Chinese, especially in poetry, you can leave out a lot of the grammar stuff that fills our language, and therefore the relationship between the different words is a lot looser than it is in our languages.

Fred Lawrence: So let me turn from the text back to you for a moment, having thought about journalism, having thought about different other careers that you might pursue, was there a particular moment when you thought to yourself, if I can make this work, I'd love to find a way to study these kinds of issues, particularly if somebody will pay me for it?

Martin Kern: Yes. I must say I never had a plan. My parents both left school at age 14. I was the first person to go to high school, not just to college, and so none of us in my family had any idea of what an academic career would be. There was no BA in Germany at the time which means you are there for quite a while. "Oh, here I get my two years paid to live in China. Great." Then I come back and then, "Oh, somebody wants to give me a scholarship to write a dissertation."

So I got a National Merit Foundation scholarship to write the dissertation. At that time, when I was done with that, I was still thinking, "Well, I have no idea where this leads, but I can always go back into journalism because now I am a trained journalist. I also have a degree in Chinese studies. So I got my PhD in 1996. I just wanted to get out of Germany. I thought I needed some fresh air, and so I thought, "Okay, I'll do the dissertation and then I get out and look around."

My wife whom I had met in Beijing, she was with me by that time then in Germany, and she said, "Okay, then let's do that." I put my job on pause, and then I wrote a single letter only to a professor at the University of Washington, David Knechtges.

Fred Lawrence: In Seattle?

Martin Kern: In Seattle. Because I thought what this scholar had done was most impressive to me and was most directly related to what I have been doing with my dissertation. So we went to Seattle right away. Then David Knechtges said, okay, now you're here. I will give you some courses to teach, and so he gave me his course History of Chinese Literature to teach.

It was 10 weeks and then another 10 weeks. The course was taught every single day. Five days a week. Then we expected our first child and we were a little bit surprised, and then I thought, "Okay. So now I have to be serious about what my next steps are." And then a friend at UCLA where I was invited for a talk, a colleague, a young colleague my age who then became a close friend and we are still friends, he showed me a website and he said, "Do you know the Association for Asian Studies?" And I said, "No, what is that?"

He said, "Well, that's where all the jobs are." It was still early in the year in 1997 and he said, "Once you get to August or so, look at that website and see if there is something for you." And then something very, very miraculous happened, and this has never happened again. So my specialization was at that time already what we call early China, ancient China. My dissertation was on state sacrificial hymns. So if you need something really obscure and remote, this is it.

Fred Lawrence: That was it.

Martin Kern: And who hires somebody with this? However, in that year, within six weeks, there were job openings. There was Columbia, Harvard, Brown, Cornell, Chicago, Stanford, Berkeley.

Fred Lawrence: All in the same cycle. All in the same year.

Martin Kern: All in the same year, all with jobs in my field. And before I knew it, I was a finalist at Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, and Boulder.

Fred Lawrence: You serve as the Director of a program called Comparative Antiquity: A Humanities Council Global Initiative, which as I understand it is a university-wide program with participants from numerous departments across the humanities at a time when many places are cutting back on humanities. This is obviously an embracing of humanities, but also a very broadening view of humanities. Can you tell us a little bit about the program?

Martin Kern: Yes. This was a program that we ran for four years, including we ran it halfway through Covid and it was originally projected for four years, and then we would always have comparative interests in everything I studied. In fact, even as a student in Cologne, I studied not just Sinology, I also studied art history and German literature because one needed three fields. I found this always interesting to discover questions that in my field, we don't know how to ask that don't come to us, but that are relevant.

in And I thought I had so many friends in other departments in classics, in art and archeology, in history, in religion and so on, and I knew that many of us were working on similar questions about, for example, the relationship between poetry and politics the ancient world. And so I went to the Humanities Council at Princeton which is our institution on campus that supports the humanities with all sorts of grants and all sorts of other support.

This is at the core of being a humanist at Princeton. I proposed that we start a program where we find a way to bring together the many people who are working on the ancient world at Princeton who are siloed in the departments, rarely have opportunities to talk at a sustained level, and that we develop certain formats, certain initiatives where we can support the ideas, and the council was very much in favor of that. They rounded up about 30 department chairs and program directors from across campus. We had a big meeting and we said, "Let's do it."

