

## Wang Yinli, Liu Wenjin et al.: *Arendt in China: Fifty Years After*

Review: Wang Yinli, Liu Wenjin, et al. (eds.): *Arendt in China: 50 Years After*. (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2025).

Hannah Arendt was one of the most important and original political thinkers of the twentieth century. Unlike many Western thinkers whose popularity fades over time, interest in Arendt has continued to grow, and her writings and ideas have had wide influence beyond academic circles in China. In the Chinese-speaking world, terms such as “totalitarianism,” “action and the public sphere,” and “the banality of evil” have become closely associated with Arendt’s name. *Arendt in China: 50 Years After* documents how a voice emerging from mid-century European ruins has become an indispensable coordinate for 21st-century Chinese thought. Its contributors include several of her principal translators and researchers in China. Rather than a mere academic survey, this volume is the culmination of a quiet, persistent labor that began in the late 1990s. The foundational translations by Wang Yinli (translator of *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future*, and *Love and Saint Augustine*), Chen Gaohua (translator of *Essays in Understanding*, *The Life of the Mind*), Chen Lianying and others did not merely import a foreign theory; they provided the linguistic scaffolding for a generation to name its own existential vertigo. Today, as evidenced by the rigorous scholarship, Chinese Arendt studies are engaging in a comprehensive inventory of the Western tradition through her eyes.

This volume features 22 articles from two generations of Chinese scholars, the book’s five-fold structure reflects a newfound intellectual maturity: **Part I:** “Commonality and Transcendence of the World”, including five articles: Arendt in the Phenomenological Perspective: From Publicity to the Common World (Liang Xiaohan); Unspeakable Naming: Arendt on Transcendence (Tang Zhangmei); *Amor Mundi*: Arendt’s “Hidden Theology” in Her Dissertation (Wang Yinli); “Fear” and “love” of the world: Heidegger and Arendt’s Interpretation of the Tenth Volume of Augustine’s *Confessions* (Wang Yinli); On “Love” - Excerpt from Hannah Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* (translated by Chen Lianying). These articles engage with Heidegger, Husserl, and Arendtian themes of “transcendence,” “World,” and “love” to reconstruct the concept of the world in a post-metaphysical wilderness. **Part II:** “Multidimensional Perspectives on the Modern Condition of Evil”, including four articles: Arendt and the paradox of Modern Evil (Liu Wenjin); “The Banality of Evil”: The Distortion and Deprivation of the Common World (Wang Yinli); Karl Barth and Hannah Arendt on Evil and Covenant (Hong Liang); Unfinished Secularity: Arendt’s Quasi-Theological Narrative on Evil (Liu Wenjin). These articles examine the controversial concept of the “banality of evil” through the lenses of Augustinian origins, Barth’s theology, and Arendt’s quasi-theological narrative. **Part III:** “Freedom as the *raison d’être* of politics”, including five articles: The concept of will in

*The Life of Mind* (Wang Yinli); Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom: A Kantian Interpretation (Nan Xing); "A Controversy of the Century" between Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin (Ying Qi) ; Action, Narrative and Identity: From Arendt to Ricoeur (Chen Gaohua) ; Arendt and Humanism (Chen Lianying). **Part IV:** "Political Emotion and Political Reason", including five articles: Reconsidering Arendt's Concept of Publicity (Zhang Nian); The Wisdom of Greek Tragedy in Arendt's Political Thought (Liu Wenjin); "Cold Enthusiasm": Emotions in Arendt's Political Theory (Zhang Shiyu); Arendt's Political Theology in Her narrative on Republicanism of American Revolution (Wang Yinli); The Foundation of Arendt's Thought of Human Rights (Tan Ruijie). **Part V:** "Arendt in the Contemporary Context", including three articles: Hannah Arendt in the Current Context: Speaking from the Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (Hong Tao); Why does the Chinese Academic Circle Need Arendt? (Zhang Yunyan); Hannah Arendt in China: Thought, Action and Technology (Harold P. Sjursen). These three articles respond to our current situation, pulling Arendt from the scholarly study back into the reality of technocratic dominance and a turbulent world.

In the first part, this collection offers a record of an "ontological shudder" bridging time cracks. The concept of the "world" is one of Arendt's major contributions to phenomenology, political philosophy, and even sociology. Arendt championed "action", understood primarily as political participation and self-expression. Yet over the past two decades, as democratic participation has visibly waned in global politics, renewed attention has turned to the reconstruction of the world, a task that also resonates with the urgent need to preserve shared meaning under modern secularization. As a result, "preserving the common world through action" has become an increasingly emphasized thread in Arendt's thought. In her long essay "Introduction into Politics", Arendt made it clear that "at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man—a concern, in fact, for a world, however constituted, without which who are both concerned and political would not find life worth living." <sup>1</sup> Essays in the first part seek to reconstruct Arendt's concept of world in a post-metaphysical and post-secular context, showing that the "world" is not only a phenomenological common world but also a post-secular, "potentially immortal" one. Liang Xiaohan offers a phenomenological reading of Arendt's "world" in relation to Husserl, distinguishing two versions of "the common world" in Arendt. The weak version concerns the world's commonality in epistemological and ontological terms. The strong version involves a robust consensus capable of grounding a good public life, based on the conviction that a "common world" emerges from plural perspectives. Tang Zhangmei develops a post-metaphysical account of "world" through an analysis of "meta-pherein" in Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*. She clarifies that "metaphysics" in the Greek sense refers to what is transcendent and not fully sayable—i.e., the transcendent dimension of human existence and of the world, as Arendt understands it. Wang Yinli, in the last two essays, advances a political-theological interpretation. By tracing Arendt's dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine*, Wang explores the meaning of *amor mundi* through Augustine's framework of *caritas* and *cupiditas*. In a

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn, Schocken, 2009, p. 106.

further comparison of Heidegger's and Arendt's readings of Book X of Augustine's *Confessions*, Wang argues that Arendt's early work already marks a divergence from Heidegger's understanding of the world—one that anticipates and prepares her later political idea of “love of the world”.

