

Interpreting Heidegger in China: Between Modernity and Tradition¹

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Abstract: Over the past four decades, Heidegger's philosophy has exerted a profound influence on Chinese intellectual thought. Within Mainland Chinese academia, two primary approaches to interpreting Heidegger's work can be identified. The "contemporary" approach, championed by Sun Zhouxing, is rooted in the concerns of modernity, particularly nihilism and the dominance of technology, using these issues as a foundation for proposing a philosophy of the future (未來哲學). In contrast, the "Chinese" approach, represented by Zhang Xianglong, emphasizes cross-cultural comparisons between Heidegger's philosophy and Chinese traditional thought, seeking to develop a phenomenology of kinship affection (親親現象學) and a "philosophy of family/home" (家哲學). Both approaches constitute concrete practices of phenomenological interpretation, and through their respective explorations, they demonstrate the universal validity and methodological robustness of Heidegger's phenomenology, showing its applicability across different cultural and conceptual contexts.

Keywords: Heidegger, China, philosophy of the future, philosophy of family/home

Heidegger's thought has exerted a broad and profound influence on academic circles in Mainland China for over four decades. Among the many scholars working in this field, two figures stand out as particularly representative: Sun Zhouxing (孫周興) and Zhang Xianglong (張祥龍). As members of the first generation of Heidegger scholars in China—

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those who began their work in the 1980s and 1990s—they have made enduring and influential contributions to Heidegger studies.²

This paper investigates the distinct yet convergent ways in which Sun Zhouxing and Zhang Xianglong engage with Heidegger's philosophy. It first outlines their respective research approaches, followed by a comparative analysis that brings to light the major points of intersection between them. Finally, the reception of Heidegger in China demonstrates the universality of phenomenology itself and its potential for cross-cultural engagement.

From Philosophy of Existence to Philosophy of the Future: Sun Zhouxing's Interpretation of Heidegger

Sun Zhouxing is known in the academic community for his translations of Heidegger's works. However, beyond his translation work, Sun has also developed a distinctive perspective in Heidegger studies. Drawing on his research on the early thought of the philosopher, he positions him as a representative figure of the philosophy of existence. This conceptual positioning is also shaped by his translation of Heidegger's two-volume *Nietzsche*. As is well known, in this work Heidegger outlines two principal trajectories in Western metaphysics: one centered on essence, the other on existence. Although he asserts that he has moved beyond both, his thought clearly aligns more closely with the latter. Of course, the philosophy of existence carries the risk of being narrowed down, potentially becoming an extreme form of subjectivism.³ Nevertheless, the anti-essentialist tendencies it embodies are undeniably of profound significance for twentieth-century philosophy.⁴

It is worth noting that Sun's engagement with Heidegger is motivated by a profound concern with contemporary problems, particularly the question of how to address the crisis of modernity. This crisis, in his view, consists of two interrelated elements: nihilism and the dominance of technology. In recent years, he has argued that human civilization has shifted into a technological age, necessitating the establishment of a philosophy of the future, or a philosophy of the Anthropocene. Around this theme, he has published works such as *The Prelude to Philosophy of the Future*, *The Philosophy*

² This article primarily focuses on the reception of Heidegger since the 1980s. For the situation prior to that period, see Xiping Jin and Qinghua Zhu, "Heidegger Study in China (till 2021)," in *The Heidegger Encyclopedia*, ed. by Heidegger Forum in Japan (Tokyo: Showado, 2021), 224-225.

³ See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche II*, GA 6.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997).

⁴ See Zhouxing Sun, "本質與實存——西方形而上學的實存哲學路線 [Essence and Existence—The Existential Route in Western Metaphysics]," in *Chinese Social Sciences*, 6 (2004), 72-81.

of the Anthropocene, and *The Reasons for an Active Life* (referred to as the “Trilogy of the Philosophy of the Future”). In these works, he engages in profound and detailed reflections on topics such as technological domination, the new world experience, and the future of humanity.

The Philosophy of the Anthropocene is composed of twelve lectures on “Technology and the Future,” exploring the current state of human civilization and its future possibilities.⁵ Sun argues that the philosophy of the future originates from the transformation of human spatiotemporal experience. Since the mid-19th century, the traditional linear experience of time, along with the associated awareness of scientific progress, has been dissolved. In its place, a non-linear experience of time and a non-abstract experience of space have emerged. He refers to these as “circular time” (圓性時間) and “concrete space” (實性空間). Of course, these new concepts also have their intellectual sources. For instance, the new experience of time stems from Nietzsche’s doctrine of the “eternal recurrence” and Heidegger’s early concept of “future” as well as his later thinking on “time-space” (*Zeit-Raum*).⁶

In his study, Sun situates Heidegger within the broader trajectory of Western philosophy, while simultaneously employing Heidegger’s perspective to reassess the development of Western intellectual history. Furthermore, it is evident that Sun’s interpretation captures the core issues that Heidegger’s philosophy seeks to address. Guided by these concerns, his reflections on the philosophy of the future gradually evolved, generating a novel conceptual framework. The problems he engages with are both universal and distinctly Chinese. In this way, he extends Heidegger’s post-philosophical, or post-metaphysical, thought into a philosophy of the future, thereby imbuing it with renewed and enduring vitality.

