

The Mystery of Resonance: Why Hannah Arendt Matters to Contemporary China?

A Review of *Arendt in China: 50 Years After* 《阿伦特在中国五十年后》, authored by Wang Yinli, Liu Wenjin, et al., edited by Luo Yangci. (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2025)

Hannah Arendt passed away on December 5, 1975, leaving the “Judging” section of *The Life of the Mind* unfinished—a silence that has since invited half a century of global interpretation. Fifty years later, this silence finds an unexpectedly vibrant echo in China. *Arendt in China: 50 Years After* is a commemorative collection of papers by Chinese scholars marking the 50th anniversary of Arendt's passing. It documents how a voice emerging from the ruins of mid-century Europe has become an indispensable coordinate for 21st-century Chinese thought.

Rather than a mere academic survey, this collection offers a record of an ontological anxiety that bridges civilizational divides. As both a contributor and a reviewer, I perceive a resonance emerging from these pages—a sentiment that has evolved from the initial fervor of discovery into a seasoned, deliberate sobriety.

Arendt in China itself is the result of an “action in concert,” originating from intellectual exchanges inspired by Arendt and realized through the joint efforts of a group of researchers. As Wang Yinli remarked at the book symposium held at Sun Yat-sen University on December 7, 2025, this volume is the culmination of a quiet, persistent labor that began in the late 1990s.

The foundational translations by Wang Yinli (*The Human Condition*) and Lin Xianghua (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*) did more than merely import a foreign theory; they provided the linguistic scaffolding for a generation to name its own existential vertigo. These early translations established a conceptual baseline for reflecting on power, authority, and the fragile possibility of a public realm in the Chinese context. Today, as evidenced by the rigorous scholarship of Chen Gaohua (translator of *Essays in Understanding* and *The Life of the Mind*), Liu Wenjin, Chen Lianying, and others, Chinese Arendt studies have entered a “deep-water zone.” We are no longer merely “introducing” Arendt; we are engaging in a comprehensive inventory of the Western tradition through her eyes.

Prior to this culmination, scholars had been laboring quietly in their respective fields until they first convened in September 2023 for a historic meeting at Sichuan University's Department of Philosophy. There, the theme of “Amor Mundi” (Love of the World) transcended the page to become a shared experiential reality. A subsequent gathering at ShanghaiTech University at the end of the same year reaffirmed this bond. Crucial to this developmental trajectory was the *Fudan Political Philosophy Review*, edited by Hong Tao and Zhao Lihong. By dedicating a special issue to Arendt, the journal provided the essential scholarly platform and editorial framework that anticipated this final collection.



For today's researchers, Arendt is no longer just a subject of study; she is a gateway to the deep traditions of Western political philosophy and German phenomenology. By tracing her lineage through Heidegger and Jaspers, Chinese scholars are not merely "learning about" a Western thinker, but are engaging in an ongoing ontological dialogue concerning the human condition itself. Their interest has transitioned from "understanding Arendt" to "understanding the world through and with Arendt"—tracing her roots back into the German phenomenological tradition to confront the specific "dark times" of the 21st-century global and local condition.

The scholarly resonance of Arendt in China is further characterized by its remarkable transdisciplinary breadth, spanning political science, Marxism, and ethics. Most distinctive, however, is the recent "phenomenological turn." Influenced by the work of Dan Zahavi and Sophie Loidolt, Chinese scholarship is increasingly treating Arendt not merely as a political commentator, but as a pivotal figure for re-evaluating the phenomenological tradition itself. By framing Arendtian "plurality" as the inevitable ethical fulfillment of phenomenology, researchers are moving beyond comparative studies to forge a rigorous ontological foundation for the "common world" amidst a post-metaphysical landscape.

