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Introduction to Philosophy of Home: a New Direction in the Dialogue between Chinese and Western Philosophy

Ren Jiantao 任劍濤

Professor, School of Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

renj9622001@aliyun.com

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Dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy is facilitated by the acknowledgement of their differences. Such acknowledgement not only serves as the starting point of dialogues, but is itself the very justification for their continued existence. Had the two distinct schools of thought shared a high degree of similarity, dialogues between their respective scholars would become redundant and tautological. Dialogues between two schools of thought premised upon a foundation of homogeneity would be devoid of intellectual enhancement. Fortunately, exchanges between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions have not fallen to such intellectually embarrassing depths. The reason for this positive development lies in the natural, profound differences between the two schools of thought: in their historical dimensionality, content, epistemology, and even social applicability. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) acutely recognized these differences even in an era characterized by a lack of mutual understanding between China and the West. Despite this foresight, however, Hegel's assertion that Chinese philosophy amounted only to a "prehistory of philosophy" abortively preempted any constructive dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy, placing the two in an awkward predicament in their nascent relationship—for if Chinese civilization could not advance past the "prehistory of philosophy," what need would there be for any dialogue built on the basis of equality and mutual appreciation? Hegel's line of thought ultimately resulted in a conflict over the *prima facie* legitimacy of Chinese philosophy for any such dialogue.

Starting from the late Qing dynasty (1616–1911), the increasingly salient clash between Chinese and Western cultures has gradually widened the chasm, preventing dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions: more roadblocks were constructed in the search for a beneficial dialogue. First, could “Chinese philosophy” be considered philosophy at all? Second, if so, exactly what kind of philosophy is it? No satisfactory solution exists for the former, for the semantic origins of *zhexue* 哲學 (philosophy) lie in a term borrowed from Japan. The discipline known to the western scholar as philosophy indeed did not exist in ancient China. As the dominant school of thought for most of China’s imperial history, Confucianism similarly lacked systematic, expository interpretations and sustained interest in such concepts of love and wisdom. Since ancient China did not clearly define the discipline of philosophy, the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy after the introduction of Western philosophy to China naturally became a dialogue between philosophy in the West and a similar concept of philosophy that happened to be in China. Consequently, any such dialogue would be in no way related to the real ancient China. Not only does this view categorically reject ancient Chinese philosophy as an epistemological concept, it also severs the historical continuity of Chinese philosophy between antiquity and the present. The next logical step in this extrapolatory line of reasoning would be the characterization of ancient Chinese schools of thought as inferior to their western counterparts—which would then be cited as the reason for China’s stagnation vis-a-vis the West. Ancient Chinese philosophy was in dire need of vindication.

If it is certain that ancient China did indeed possess “philosophy” *per se*, how would it be characterized? It has long been customary to employ Western categories such as ontology, epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of history to contextualize the corresponding concepts in ancient China. This was the common approach to constructing an intellectual framework for ancient Chinese thought, inspiring histories of Chinese philosophy authored by such scholars as Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962). However, this approach failed to address the crisis of legitimacy faced by Chinese philosophy. On the contrary, it heralded an even deeper crisis. To avert this epistemological crisis, the act of finding grounds that qualify Chinese philosophy as “philosophy” has gained prominence in the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy.

It must be admitted that scholarly endeavors to identify core premises of and fundamental differences between Chinese and Western philosophies have not always been successful. For this reason, one inevitably has to contend with the legacy of Western philosophical traditions in the study of ancient Chinese philosophy. Daoist philosophy can be seen as the intellectual counterpart to

the ontological traditions of Western philosophy; the Chinese theory of harmony can be seen as the intellectual counterpart to Western epistemology. In order to contrast Western philosophy's emphasis on historical progress, ancient Chinese philosophy eloquently introduces the Doctrine of the Mean (*zhongyong* 中庸). These lines of thought exemplify the perspectives of Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), who are among the prominent representatives of Neo-Confucianism. Nevertheless, these endeavors have not yet succeeded in freeing Chinese philosophy from being articulated exclusively through the vocabulary of Western philosophy.

