

On the Contemporary Construction of the Chinese System of Academic Discourse

Wu Xiaoming

Department of Philosophy, Fudan University

近年来,“中国学术话语体系的当代建构”已作为一项重要的学术议题而受到愈来愈广泛的关注。其中有待进一步思索和追究的问题是:这一议题的实际生成和展开究竟意味着什么?应当在怎样的视域中揭示其本质并引申出进一步的结论?该议题在其本质定向中将提出何种思想任务?对这些问题的深层揭示,亦即中国学术话语体系之当代建构的核心之点,在于当今的学术话语如何能够深入于我们的历史性实践所开启的特定内容之中,从而使这样的内容能够被真正的思想所把握,并能够以学术的方式被课题化。

关键词: 话语体系 中国学术 当代建构 学术话语 当今中国 社会科学研究 黑格尔 形而上学

As an important academic issue, the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Questions needing further reflection and exploration are: What does the genesis and expansion of this topic actually mean? Within what horizon can we reveal its fundamental nature and draw further conclusions? What intellectual task will be presented to us in the course of fixing its direction? An in-depth probe into these questions, that is, the core issue in the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse, is how contemporary academic discourse can enter deep into the specific content ushered in by our historical practice, so that this content can be truly grasped intellectually and studied academically.

Keywords: discourse system, Chinese academia, contemporary construction, academic discourse, contemporary China, social science research, Hegel, metaphysics

As an important academic issue, the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse has attracted increasing attention in recent years. The topic has had multiple manifestations in almost every field of the humanities and social sciences, and has

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in fact led to a series of quite intense academic debates. Although the debates have mainly focused on a number of specific specialist disciplinary areas, the issue itself is gradually revealing something more fundamental. Therefore, questions needing further reflection and exploration are: What does the genesis and expansion of this topic actually mean? Within what horizon can we reveal its fundamental nature and draw further conclusions? What intellectual task will be presented to us in the course of fixing its direction? It is on the basis of these questions that we seek to have a deeper philosophical discussion on the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse.

I

Discussion and debate about the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse will have a distinctive and significant influence on the history of academic development in contemporary China. Notwithstanding divergent views, the process of exploring the issue itself implies the rise of a positive self-consciousness, that is, a consciousness of our own system of academic discourse that involves self-examination. This consciousness has in fact a dual orientation: on the one hand, it is critical, requiring a critical review of the academic discourse of the humanities and social sciences in contemporary China; on the other, it is constructive, as it is required to lead the reconstruction of the contemporary Chinese academic discourse system. More importantly, what these two characteristics show is that today's Chinese research in the humanities and social sciences is trying to throw off its "apprenticeship" to foreign learning and put forward its own demand for "autonomy." What we call the demand for autonomy implies, in Collingwood's words, a critical departure from authorities other than oneself to become "self-authorizing."¹

Therefore, what we are discussing here is definitely not confined to issues of philology or terminology in the narrow sense, although these issues also exist and can likewise be discussed within the horizon of what we call the academic discourse system. Academic discourse in the true sense has never been (and cannot be) merely an issue of surface or pure form; it has "substantive" content and most often coincides with and is intimately connected with discarding some sort of apprenticeship and with a demand for a given form of autonomy. We frequently see such phenomena in early modern intellectual history. For example, we can say that the medieval system of philosophical discourse (philosophical theology or scholasticism) was directed to externality and authority, whereas that of modern philosophy since Descartes has been intrinsically "*cogito*" oriented, that is, inner-directed and based on self-consciousness ("self-thinking thought"). This change in the philosophical discourse system means a fundamental change in philosophical thought, as it threw off its dependence on philosophical theology and regained its full autonomy as rational thought. So Hegel not only regarded Descartes as the initiator of modern philosophy, "a bold spirit who re-

1 See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 268-269.

commenced the whole subject from the very beginning and constituted afresh the groundwork on which Philosophy is based”; but also said that “It is not until Descartes is arrived at that we really enter upon a philosophy which is, properly speaking, independent, which knows that it comes forth from reason as independent, and that self-consciousness is an essential moment in the truth.”² In the same sense, Heidegger takes “*cogito*” as the “fundamental framework” of modern metaphysics. This means that as self-consciousness, “*ego cogito*” constitutes the true essence and core of the new system of philosophical discourse, and is thus the pivot of all early modern Western philosophical discourse.