From the Chinese *Tian Dao* (天道) to the “Philosophy of Family/Home”: Zhang Xianglong’s Interpretation of Heidegger

In contrast to Sun Zhouxing’s Nietzsche-Heidegger approach, Zhang Xianglong is more focused on bridging the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger in order to unveil the fundamental spirit of phenomenology, and, from this, to construct his own understanding of philosophy. He believes that philosophy is always a contemplation and study of horizon (*Horizont*, 邊緣),⁷

⁵ See also the review of this book in Zhaonong Wang, “Technological Domination and the Twofold of Human Existence: A Review of Sun Zhouxing’s *Philosophy of the Anthropocene*,” in *Eksistenz*, 3 (2024), 139–149.

⁶ See Zhouxing Sun, *人類世的哲學 [The Philosophy of the Anthropocene]* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2020).

⁷ Zhang Xianglong’s attention to the concept of “邊緣” (horizon) is related to his translation and understanding of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, which he rendered as “緣在.” See Qingjie

characterized by non-objectivity and non-readiness, deriving from the fundamental spirit of both Husserl's and Heidegger's thought.

Another key aspect of Zhang's work is his comparative perspective between Chinese and Western thought. His study of Western philosophy was ultimately aimed at returning to the academic roots of China itself. This is clearly evident in his earliest major work, *Heidegger and Chinese Tian Dao*, where he does not treat *Tian Dao* as a conventional notion of ultimate reality, but, in the spirit of phenomenology, interprets it as event (*Ereignis*, 構成境域).⁸ Through his phenomenological interpretation, the vitality of Chinese thought is revived, with its generative, dynamic, constitutive, and situative features brought to the fore.

Due to the affinity between Heidegger and Daoist thought (and Heidegger's own engagement with Laozi's philosophy⁹), Zhang Xianglong initially focused on comparing Daoist philosophy with Heidegger. However, he soon redirected his focus toward Confucianism, with his main theme centering on the comparison between phenomenology and Confucianism, while employing phenomenological methods to illuminate Confucian thought. On one hand, he uncovered the Confucian emphasis on factual life experience, which leads toward *Tian Dao* and transcendence in everyday human relationships. On the other hand, he found specific carriers for Confucian theory, namely, the family and filial piety relations (孝親關係).

To this end, he proposed a "phenomenology of kinship affection" as a phenomenological Confucianism. It is noteworthy that this phenomenology of kinship affection has its unique temporality. We know that the relationship of filial piety is generational, occurring between parents (who show natural love) and children (who show filial love). The two occupy different positions in the flow of time, "but more importantly, they exist within the same temporal structure, mutually requiring and complementing each other, together forming human consciousness of kinship affection."¹⁰ Zhang calls

Wang, "On Chinese Receptions and Translations of Heidegger's Dasein," in *Contemporary Philosophy Review*, 53 (2020), 449–463.

⁸ See Xianglong Zhang, *海德格爾與中國天道：終極視域的開啟與交融* [*Heidegger and the Chinese Tian Dao: The Opening and Fusion of Ultimate Horizons*] (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2010), 276ff.

⁹ Scholarly attention to Heidegger's reception of Daoism has been extensive. The earliest discussion can be found in Otto Pöggeler's essay "West-östliches Gespräch. Heidegger und Lao Tse," in *Neue Wege mit Heidegger* (Freiburg and München: Alber, 1992), 387–425. More recent studies that focus on its intercultural significance include Fabian Heubel's *Gewundene Wege nach China: Heidegger – Daoismus – Adorno* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2020) and Thomas Michael's "Heidegger's Legacy for Comparative Philosophy and the Laozi," in *International Journal of China Studies*, 11:2 (2020), 299–318.