In recent times, bolstered by the efforts of scholars possessing a competent grasp of both Chinese and Western philosophical traditions, the analytical framework of the philosophy of home has gained prominence in the discourse between these divergent systems, serving to highlight their foundational distinctions. American-based Chinese scholar of philosophy Yang Xiaosi 楊效斯 strongly advocates using the presence or absence of the philosophy of home as a means of distinguishing between Chinese and Western philosophy in *Jia zhexue: Xifang ren de mangdian* 家哲學：西方人的盲點.¹ Yang Xiaosi asserts that the dichotomy between the individual and the family is inherent in Western philosophy, qualifying Western philosophy as an individualistic philosophical system with a “blindspot” regarding familial matters. Conversely, Confucian philosophy places the family at the center, embracing such concepts as blood relations and familial affection as fundamental in shaping human behavior. This exemplifies the glaring distinction between the two traditions. Inspired by Yang Xiaosi's perspective, in *Jia yu xiao: cong Zhong-Xi jian shiye kan* 家與孝：從中西間視野看,² Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍 (1949–2022) employed phenomenology and the concept of “inner time” to further examine the Confucian philosophy of home. By thoroughly examining the relationship between filial piety and the temporal-social aspects of the concept of family, Zhang Xianglong articulated the cultural distinction between Confucianism's emphasis on *renlun* 人倫, commonly translated as ethics, compared to its Western counterpart's tendency toward a breakdown in ethical interpersonal relations. In doing so, Zhang Xianglong highlighted the unique value of the philosophy of home in distinguishing between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions. Following in Zhang Xianglong's footsteps, Sun Xiangchen 孫向晨

1 Yang Xiaosi 楊效斯, *Jia zhexue: Xifang ren de mangdian* 家哲學：西方人的盲點 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010).

2 Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, *Jia yu xiao: cong Zhong-Xi jian shiye kan* 家與孝：從中西間視野看 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhì Sanlian shudian, 2017).

published *Lun jia: geti yu qinqin* 論家：個體與親親,³ a comparative study of the concept of family in Chinese and Western philosophies. Sun Xiangchen innovatively advocates the replacement of the kinship-hierarchy dichotomy with that of the individual and kinship, so as to bring about a reconciliation between modern concepts inherent within Chinese and Western philosophies. At the same time, he utilizes Western philosophy as a reference to interpret the Confucian philosophy of home, deriving from the latter a remedy for the deficiencies inherent within Western philosophy. By bridging the gap between the two schools of thought in this fashion, Sun Xiangchen presents a version of the philosophy of home that is urgently needed in the modern world.

So far, it is clear that among scholars who study the philosophy of home, a mutually supportive and epistemologically systematic exposition of the idea has emerged. However, in contrast to a process of mutual reinforcement, the prominence of the philosophy of home has only been gradually increasing within the broader, scholarly community of Chinese philosophy. Within the latter, discourse has so far been limited to the Chinese-speaking community of scholars. The international scholarly community's response to the philosophy of home will play an instrumental role in whether it will be accepted as a standard for comparative studies of Chinese and Western philosophies.

This issue of the *Journal of Chinese Humanities* focuses precisely on the intellectual value of the philosophy of home, with the hope of inspiring international scholars to express their views on the topic. The five essays herein that illustrate and contextualize the Chinese scholarly community's discourse on the philosophy of home have been selected for this purpose. Sun Xiangchen's article may aptly be characterized as a "headliner," reflecting the authoritative and representative nature of his intellectual argumentation regarding the philosophy of the home and the debates that his arguments have elicited from the academic community as a whole. In contrast to Yang Xiaosi—whose residence overseas has limited his engagement with scholars in mainland China—and the late Zhang Xianglong, Sun Xiangchen has emerged as the undisputed leading proponent of the philosophy of home. His highly structured and systematic exposition of the philosophy of home has inspired a gradual intensification of interest in the school of thought from the wider scholarly community in China. As such, he has adopted a proactive and assertive stance in advocating the philosophy of home. Sun Xiangchen correctly points out that "'Home' is a word charged with complex emotions." In order to conduct a philosophical inquiry into the concept, one must eschew "day-to-day" knowledge, historical

3 Sun Xiangchen 孫向晨, *Lun jia: geti yu qinqin* 論家：個體與親親 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2019).

background, and social science studies of the concept of “home” in favor of its philosophical implications. In doing so, the fundamental characteristics of home as a metaphysical construct of human existence can be revealed. Modernity has been constructed on the concept of “leaving the home,” along with its logical extrapolations and inferences. Originating from Protestantism, the primacy of the individual was further refined by modern philosophy as a concept; yet, the same idea ultimately gave rise to modern nihilism. Concerning the concept of “salvation,” the Sinosphere has brought about its own interpretation—one rooted in the idea of “homecoming.” Modern Western philosophy reveals a similar path to salvation, rooted in the concept of “home.” Ultimately, drawing upon the “ontology of the home,” Sun Xiangchen articulates the inherent tenderness of various aspects of human life.

However, Sun Xiangchen’s theory on the philosophy of home is confronted with doubts regarding its premise, as well as the questioning of the validity of the solutions that it proposes. According to Li Yong 李勇, the philosophy of home seeks to “detoxify” modern individualism as a response to contemporary nihilism. This theory of detoxification is founded upon the premise that the modern world built upon the “individual-subject” dichotomy naturally gives rise to nihilistic tendencies. As such, humanity can only return to a world abundant in warmth through “homecoming,” experiencing “kinship,” and sustaining the cycle of “life.” However, such a targeted approach inherent in this interpretation of the philosophy of home is lacking in reality—the supposed inherent nihilistic tendencies of the so-called “modern world” present a “pseudo-problem.” Naturally, a line of reasoning based on a pseudo-problem does not hold weight. Such concepts as “kinship,” “life,” and “homecoming” are not themselves constructive solutions to the real problems faced by modern life. “Homecoming” is essentially an endeavor to resolve the inherent utilitarian, social, ethical, political, and religious problems and challenges that confront the modern individual by constructing a community sustained by kinship and familial affection. Such an endeavor, however, transcends the legitimate purview of the philosophy of home; consequently, it is nothing more than an illusory construct and destined to fail.