A similar situation can be seen at a different level. In the 17th century, metaphysical discourse took the form of mathematics/geometry. In other words, it established its own discourse system by imitating mathematics and geometry and thus proved itself. This is what Descartes and Spinoza did, as did Leibnitz and Christian Wolff. “The mathematical form, however, could not, after the days of Kant, reappear in philosophy; he has mercilessly passed sentence of death upon it in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.”³ The issue of philosophical discourse here plainly does not involve mere surface form, because in destroying the entire edifice of dogmatic metaphysics Kant released discourse from its shackles, so that philosophical method and its discourse system were freed from their imitation of mathematics/geometry and obtained their autonomy.⁴ And similarly, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a great theoretical movement in the philosophy/theory of history, connected with Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel and Benedetto Croce. This demanded a fundamental change in the entire discourse system of the “science of history” (also “science of culture” [*Kulturwissenschaft*] or “science of spirit” [*Geisteswissenschaft*], the essence of which was that the science of history should free itself from apprenticeship to natural science and become an autonomous and self-authorized academic system. “Historical thought is free from the domination of natural science, and is an autonomous science”; Collingwood even called this change the “Copernican revolution in the theory of history.”⁵

Some might ask: In what sense is the topic of “the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse” analogous to the above-mentioned major changes in the discourse system? If what we are discussing here relates only to superficial rhetoric in philology or trivial deliberations over terminology, then we need not let this little matter get out of proportion or make inappropriate comparisons. But today, China’s humanities and social sciences are encountering real difficulties with academic discourse in the course of their rapid expansion, difficulties that are not individual or occasional, but rather integral and essential. This means that the issue of academic discourse so formed has genuine “substantive” content; and therefore, unless such content *per se* has been thoroughly examined, our so-

2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, pp. 59, 59-60 and 63-66.

3 Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, p. 105.

4 See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, pp. 498-512.

5 See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 360-361 and 268-269.

called system of academic discourse will remain superficial and trivial.

So the key point is to clarify the following question: From what substantive content does our topic originate? The most expeditious way is to investigate the real-life basis of discourse issues encountered in actual problems. Let's draw the analogy of the relationship between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine. We are now fully aware that dialogue between the two is extremely difficult, because—to take just one thing—in the two systems, the organs (heart, liver, spleen, stomach, kidney, etc.) are spoken of and understood in completely different discourse systems, and hence are defined differently. Likewise, some scholars' definition of the concept of “天” (*tiān*, literally “heaven”) in traditional Chinese philosophy as “a transcendental and metaphysical entity” is highly suspect, because such a definition would only be possible if traditional Chinese philosophy were also rationally divided in accordance with category theory and thus followed the discourse system of the binary opposition of transcendence and immanence, metaphysics and physics, substance and attribute, etc. The discourse systems here are completely different, which can of course be simply attributed to fundamental differences in our intellectual systems. However, we can pursue this further: How is it that we encounter, in such a striking way, such great differences in discourse systems? What kind of orientation can we adopt to understand and thus expand their domain of meaning?

The following example may take us further. As is well known, a fundamental premise of the nature of the modern Western world is the so-called “atomistic individual,” which takes abstract “personality” as its benchmark and is in cultural terms the product of over a thousand years of Christian acculturation, in the same way as this abstract personality finally took on a modern form manifested in the actual disintegration of ethical/patriarchal society. If we unthinkingly talk about the “individual” in contemporary Chinese research on the humanities and social sciences, and use this as the natural premise for our research rather than subjecting it to a real critical analysis, then the “individual”—with all the baggage of modern Western “self-consciousness” and differing in no way from the Kantian “subject of rights” and “moral subject”—becomes our starting point as a matter of course. It is not hard to see that such a starting point is universally abused—overtly or covertly, but most often unconsciously—in our academic discourse. However, can we expect such an “individual” to miraculously alight in China just on the strength of our casual usage of the term? Can we expect to build the great edifice of humanities/social sciences research on the fragile basis of a completely un-clarified premise? Therefore, if we do not limit our discussions to traditional thought but extend them to the vast expanse of modern subjects, the issue of academic discourse will become more complex. This is because it is in these areas that any name, definition, concept, proposition, etc., will involve wholly different discourse systems, so that any problem will involve numerous complex and intricate relationships between different systems of thought. A classic symptom demonstrating this point is that any thing, matter or event that is of real importance to us will almost inevitably spark off a debate about “tradition vs modernity” and “Western vs Chinese.” This is a continuing challenge for our humanities and social sciences, one that will be with us

for a long time. In fact, it is this longstanding challenge that leads us at the present moment to the task of the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse.