Fred Lawrence: In your capacity as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa, you have a number of fascinating lecture topics, and when you do your public lectures, I do invite our listeners who are in the area where you are to check one of these out. You can find that on our website, pbk.org. But I do have one of your discussion topics that I want to ask you a question about, which to me is just irresistible. That's this topic that you call Beyond Nativism: The Methods and Ethics of Studying Ancient China, and you caught my attention because you said that it was highly controversial, and in fact, to use your words, it set off a little firestorm when you first raised this in a Chinese publication.

So tell us a little bit about the topic and why did it cause a little firestorm which I'm guessing it was not so little or you wouldn't be talking about it.

Martin Kern: I'm very active in China. I'm there six weeks a year, on and off, year after year, and I run into a situation that is part of what I just described where I sense a certain nationalistic impulse in the study of Chinese history in China, not by all of my colleagues, by no means, but by enough people and by some very powerful people, and having observed that for quite a while, I wrote an essay which was first published in Chinese. I wrote it in English, but it was then, a friend of mine helped me translate it, and then we published it in a national intellectual journal in Shanghai.

When they put this out on social media, it had 7,000 readers within hours, and in this essay, I described the problems as I see them of how ancient China is studied in China

itself today, and I charged some of my colleagues with being monolingual, monocultural, knowing nothing but their own things, not even reading much of foreign scholarship, even when it's presented to them in Chinese, having no interest in other ancient civilizations and making the ancient Chinese past usable for present purposes.

This is the bottom line. Toward the end of it, I reflected on why that is happening, and it's not just that these scholars are forced to do that. It is that the scholars of not my generation but the generation above me who are still very influential, had to live through the Cultural Revolution. Their education was viciously denied to them. They saw what it meant to destroy the past.

Once China emerged from that and became more open to its own past, especially since the 1980s, there was a new desire, this is how I see it in my interpretation, there was a new desire for appreciating the past, securing the past, having the past as a point of cultural reference to which we can connect and where we can draw some sort of line intellectually, culturally, from antiquity to the present.

So that's why we have Confucius Institutes. Confucius has been dead for 25 centuries, and I understand that desire for securing a past, and I understand why my Chinese colleagues, some of them are upset when I say, "Let's use these new archaeologically recovered materials, not to try to confirm what we already know, but let's use them to find out what we do not know and what was actually different from what the last 2,000 years have done to that ancient world."

Fred Lawrence: Our listeners, like all Phi Beta Kappa members, are fascinated with books and with reading, and we like to help them build their book lists. For those who've been particularly interested in hearing your career path, but also the development of scholarship in the West about China, ancient China, modern, contemporary China, can you give us a couple of suggestions that people might want to add to their reading lists?

Martin Kern: For the general reader, I would start with *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, which was published about two decades ago. Of course, there have been a lot of new discoveries, especially archeological ones, but still this is a very good book, *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, which is written by a group of historians as well as archeologists. Then we have *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, which is a two-volume work. The first volume goes from the earliest times to I think around 1500 or so.

There is *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Beginning to AD 600*, which is edited by my Princeton colleague, Andrew Feldherr and a colleague in Sinology, Grant Hardy, and that has large sections on both Roman history and Chinese history. The so-called *Records of the Historian* by Szuma Chien has seen more and more translations of its parts. There is a big translation program led by William Nienhauser at the University of

Wisconsin trying to translate the entire *Records of the Historian*, which is important. You can put it up right there with Thucydides, Herodotus. This is what it is.

Fred Lawrence: Both history that it describes and history in itself. Well, thank you for those additions to our reading list, and thank you for being part of the Phi Beta Kappa family this year as a Visiting Scholar. Hearing you talk about not just your own research on Chinese history, but the role of history and not letting history become instrumental is particularly inspiring as we in the United States approach our very recent, by ancient standards, 250th anniversary coming up.

But it's good to be reminded that history exists for its own sake and not for our sake. We learned from it rather than trying to manipulate it. Thank you for bringing that to our students, to all of us, and thank you for being with me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Martin Kern: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. It was a great pleasure.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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