In attempting to ontologize the “home,” the philosophy of home fails in adhering to the historical evolution of the concept of home itself; therefore, its arguments evidently possess no sufficient empirical basis. In his article, Huang Yushun 黃玉順 points out that using traditional Chinese concepts of home to distinguish Chinese culture from its Western counterpart (or even to elevate Chinese culture above that of the West) is an obvious exaggeration of the East-West distinction in the concept of home itself. Furthermore, it obfuscates the historical transformations of home and family in both philosophical

traditions. Empirically, the foundational paradigms of Chinese and Western families alike demonstrate a high degree of homogeneity. Each exhibits a trajectory that originates within the nuclear family unit and subsequently expands into the broader reaches of the extended family, and ultimately to the wider clan. However, human history has shown that the evolution of the family adheres to an opposite trajectory. In the Chinese context, this “reverse evolution” manifests itself in the following sequence: feudal-era clan-based family units disintegrated, triggering the first major social transformation that resulted in individual lineages becoming the base unit; subsequently, the disintegration of these individual lineages triggered the second major social transformation, bringing about the nuclear family as the fundamental building block of social relationships. The modern “family” has all but lost its political and productive capabilities of yore, exposing its vulnerability to a third major social transformation that would atomize the nuclear family in favor of the individual. A return to historical family structures should not be a means to address the problems stemming from the disintegration of the traditional concept of home—a specific manifestation of the concept of family is the product of specific social conditions. Returning to a traditional Chinese family structure is neither realistic nor desirable. Even within the context of Confucian theories of justice in institutional ethics, this historical regression lacks support.

For the philosophy of home to aid in resolving modern dilemmas, the understanding of the relationship between the home and modern political structures is crucial. Tan Ankui 譚安奎 explains that Western political theory has consistently shaped the idea of family through political concepts, rather than deriving political concepts from the idea of family. Furthermore, the instrumentalist conception of the state, a hallmark of modern individualistic political theory, results in the total erasure of “family” from the political landscape. This reductive line of reasoning is counteracted by the problem of continuous reproduction in a political society. Despite introducing an ontological aspect to this question, the characteristically intergenerational nature of familial development simultaneously gives rise to tensions on an ethical level. For the modern nation-state, the family must shift its focus from vertical, intergenerational relationships to horizontal relationships between spouses in order to fulfill its educational purpose. As a human construct, the home is representative of an ethical framework for internalizing the state as a constitutive political community; yet, a “horizontalized” view of the family necessarily implies the rootlessness of modern politics from an ontological standpoint. As such, the relationship between the family and the state becomes functionally, ontologically, and ethically entangled. Against the backdrop of individualization, a constitutive political community that propagates across generations

requires an ontological basis. Philosophy of home is incapable of providing such an ontological basis. This illustrates the difficulty in bridging the distance between the family and the state in modern society, and augurs a grim future for the philosophy of home in the modern era.

Can the philosophy of home truly discover kindred concepts within Western philosophy or even receive direct support from its modern iteration as a comparative framework that seeks to bridge the gap between Chinese and Western philosophy? Chen Jianhong 陳建洪 expresses major doubts. On the one hand, Chen admits to the prominence of the philosophy of home in Chinese scholarly circles, meticulously analyzing Zhang Xianglong's logic to emphasize his desire for a return to Confucian philosophy of home. On the other hand, through the lens of "human strangeness" presented by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Otto Rank (1884–1939), Chen maintains that philosophy and faith are indeed "homeless" concepts in their origin. As such, the Confucian interpretation of the philosophy of home can be said to possess the wrong comparison framework. Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein* is fundamentally distinct from—and even contradictory to—the Confucian interpretation of the philosophy of home. Therefore, it cannot logically support the line of reasoning advanced by the philosophy of home. Holistically speaking, the contemporary resurgence of Confucian philosophy of home is a result of its strengths in theoretical and ethical inquiry, as well as its emphasis on emotional warmth, but ultimately falls short in social and economic utility. This combination of strengths and weaknesses accentuates the theory's failure in the realms of differing familial structures, their institutionally repressive nature, and their propensity toward intergenerational conflict. In simpler terms, while the "family" may serve as an emotional refuge, it can degenerate into a source of repression on an institutional level.

Translated by Kevin Wang