Here the problems of academic discourse we are facing show their essential relationship to substantive content. Fundamentally, they are not completely abstract forms of discourse, or problems confined to “pure scholarship,” because they cannot always nestle “in the bosom of the ‘impersonal reason of humanity.’” The problems discussed here have undoubted socio-historical content: they are rooted in a century and more of Chinese historical practice, in China’s unique road of modernization, and in the task of planning for the future rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is because of its links with this substantive content that our discussion can discard a variety of empty and superficial arguments and demonstrate its profound and far-reaching epochal significance.

II

Required to try to understand its social-historical content, academic discourse can no longer be confined to itself alone but must be placed in a broader field with greater depth so that it can be understood and explored—this field is “language (*Sprache*),” which Hegel called “self-consciousness existing for others”: “Ego (*Ich*)” exists only in language (the particular existence of the self itself), and the self-consciousness of “self-existence” in language at the same time is the “existence for others.”⁶ This means that Hegel, with his speculative idealism, was pointing out that language was a field with socio-historical content, and precisely because of this, it had become the “reality of culture.” In this regard, Marx critically inherited and decisively corrected Hegel. In “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” Marx, in his critique of subjective philosophy, consciously led the essence of thought, ideas, consciousness etc., back to language, which he understood as “sensuous nature” in a specially important way: “The element of thought itself, the element of the vital expression of thought—language—is sensuous nature.”⁷ Here, “sensuous nature” does not refer to what traditional metaphysics may be able to promise, but rather to “the social reality of nature,” that is, to “sensuous consciousness” or “practical consciousness.”⁸ So we read in “The German Ideology” the following lines: “From the start the ‘spirit’ is afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well.”⁹ This assertion means that “pure consciousness” is deeply rooted in “sensuous consciousness,” and “*cogito*”—pure thought—is deeply rooted in the phenomenon of language; and such “rootedness” also means that the existential feature of consciousness

6 See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 161, 55-56.

7 Karl Marx, “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” p. 308.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, “The German Ideology,” p. 81.

receives an existential investigation in a way that transcends modern metaphysics: language, as sensuous consciousness, is by no means something subordinate to or an overflow from the immanence of consciousness, nor is it an external form or instrument of “*cogito*”; on the contrary, it is the phenomenon of language that re-reveals the foundation on which thought, consciousness and ideas rest, and establishes “a new epoch of existential order.”¹⁰

What basic conclusions emerge when the issue of academic discourse is examined in this field of vision?

Firstly, an academic discourse system is entirely built on the basis of “the language of real life.” Only at this specific stage of language development can we talk about the derivative academic discourse system later set up. The genesis, prosperity, sustainability and decline of any academic discourse system is the result, close at hand or rather distant, of the process of people’s real life and the corresponding linguistic phenomena. Although, in the course of its development, academic discourse gradually gains the appearance of a certain degree of independence, it is fundamentally still completely subordinate to the language of real life. Therefore, the view that an academic discourse system is self-sufficient and independent and can be created and preserved in an ivory tower is actually a utopian fantasy. Wittgenstein says that “what makes logic *a priori* is the impossibility of illogical thought.” In fact, we can say likewise that what constitutes the basis of academic discourse is very “un-academic.” As everyone knows, early modern linguistics and philosophy of language saw a long-standing attempt to design an “artificial language” and create an “ideal language” (to create a universally applicable code). This dream of a perfect language has proved to be a complete failure; in the eyes of French linguist Claude Hagège, it is simply the Tower of Babel myth from Western ideology, a myth that accords with the hypothesis that language is created by God. In essence it is nothing but an attempt to get out of the constrictions of “the social nature of language,” that is, to “remove the social norms imposed on man by the language system.”¹¹

10 Here we can refer to Heidegger’s existential critique of consciousness, which “transformed the nature of the task of metaphysics” and led to the conclusion that “All thinking is confined to language, as a limit as well as a possibility.” On this basis, language is but “a mode of interpreting the world that precedes all reflective attitudes.” According to Gadamer, the idea of “things themselves” indicated and revealed by “the language of things” is the systematic starting point of Heidegger’s later works. (See Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 72.)