¹⁰ Xianglong Zhang, *家與孝：從現象學視野看* [*Family and Filial Piety: From a Phenomenological Perspective*] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2022), 43. During this period, the English translation of the book has been published, as follows: Xianglong Zhang, *Family and*

this temporality “wholly cyclical,”¹¹ which differs from the linear, conventional notion of time. This, he argues, is something that Western phenomenologists rarely recognize (except for Levinas, who touches on it to some extent), yet it constitutes the true foundation of time. Clearly, the phenomenology of kinship affection forms the foundation of the philosophy of family/home.¹²

It is important to note that, although Western philosophy is generally considered to have forgotten the philosophy of the family/home, it has not contributed nothing in this regard; Zhang Xianglong also sought to find philosophical resources for the philosophy of the family/home in Western philosophers, including Heidegger. While early Heidegger regarded “home” as a possibility of being-with and thus classified it as inauthentic, in his later work, he began to emphasize the concept of home, even using the hearth (*Herd*)—a symbol of the home—as a metaphor for Being itself.¹³ This undoubtedly opens up the possibility of dialogue between Chinese and Western thought. However, Zhang observes that Heidegger’s notion of “home” refers primarily to the *home of Being* rather than to one grounded in kinship or the parent–child relationship—precisely the point at which the significance and future potential of Confucianism can be demonstrated.¹⁴

In summary, within the framework of phenomenology, Zhang Xianglong engaged deeply with traditional Chinese thought, particularly Confucian philosophy, and developed an approach that foregrounds the lived experience of Confucianism. Moreover, he drew upon its distinctive understandings of life and temporality to critically reflect on the limitations of Western philosophy, thereby fostering a dialogue between Chinese and Western thought and creating a foundation for meaningful intellectual exchange.

Between Modernity and Tradition

In general, Sun’s focus has been on the issues of modernity, while Zhang has approached the subject from the perspective of Chinese traditional thought. This creates a dual paradigm in Chinese Heidegger studies, guided by the key terms “contemporaneity” and “China.” Superficially,

Filiality: An Intercultural Perspective, trans. by Kevin J. Turner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2025).

¹¹ Zhang, *Family and Filial Piety*, 2.

¹² More extensive discussions on the philosophy of the family/home can be found in Xiangchen Sun, *論家：個體與親親* [*On the Family: Individual and Kinship Affection*] (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2019).

¹³ See Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne “Der Ister,”* GA 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993).

¹⁴ See Zhang, *Family and Filial Piety*, 325–326.

contemporaneity corresponds to “temporality,” while China aligns with “spatiality,” each drawing from Heidegger’s thought to enhance its own perspective. However, these two approaches are not completely distinct or unrelated. It must be recognized that Zhang Xianglong’s focus on Chinese traditional thought is not an attempt to return to the past, but rather to activate the contemporary significance of traditional thought in order to address the challenges of the present day. He saw the various dilemmas facing us in the globalized modern world and thus sought to find original life experiences and solutions from traditional Chinese philosophies, especially Confucianism. If phenomenology is the result of Western culture’s self-reflection, then the “philosophy of family/home” based on the phenomenology of kinship affection is the solution Zhang Xianglong discovered through his exploration between East and West. In his view, Confucianism must be activated through phenomenological methods, so that it can continue to play a role in the contemporary world.¹⁵

On the other hand, although Sun Zhouxing’s focus is on contemporaneity, he also places significant emphasis on its integration with the Chinese context. As previously noted, in the view of Sun, the reflection on the dilemmas of modernity is particularly urgent in contemporary China. Heidegger’s broad reflections in this regard clearly resonate in China, which lies outside the European cultural sphere. This is particularly so because Heidegger is not merely a European thinker; his philosophy carries a universal relevance, encompassing perspectives that transcend Western or Eurocentric frameworks. Sun argues that Heidegger’s thought aligns closely with Chinese traditional philosophy: both express resistance to the mainstream philosophical traditions of the West, which emphasize logic, argumentation, and formalization as dominant modes of thought.¹⁶

From the analysis above, it is evident that the two representative approaches to Heidegger research in China over the past four decades are not clearly distinct; rather, they are complementary. They arise from different starting points but are unified by a common concern. Below, I will attempt to

¹⁵ See Xianglong Zhang, *思想避難：全球化中的中國古代哲理* [*Philosophical Refuge: Ancient Chinese Philosophy in Globalization*] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007), 6–10. In addition, Zhang Xianglong also sought to put Confucianism into practice. For example, he advocated the establishment of a “Confucianism protection zone.” See Monika Gänßbauer, “‘A Special Zone for Confucianism’? Theses of the Academician Zhang Xianglong on Traditional Chinese Culture,” in *Asian Studies*, 2:1 (2014), 115–126. Zhang likewise underscores the significance of Confucian thought for understanding and responding to the technological age. See Xianglong Zhang, “Technology, Dao-Technē and Home: The Significances and Limits of Heidegger’s Critique of Modern Technology’s Essence,” in *Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy*, 2 (2017), 372–392.

¹⁶ See Zhouxing Sun, *存在與超越：海德格爾與漢語哲學* [*Being and Transcendence: Heidegger and Philosophy in Chinese*] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2019), 152.

further reveal three key commonalities in the research approaches of Zhang and Sun.