This resonance is built upon several pivotal dimensions. **To begin with, Arendt catalyzes Chinese readers toward a reflexive critique of technology and modernity.** With generative artificial intelligence booming across all sectors of society worldwide, her foresight regarding the "age of technology" addresses the specific concern of whether machines will replace human speech and thought, striking a chord in contemporary Chinese discourse. In a society that has experienced arguably the most rapid industrial and digital transformation in history, Arendt's warning feels hauntingly prophetic to Chinese intellectuals, and it strikes at the very nerves of each one of us, forcing us to confront and adapt to this new reality. The super-speed of Chinese technological development has created a unique urgency for Arendt's distinction between work and action. For Arendt, while science and technology have given birth to modern civilization, they also contain an ideology of "making" (*poiesis*). The figure of *homo faber*—man as the builder and fabricator—has long been the celebrated hero of China's modernization. Her work catalyzes a critique of the instrumental logic underlying modern technology, which views the world as an object for conquest and control—a driving mechanism behind totalitarianism and the expansionist logic of imperialism. Clearly, articles in *Arendt in China* reflect and respond to this growing anxiety: when the logic of fabrication (utility, means-ends categories) spills over into the political realm, it treats human society as a mere "artifact" to be engineered and the world is in danger of becoming a desert.

This pressing urgency explains one of the most important reasons why Arendt is so widely welcomed in China: in a world of constant flux and uncertainty, her conception of the modern loss of the world serves as an existential demand—a voluntary path of self-understanding for those seeking to unravel a modernity that feels both inevitable and alien. This critique prompts a cautious re-examination of whether information technology facilitates or hinders the construction of a robust public sphere. The reflection posits that

while technology creates a “new world” of objects, only action rooted in human plurality can construct a genuine “human world”.

Indeed, this volume explores a remarkable phenomenon: a resonance that transcends borders and centuries. This “miraculous” connection stems from Arendt’s uncanny prescience. Long before the total digitization of society, Arendt foresaw a world where the logic of the “jobholder” and the “*animal laborans*” would eclipse the capacity for genuine action. The tension in her work—her profound pessimism regarding technological progress versus her unwavering optimism in human action and plurality—is precisely where the Chinese reader finds a mirror. The demand for Arendt is, at its heart, a demand to remain “human” within a system that increasingly treats human life as “human resources” to be managed. Amidst this technological totalization, the Arendtian concept of plurality emerges as a crucial philosophical sanctuary.

The Chinese intellectual community seeks to recover the “web of human relationships” in an atomized digital age. Plurality—the condition that “men, not Man, live on the earth”—is presented here not as a Western export, but as an existential necessity for a culture striving to balance traditional collectivism with modern individuality. The “miraculous” resonance lies in how Arendt’s “in-between” (*inter-est*) offers a vocabulary for a new kind of sociality that transcends both state-centric and purely market-driven identities. The “Arendt Fever” in China—manifested in the competitive publishing of her monographs and the fervent consumption of her ideas by both scholars and the “thinking public”—stems from a visceral demand for meaning. In an age of atomization, Arendt offers a “common world.” Yet, this success brings with it a complex mixture of joy and apprehension for the researchers involved. The task ahead is to ensure that Arendt remains an irritant that provokes us to think what we are doing, rather than a consolation that allows us to endure it.

Secondly, Arendt’s effort to reconstruct a relatively permanent world—a notion of transcendence—helps expand the Chinese conception of the world. The Chinese equivalent vocabularies for “world” are metaphorically pure, all-encompassing spatiality: *tianxia* (天下, “all under heaven”), *jiangshan* (江山, “rivers and mountains”), or *jianghu* (江湖, “rivers and lakes”). Meanwhile “world” (世界, *shi-jie*) in Chinese, as a loanword, carries a more transcendent Buddhist connotations: *shi* refers to ever-recurring cycle of generations (time) and *jie* refers to boundaries in general (space). The initial Chinese reception of Arendt’s “world” focused on its Heideggerian roots as a meaningful context of the whole of human relations—with tools at hand, with others and with itself. For Arendt, the idea of “common world” (the *in-between* that both relates and separates us) also serves as a relational, meaningful context of human existence, with a focus on its openness: the world as a man-made artifact poised against the Earth, as the space of appearance and the public realm.