11 Claude Hagège, *L’Homme de Paroles: Contribution Linguistique aux Sciences Humaines*, pp. 246-248. On this issue, see also Gadamer’s statement: “The merit of semantic analysis, it seems to me, is that it has brought the structural totality of language to our attention and thereby has pointed out the limitation of the false ideal of unambiguous signs or symbols and of the potential of language for logical formalization.” (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 83.) In addition, Heidegger wrote when talking about the nature of language: “Of late, the scientific and philosophical investigation of languages is aiming ever more resolutely at the production of what is called ‘metalanguage.’ Analytical philosophy, which is set on producing this super-language, is thus quite consistent when it considers itself metalinguistics. That sounds like metaphysics—not only sounds like it, it is metaphysics. Metalinguistics is the metaphysics of the thoroughgoing technicalization of all languages into the sole operative instrument of interplanetary information.” (Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 128.)

If we hoped to design and establish our academic discourse system in this way, we might get one that was crystal clear and elegant—one without the slightest worldly taint and adhering closely to “pure logic” and “pure scholarship.” However, as long as this process of system construction attempts to renounce the language of real life, that is, as long as it attempts to deprive it of its true substantive content and the most essential part of that content, its social-historical dimension, this discourse system will in the end be nothing more than a mirage, destined to be a swan song—because the seemingly pure “objectivity” it can attain, in Johann Gustav Droysen’s words, is nothing but “eunuch-like objectivity.” In his “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” Gadamer raises in particular the tension between “terminology” and “living language.” He points out that the specific technical expressions of terminology are constrained by that the “world-orientation resting upon our linguistic relationship to the world”; that is, it is only when such expressions correspond with “living language” and partake of its life that they can be positive and accurate. “Nevertheless such precisely defined, unambiguous terms live and communicate only in as far as they are embedded in the life of the language.”¹²

Therefore, secondly, only on the basis of our own national language (“the Chinese language” or *Zhongguo hua*) is it possible for the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse to be actually carried out and actively established. In a word, Chinese academic discourse must use “Chinese.” At first glance this is a constraint. Given the shattering of the metaphysical illusion of a “single language,” however, it is precisely this constraint that provides us with the realistic possibility of constructing our academic discourse system. William von Humboldt, with his magnificent gifts, testified to the fundamental role of language in the whole life of a nation: Language is the “breath” (*Odem*) which a people’s survival cannot dispense with even for a single moment; it is through language that a nation is able to unite and it is in language that its basic features are engraved. Different nations speak different languages and different languages are different “organisms” (*Organismus*), which hence have different principles created from within. “Language is, as it were, the outer expression of the spirit of peoples; the language is their spirit and the spirit is their language; one can never think of them sufficiently as identical.”¹³ Humboldt even interpreted the unique internal form of a language as its unique “world outlook” (*Weltanschauung*).¹⁴ We can hear the distant echo of this idea in Gramsci and Gadamer’s discussions of the philosophy of language, as well as that of others.¹⁵ This enables us to understand why Hegel, despite not having a high opinion of Christian Wolff as a philosopher, praised his “immortal contribution” and called him “teacher of the Germans” because he had written philosophy in German and

12 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 86.

13 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, pp. 52 and 33.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 72 and 49-50.

15 See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 32-33; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 563-564 and 571-573.

made philosophy “an ordinary science pertaining to the German nation.” Hegel commented: “It is only when a nation possesses a science in its own language that it can really be said to belong to it; and in Philosophy most of all this is requisite.”¹⁶

It should be pointed out immediately that when we emphasize that the construction of an academic discourse system must be based on some kind of “living language” and must take a national language as its starting point and benchmark, we do not intend any kind of linguistic nationalism or isolationism. In fact, the basic model of language is in the first place to speak and listen, to engage in dialogue and communicate.¹⁷ Therefore, the primeval diversity of language is not opposed to the oneness of human language capacity; instead, each is the premise of the other, in the same way as Humboldt believed that the universality of language was the premise of individual (national or even personal) languages and vice versa. In this sense, the statement that the contemporary construction of a Chinese system of academic discourse must be built on the basis of our national language also means that only on this basis are real dialogue and communication (including learning and imitation) with the outside world realistically possible. If we say that every language includes within it the complete system of concepts and imaginative modes of a community, then “to learn a foreign language should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed.”¹⁸ This of course means extending one’s horizons and increasing one’s abilities, or, in a more recent expression, some kind of “fusion of horizons” (*Horizont-verschmelzung*), but by no means does it imply the loss or elimination of one’s own standpoint. As Gadamer put it: to understand what a person says is, as we saw, to come to an understanding about the subject matter (*sich in der Sprache verständigen*), not to get inside another person and relive his experiences (*Erlebnisse*).¹⁹