The second part focuses on the problem of evil. “The banality of evil” has already become Arendt's most iconic phrase. As an attempt to comprehend the Eichmann phenomenon, however, Arendt did not provide a fully systematic argument for it. Even so, she was among the first philosophers after World War II to confront evil directly and to reflect on it with philosophical seriousness. She holds that the evil manifested in modern political events should become an object of philosophical “wonder”. In the Western tradition, reflections on evil have often relied on religious and theological answers; within modern Enlightenment philosophy, Kant offered perhaps the most rigorous rational account. Yet Nazi totalitarian domination produced a new kind of evil that rendered traditional moral and rational explanations inadequate. After Kant, philosophy largely lacked an appropriate discourse for speaking about evil. People retained the vocabulary and moral sensibility of “good” and “evil” through lived experience, but these terms became increasingly subjective and vague—often displaced by seemingly more “objective” language such as “wrong”, “bad”, or “injustice”, supported by scientific data and social statistics. Against this background, essays in this part revisit Arendt's reflections on evil through the lenses of Greek tragedy, Judaism, and Christianity, demonstrating how she brings the problem of evil back into philosophical view. Liu Wenjin analyzes the tensions—between tradition and modernity, secularity and sacredness, truth and freedom—embedded in Arendt's quasi-theological narrative of evil. Wang Yinli continuously situates Arendt's “banality of evil” within her reconstruction of the dynamic relation between Augustinian concepts of love and evil, arguing that Arendt offers a secularized appropriation of Augustine's notion of evil. Hongliang, as the student of German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, compares Karl Barth and Arendt on evil. He argues that they both diagnose the radical evil as “rootless”: it deprives human world and threatens humanity as such. For both Barth and Arendt, the ethical community constituted by “neighbors” becomes a key perspective for understanding this rootless evil.

Unlike Sartre, Heidegger, and other major contemporaries, Arendt consistently occupies an “in-between” position—an intermediary stance that prompts us to face reality and to pose questions in a renewed spirit. In this collection, the reconstruction and reinterpretation of Arendt's ideas—freedom and identity, political emotion and political reason, and “the right to have rights”—all demonstrate the continuing significance of her thought for the present and the future. A recent book written by the Japanese scholar Kei Hiruta, Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin, *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin: Freedom, Politics and Humanity* (Princeton University Press, 2021) sketches a “battle of the century” between Arendt and Berlin over the meaning of freedom. For Arendt, freedom is not primarily an inner state or a range of protected choices; it is the freedom to “act politically”, to begin, which is an insight rooted in ancient political experience. Nan Xing offers a Kantian interpretation of Arendt's concept of freedom, while Wang Yinli still traces Arendt's idea of freedom-as-beginning to its Augustinian sources. From a feminist perspective, Zhang Nian re-examines Arendt's account of the public and the private. She

argues that in modern time, issues of “biological necessity”—intimacy, reproduction, and sexuality—have crossed the threshold of the household and surged into the public realm. This shift is less a simple transformation of the “structure of the public sphere” than a change in how these two spheres are seen and experienced, that is, change in “gaze” and “perception”. Tan Ruijie argues that Arendt’s account of her view of human rights can be grounded on the conditioned character of human existence—especially through the condition of natality, which points to the singularity of each person born into the world and provides an immanent-transcendental basis for action and for the basic rights affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Finally, Zhang Shiyu examines how the binary opposition between public reason and private emotion exerts a contradictory influence on Arendt’s political thought.

The three essays in the book’s final section return to Arendt’s significance for the contemporary Chinese context. Chinese political scientist, Hong Tao argues that “taking practical problems as the raw material for thought” is a key to grasping Arendt’s approach. Arendt confronted the collapse of the Western philosophical tradition in the twentieth century, and the questions she posed to modernity, Hong suggests, are also those that Chinese intellectual have faced in this time.

Zhang Yunyan maintains that Arendt’s ideas about using the inner self’s personal memory to resist evil, and about sustaining cultural memory through storytelling, are likewise highly relevant for Chinese literature. Harold P. Sjursen, emeritus professor at New York University, completed his PhD in 1974 under the supervision of Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas. For this volume, he contributes an essay on Arendt’s reflections on technology. He begins with a warm recollection of studying with Arendt, which adding a most vivid portrait for Arendt, as a teacher who tirelessly provoked students with Socratic dialogue and repeatedly invited them into the practice.

After experiencing the brutality of the twentieth century, Arendt’s thought has always been based on “love of the world”. Why is it so difficult but necessary to love the world? Because “new life” always brings freedom and hope to the world, and brings the power to start anew. For Chinese scholars, Arendt study can be a discourse that promotes internal experience when we study our own problems. Let this kind of thought and discourse enter our expression and communication, then Arendt’s thought will bring a new beginning.

See also: *The Mystery of Resonance: Why Hannah Arendt Matters to Contemporary China? On the occasion of Arendt in China: 50 Years After Arendt in China: Fifty Years Later*, edited by Yinli Wang and Wenjin Liu, Shanghai: People’s Publishing House, 2025.

Yinli Wang published *Hannah Arendt: Between Philosophy and Politics*, *Hannah Arendt: Love, Thinking and Action*, and translated Arendt’s works including *The Human Condition*, *Between the Past and the Future* and *Love and St. Augustine*.

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