It is from this relationality as her point of departure that Arendt characterizes her conception of world with a distinct layer of “the political”: a stable and enduring foundation for the human artifice. This framework anchors the human world in a relative permanence that transcends the mere flux of existence of all species, including human. It is precisely this dimension of “relative permanence” within the human condition that has sparked a profound interest and even resonance in contemporary Chinese scholarship,

particularly regarding Arendt's linkage of "the political" to the distinction between "eternity and immortality".

In the Chinese context, these terms are often conflated through the concept of *sheng sheng bu xi* (生生不息: an unending cycle of life), where the rise and fall of dynasties is viewed as a natural necessity, with only the people and their culture surviving. This stands in sharp contrast to the ancient Greek experience: surrounded by an immortal nature and immortal gods, the Greeks sought to achieve a political "immortality" by establishing unique life stories that blossomed out of these cosmic cycles. This thematic intersection serves as the focal point for both my paper, "Naming the Ineffability: Arendt on Transcendence", and Wang Yinli's "Arendt's *Theological Narrative*" on American Revolutionary Republicanism." Although our works share this common point of departure, we approach the text with distinct emphases: my research interrogates the passage through the lens of Arendt's political ontology of transcendence, while Wang examines it within the framework of the "theological narrative" of American republicanism.

Thirdly, her re-evaluation of post-secular values deepens our understanding of ethical political discourses on an ontological basis. The Chinese do not inherently share the existentialist's burden. And the metaphysical weight of death was never Confucius' primary concern. Confucius established a distinctive posture of deliberate omission regarding the supernatural; his classic stance of "respect ghosts and gods but keep them at a distance" (敬鬼神而□□, *jing gui shen er yuan zhi*) effectively partitioned the "theological" from the "human". For the cultural lineage descending from this tradition,—"While you do not know life, how can you know about death?" (未知生焉知死, *wei zhi sheng yan zhi si*)—the focus was never on the transcendence of death, but on the ethical vitality of life: a "secular" world bound by patriarchal kinships rather than ontological anxiety. In this light, the introduction of Arendt and her mentor Heidegger into the Chinese intellectual landscape represents a profoundly mysterious encounter. They have effectively propelled the finality of death into a vision traditionally defined by the "unending cycle of life" (生生不息), thrusting the Chinese subject into the ultimate question of "To be or not to be".

The significance of this event—this collision between a kinship-based secularity and a stark existential ontology—is far-reaching and transcends current definitions. The endeavor of contemporary scholars, as seen in this volume, is not to pull Arendt back into a familiar ethical or political frame, but to utilize her thought as a gateway to a more comprehensive perspective. By engaging with her principles, we gain a broader horizon to understand our own existence—not just as members of a lineage, but as individuals confronting the "relative permanence" of a common world. This is the similar "goal" of different cultures, even though they took different routes to achieve. And that is what Chinese scholars are so enthusiastic about: while death—recognized as the mark and condition of human existence—is unfamiliar to Chinese readers, yet strikingly familiar is the way for humans to achieve "immortality," which is in definition and in nature political *par excellence*: by living among others, by striving to be seen and to be heard, by establishing a unique, recognizable life story (立身、立言、立命), and by being remembered.

Moreover, Arendt's ideas of "love" (*amor mundi*) and "evil" (the banality of evil) represent two basic orientations toward the world and constitute two major parts of *Arendt in China*, exploring the dynamic relationship between human beings and the world. Wang Yinli's paper "*The Banality of Evil: the Twisting and Deprivation of the Common World*" attempts to use "secularization" to delineate the shift in Arendt's characterization of evil from radical to banal. Wang begins with Augustine's refusal to grant evil an ontological basis, revealing that Augustine's description of evil as a "privation of good" (*privatio boni*) actually imbues evil with a kind of "pseudo-profundity" and "pseudo-reality." In contrast, the banal character of evil emphasizes the rootlessness, which corresponds precisely to the fundamental distortion and deprivation of human morality and thought caused by the "world in a desert." Consequently, the two types of Eichmann—the proactive war criminal, the "evil-doer" versus the passive, banal "executor"—are not contradictory; rather, they are the manifestations of a person without a "world" and without "depth" in different scenarios.