And lastly, the contemporary construction of a Chinese system of academic discourse will be a protracted task which will only be gradually brought to completion when the substantive content that evoked this subject is itself fully developed and our humanities and social sciences have the ability to enter deep into this content and begin to think. This is because

16 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, pp. 187 and 188. We can add here that when Heine praised Wolff in the same vein, he gave greater credit to Martin Luther, whose masterly translation of the Bible turned a dead language into a language that was not yet alive. In this regards, “He gave the spirit a body, he gave word to the thought; he created the German language.” (See Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, pp. 76-77 and 45-47.)

17 “Communication in words is the source determining all other forms of communication; if man is *homo sapiens*, he is so first of all as *homo loquens*.” See Claude Hagège, *L’Homme de Paroles: Contribution Linguistique aux Sciences Humaines*, p. 5. See also the following statement of Gadamer on language: “... its real being consists in what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the whole great chain of tradition reaching us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it.” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 65.)

18 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, pp. 72-73.

19 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, vol. 2, pp. 489-490.

it is only when our historical practice fully opens up its own path and begins to actively show (i.e. express) itself that a real “language transition” (*Wandel der Sprache*) will become possible and the academic discourse system rooted in this “living language” will mature and flourish. So we cannot possibly discard the unique path to modernization China has taken since early modern times and construct our academic discourse system out of an abstract “ideal language” that is essentially totally lacking in content. “A transformation of language is needed which we can neither compel nor invent. This transformation does not result from the procurement of newly formed words and phrases. It touches on our relation to language, which is determined by...the terms of the mode in which we, who are needed in the usage of language, belong to the Appropriation (*Ereignis*).”²⁰ In his later years, Heidegger said explicitly that through Hölderlin he came to understand how useless it is to coin new words.²¹ In making this point, he repeatedly and admiringly quoted two passages from Humboldt: “The application of an already available phonetic form to the internal purposes of language...may be deemed possible in the middle periods of language development. A people could, by inner illumination and favorable external circumstances, impart so different a form to the language handed down to them that it would thereby turn into a wholly other, wholly new language.”²²

Therefore, the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse, fundamentally speaking, will inevitably acquire its own substantive content from its own national historical practice; as regards the form of this system, we look forward to its gradually taking shape as our “language transition” is realized. However, even such a transition itself is not unconditional; its preconditions are none other than the “internal illumination and favorable external circumstances” mentioned above. Precisely because of this, the task of constructing our academic discourse system is at the same time an intellectual task that urgently awaits further deepening.

III

The key point of the contemporary construction of a Chinese system of academic discourse as an intellectual task is: how can contemporary academic discourse in China go deep into the specific content provided by our historical practice so that we can gain a true intellectual grasp of this content and render it amenable to scholarly research projects? Since such substantive content primarily means “social reality” and the problem areas dictated by this reality, exploration of the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse as a whole ultimately boils down to the theme of “social reality”; that is, to the question of whether

20 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 229.

21 See Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, p. 52.

22 The translation is from the *Four Seminars*. For the original translation, see Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, pp. 95-96.

we will draw ever nearer to and reveal these realities or whether we will move ever further from them and cover them up. From this will emerge a basic criterion, and it is only in accordance with this criterion that we can give in-depth intellectual consideration to academic discourse and orient the construction of the academic discourse system in an exploratory direction.

As mentioned earlier, the construction of an academic discourse system is not technical in nature, nor can it be artificially arranged to some external design. It would be absolutely wrong if its construction were to be understood as a rational technical operation, something which is a totally different matter. In the present agenda, it is first of all an intellectual undertaking, and true thought must take as its purpose getting to the heart of reality. In short, when the contemporary construction of a Chinese system of academic discourse manifests itself as an intellectual task, the purpose of this task is to reveal and get to the heart of the social realities of contemporary China.