Firstly, there is a common emphasis on factual life experience. Interestingly, Sun, in his comprehensive portrayal of Heidegger, contends that the early and late approaches are not contradictory but run in parallel, both oriented toward the same philosophical task: the possibility of a non-theoretical philosophy. Therefore, in engaging with Heidegger's philosophy of existence, Sun not only offers critique but also seeks to extend and develop it. In his conception of a new world experience, he asserts that the philosophy of existence is a precondition for the philosophy of the future, as its inherent individualization, worldliness, and creativity provide the necessary conditions for establishing a future-oriented philosophy.¹⁷

In contrast to Sun's emphasis on the individual, Zhang Xianglong seeks to find an alternative space for meaning in modern life through the "family," the most fundamental community. According to Zhang, modern society contains three entities: the individual, the family, and the collective. Within this three-part structure, the "family" occupies a more primordial position, situated between the other two.¹⁸ Through this structure, Sun's individualism is indirectly critiqued. For Zhang, when he posits the phenomenon of filial piety as the foundational life experience and even the basis for phenomenology, he demonstrates that without concrete everyday life, we cannot comprehend *Tian Dao*. It is precisely this conviction that supports his turn toward a phenomenological study of Confucianism, thus opening a new path for revitalizing Confucianism in contemporary China. It is important to note that both the familial experience of filial piety and the individual's creative experience signify a resistance against the technologized social reality, while at the same time opposing the dominant tradition of metaphysics.

Secondly, there is a shared exploration of new temporal experience. Both Sun and Zhang have pointed out that the reconstruction of life experience must be grounded in temporal experience. Unlike Zhang, who particularly emphasizes the significance of temporality, Sun not only discusses circular time but also addresses concrete space. Furthermore, while it remains somewhat ambiguous in Zhang's work whether it is life experience or temporal experience that constitutes the foundation, Sun considers temporal experience as a component of the entirety of life experience. However, what they share in common is the recognition of the cyclical nature of temporal experience, which involves a reflection on and critique of the linear concept of time (the progressive view of time).

¹⁷ See Sun, *Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 252.

¹⁸ See Zhang, *Family and Filial Piety*, 48.

Finally, there is a shared emphasis on method. Although Heideggerian phenomenology may appear to be a critique of methodology, its primary target is the scientific method, or the approach that treats the scientific method as the only valid one. Therefore, the search for an alternative method constitutes the core demand of phenomenology. For Zhang, method is similarly at the core. His research and extension of early Heidegger's concept of formal indication, along with his emphasis on its contextuality and non-readiness, all reflect this focus. A key feature of his approach is the incorporation of "time" (or timing) into the method, thus forming a primordial, vivid experience. Zhang Xianglong's insistence on a cross-cultural intellectual path between China and the West is significantly grounded in the unity of method; that is, the phenomenological method and Confucian thinking methods can mutually support each other.¹⁹ This implies that method serves a foundational role in his overall philosophy.

In his research on Heidegger, Sun Zhouxing summarizes the issue of method as the search for a form of thought and expression that is non-inferential and non-argumentative. He contends that Heidegger's work is characterized by three primary approaches: existential reflection, poetic thinking, and divine thinking.²⁰ The hidden foundation of these methods lies in Heidegger's dualistic thought. Sun's focus on duality stems from his doctoral dissertation, and this methodological concept is also reflected in his philosophy of the future, where duality is considered a form of "non-identical thinking" or a "differentiated thought strategy," which is precisely the indispensable method for our time.²¹

Conclusion

As we have seen from the previous discussion, while differences can be discerned in the specific ways they address issues of life, temporality, and methodological approach, it remains undeniable that both thinkers converge in their fundamental emphasis on these themes and demonstrate parallel orientations in their philosophical outlooks.

When Sun Zhouxing proposed the philosophy of the future and Zhang Xianglong the philosophy of family/home—approaching these

¹⁹ See Xianglong Zhang, "現象學如何進行儒學研究？論雙方方法論的親和性 [How Does Phenomenology Conduct Confucian Research? On the Methodological Affinity Between the Two]," in *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, 6 (2020), 68–74.

²⁰ See Zhouxing Sun, "非推論的思想還能叫哲學嗎？海德格爾與後哲學的思想前景 [Can Non-Inferential Thought Be Called Philosophy? Heidegger and the Intellectual Prospects of Post-Philosophy]," in *Social Sciences Frontline*, 9 (2010).

²¹ See Zhouxing Sun, *積極生活的理由 [The Reasons for an Active Life]* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Press, 2024), 141.

respectively through the lenses of “contemporaneity” and “China”—their ideas resonated with Heidegger and together constituted a phenomenological interpretation of his thought. At the same time, the success of such practice serves as a concrete demonstration of the universal validity of Heidegger’s phenomenological methodology—showing that when phenomenology is employed not merely as a philosophical inquiry but as a method of interpretation, it proves both applicable and illuminating across different cultural and temporal contexts.

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