Lastly, Arendt's political thought navigates Chinese toward a self-contemplation of our own renaissance. In "*Arendt in the Current Context: Starting from the Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*," Hong Tao poses a burning question: Chinese people were inflicted with as profound existential crisis and suffering in in 20th century Europe as Jewish people were, yet China produced no world-renowned self-reflection work comparable to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Why?

Hong Tao notes that it is partly because Arendt herself possessed two advantages: her personal experience with totalitarian regime, and her thought was deep-rooted in the tradition from Ancient Greece to Heidegger. Relatedly, what is the significance of Arendt's thought for Chinese readers today? Hong points out two valuable perspectives. First, modern China shares many of the hallmarks of modernity with the modern West. Most strikingly, the human relationships have been shattered from traditional patriarchal relations organized by agriculture (such as those between parents and children, siblings) and replaced and reconstituted by broader relationships under the market economy structure. Therefore, China obviously and definitely faces the many problems that challenge the industrial and informational Western world today. Second, Arendt witnessed a break of tradition, but also a subsequential declination of the West civilization in the 20th century. In a similar vein, does the revival of the tradition that the Chinese people have carried forward for millennia possess sufficient resilience to respond to and confront today's global and structural crises and challenges? This requires us to carefully and responsibly navigate a way forward. We must sincerely ask whether this ancient tradition can be reborn and realize new developments.

This approach offers a way to confront the "philosophical wonder" (*thaumazein*) that emerges when one finds oneself at an impasse. For Chinese scholars, embracing a kind of "pariah" status—existing between cultures, identities, and disciplines—becomes a means of observing the "Other" while ultimately returning to a deeper inquiry into their own existence.

Some may detect a striking paradox at the heart of Hannah Arendt's thought: on one hand, she champions the capacity for new beginnings; on the other, she reaches for what might be called "ancient remedies"—concepts such as "civil society," "virtue," and

“philosophical leisure,” all deeply rooted in Greek thought. She advocates for humanistic education as the foundation of a shared civic sensibility. Critics, however, contend that these classical ideals have long been rendered obsolete by modern society, rendering her call for a return to Greek-style participatory politics either impractical or ineffective. Yet such criticism overlooks a crucial historical nuance: the “classical tradition” was first challenged not by modernity, but by Christianity. In fact, the dawn of the modern era itself began with a literary revival—the Renaissance. The dialectical interplay between the “ancient” and the “modern,” the “old” and the “new,” has persisted across every age. The enduring power of the “ancient” lies not in resurrecting obsolete objects or institutions, but in its rootedness in human nature itself. It is not a matter of returning to the past, but of rediscovering and cultivating an awareness of what it means to be human—a task as urgent today as it ever was.

In conclusion, *Arendt in China: 50 Years After* proves that the resonance in China is not a passive echo; it is an active, urgent dialogue. As has been said, Arendt’s academic reception and wide readership in China represents the culmination of a sustained and quiet intellectual cultivation since the late 1990s. Her concepts of “action,” “public realm,” and the “banality of evil” have become very popular both within and outside academia. This is because Arendt’s thought was never purely academic; it was closely linked to her life experiences and political history. However, there are still many profound aspects of her thought that deserve further discussion. We turn to Arendt because her vision—of earth, life, worldliness, plurality, mortality and natality—captured the shared human conditions of all humankind. In the resonance between her “dark times” and our own, we find not just a shared grief, but a shared responsibility to “think what we are doing.”

Yet, a note of “vigilance” is warranted—particularly among general readers and at the public level—against the risk of “superficialization.” We must confront the trap of “ready-made” conceptual displacement, where luminous terms like “natality” and “action” are adopted as mere “intellectual prosthetics.” Severed from their phenomenological roots, they threaten to become prefabricated masks, sparing us the arduous task of theorizing our own silent realities. There is also the danger of the aestheticization of politics, where Arendtian “action” devolves into a romantic retreat—a “beautiful soul” syndrome, a psychological sanctuary in which we feel morally and plurally alive within the pages of a book while remaining effectively atomized in the lived world. Finally, we must guard against the instrumentalization of her critique: the risk of turning the fiercest critic of *homo faber* into just another “tool” for technocratic crisis management.

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