We need to highlight this point, because in the construction of which we are speaking, the main dangers and obstacles are what Hegel calls “subjective thought” and “external reflection”—it is precisely this external reflection that completely obscures and darkens “reality” (*Wirklichkeit*). According to Hegel, the concentrated manifestation of subjective thought (or subjective consciousness) is abstract “external reflection”: it is the *raisonnement* that moves hither and yon and, without settling on a particular content, knows only how to apply general principles to any content. Therefore, the external reflection merely “haunts these empty forms” and is completely alienated itself from the realistic content itself, that is, from “the actual fact or affair (*Sache*) in its all-round definiteness.”²³ There is no denying that contemporary humanities and social sciences in China are to a large extent still confined to the context of this “external reflection.” This is conspicuously manifested in the fact that they follow foreign learning (“up-to-date” and “advanced” though it may be) like sheep; that is, they take on board its general principles entirely without criticism or reflection, and apply these abstract principles from the outside to any and every form of content without ever going deep into the specificity of the content itself. This is by its nature a “thoughtless” state; in this state, the topic of a Chinese system of academic discourse is fundamentally unnecessary and meaningless, because we seem to be able to get a complete ready-made and undisputed one from the outside world. No wonder Perry Anderson strikingly reminds us that what China needs is an intelligentsia who are able to be critical and to examine themselves, who reject blind obedience.

Therefore, our intellectual task is to resolutely criticize external reflection that is subordinate to subjective consciousness, and through it to usher in a “new world” of social reality. In fact, both aspects originate in the legacy of Hegelianism: “For by subjecting the standpoint of subjective consciousness to an explicit critique, Hegel’s philosophy opened up a way to understand the human social reality in which we still find ourselves today.”²⁴

23 See Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*. Chinese translation by He Lin, pp. 300-305; Chinese translation by Yang Yizhi, pp. 449-451.

24 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 111.

Karl Löwith pointed out correctly that, when Hegel took “reality” as the unity of essence and existence, he thereby elevated the real and current world into the contents of philosophy. So the most important thing is to make clear that the contents of philosophy can be the real contents of the world or of experience.²⁵ Hegel’s solution is the reconciliation of reason and reality on the basis of absolute idealism; in other words, reality, which is truth, is the idea, and to grasp the idea is to reveal the most profound reality. If we say that it is here that Hegelianism forgoes its original intention of going deep into true social reality, then the various critiques Marx developed from this point, along with his ontological revolution and its main achievement—historical materialism, rescued and relaunched social reality itself. So we can say that both speculative idealism and historical materialism made a decisive attempt to go beyond subjective thought as an external reflection, so that the dimension of “reality” could be positively visible. However, for the former, social reality was just a reversed reflection of the movement of the idea itself and eventually dissolved in abstract thought; while for the latter, social reality was the sum of all social relations formed and realized in the course of people’s life and practice. Historical materialism has revealed an extremely broad field of reality; it has fostered some valuable academic achievements, but to a great extent it still awaits further understanding, digestion and absorption by the humanities and social sciences. Heidegger commented at a seminar in 1969: “‘Philosophy’ today is satisfied with running behind science, in misrecognition of the two sole realities of this age: the development of business and the armament that this requires. Marxism knows of these realities.”²⁶

Only when subjective thought and its external reflection lose their dominant power in the intellectual realm will it be possible for the humanities and social sciences to go deep into “social reality”; and it is only when our academic research is really in accord with, close to and at the heart of social reality, that the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse can be considered to be well prepared intellectually and to have laid the necessary foundation. Because it is only in such a context that what we call “Chinese experience” can actually be constructed, and it is only on the basis of this experience that the “China issue” can show us its true face. Abstract external reflection can only stifle or block the real “Chinese experience,” and render its acquisition impossible by castrating it in advance. According to the precise meaning of the word, “To experience means *eundo assequi*, to obtain something along the way, to attain something by going on a way.”²⁷ “This is where the ‘exhortation to objectivity’ (*Sachlichkeit*) that we also know as the characteristic

25 See Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, pp. 183-185.

26 See Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, p. 53.

27 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 137. See also the following words in the same work, p. 127: “To undergo an experience with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god—means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transform us. When we talk of ‘undergoing’ an experience we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens.”

attitude of philosophy originates...the thing itself is active in it and not simply the free play of our own notions. That is, the free play of our reflective procedures with the thing is not operative in real philosophical speculation.”²⁸ In criticizing the fundamental system of modern metaphysics, Heidegger said what is important is to have a fundamental experience of the thing itself. If one starts with consciousness, one cannot have this experience.²⁹ Similarly, we can say that it is important for the humanities and social sciences in China to produce China’s own fundamental experience; but as long as one starts from the subjective consciousness of external reflection, such experience is completely impossible. In brief, there can be no such a thing as “Chinese experience” and the related “China issue” so long as the social realities of contemporary China have not been clearly revealed. Here a question needing our serious consideration is: If such experience and such an issue no longer exist, where should our humanities and social sciences put their efforts? Does this not mean that we lose even the object of our study? If this is the case, there will be no meaningful academic discourse to speak of.

Here the absolute necessity of critical method is very clear. The most concise and fundamental meaning of “critique” is to clarify premises and delimit boundaries. Hegel said that it is characteristic of free thought to allow no assumptions to pass unquestioned. What Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* does is no more than reveal the realistic premises and historical boundaries of the modern capitalist mode of production. The viewpoint of external reflection is completely uncritical, on the other hand, for it never really tries to make contact with and go deep into the content of reality, so it is completely ignorant of the premises of reality and the fundamental boundaries of socio-historical phenomena. When this ignorance is indiscriminately regarded as some kind of academic “conscience,” academic research has to succumb to completely abstract and empty formalism and dogmatism (formalism and dogmatism, no matter of what kind, are unconditionally subordinate to abstract external reflection). For the humanities and social sciences in contemporary China, the fundamental importance of making a critique is that without it, it is impossible to reveal the social realities of China today, and to further establish the real Chinese experience and China issue. If we say that in freeing ourselves from the shackles of external reflection, we depend heavily on critical method, then many academic approaches in the humanities and social sciences—for example, learning, research, dialogue, etc.—must be critical. However, for scholarship as a whole, whether it be the critical method itself, or critical learning, research and dialogue, all are in the end subject to the main purpose of getting to the heart of social reality. It is for this reason that the contemporary construction of the Chinese system of academic discourse is a highly principled and profound intellectual task.

Since the object of this intellectual task is to reveal the social realities of present-day China, and since its original motive force is provided by our historical practice and our

28 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, pp. 71-72.

29 See Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*.

unique development path and plans for national rejuvenation, then it is impossible for us to confine ourselves to mere imitation or transmission; instead, this task will inevitably need pioneering creative work of profound significance. In talking about the renaissance of classical cultures, Ernst Cassirer pointed out that the genuine great rebirths in world history had always been triumphs of spontaneity (*Triumphe der Spontaneität*), instead of mere receptivity (*Rezeptivität*). The way in which these two factors interact and condition each other constitutes one of the most intriguing issues in the history of thought.³⁰ Accordingly, when the need for change from within achieves its full strength and intensity, the language will become the expression of novel and distinct feelings for life. As such feelings permeate the language, they arouse all the unrecognized energies slumbering within it. What was merely change within the sphere of everyday speech now becomes a construction of novel form (*Neugestaltung*).³¹ If we say that we have a similar possibility of a renaissance of civilization, and that the road opened up by our historical practice is constantly demonstrating the world historical significance of our great mission of rejuvenation, then the academic future of the humanities and social sciences in China will rest decisively with this mandate, just as the direction of the academic discourse system we construct will inevitably be determined by this mandate. For our humanities and social sciences, this is both a mission and a test—a task given by history, to test whether those on whom it rests have wisdom and courage enough to take it on and bring it to completion.

Notes on Contributor

Wu Xiaoming is Doctor of Philosophy and Professor of the Department of Philosophy, Fudan University, and “Chang Jiang Scholar.” His research area is Marxist philosophy. His representative works include: *The Decline of Metaphysics: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Relationship between Marx and Feuerbach* (形而上学的没落——马克思与费尔巴哈关系的当代解读, Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2006), *Thinking into the Depths of the Times: Marxist Philosophy and the Contemporary World* (思入时代的深处：马克思主义与当代世界, Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2006), “Historical Materialism as a Historical Science Methodology” (作为历史科学方法论的历史唯物主义, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* [中国社会科学], 2008, no. 1). E-mail: xdxuqin@126.com.

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30 See Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of Humanities*, p. 177.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

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