

## Zhang Shiyong and Chinese Appreciation of Hegelian Philosophy

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the study of Hegelian philosophy conducted by Zhang Shiyong (张世英), Professor of Philosophy in Peking University China, a well-known contemporary scholar.

**Keywords** Hegel; Subjectivity; Phenomenology

Zhang Shiyong (张世英), a Professor of Philosophy at Peking University, is a well-known contemporary Chinese scholar specializing in Hegelian Philosophy. Zhang is highly respected in China and considered the best living scholar in Hegelian philosophy. He has made in-depth studies of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Logic*, and *Philosophy of Mind*, which includes the "Philosophy of Art" (namely, "Aesthetics"). Zhang's study of Hegel's philosophy has extended to all of Hegel's work in German except for "Philosophy of Nature." Zhang has published 18 books and many essays. His monumental work *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy* has appeared in 12 editions and sold over 200,000 copies. His *On Hegel's Logic* has gone through four editions from 1959 to 2008. In his *Terms for Hegelian Philosophy*, Professor Zhang has also translated about one million Chinese words from the German. Currently, Professor Zhang is working on a 20-volume *Collection of Hegel's Works* to be published by the People's Press. It is fair to say that Professor Zhang's work has significantly influenced a generation of scholars in China to have a greater curiosity about and understanding of Western philosophy.

Professor Zhang's accomplishments have also gone beyond the Chinese world. For example, in 1972 a group of young French scholars including Alain Badiou, Joel Bellassen, and Louis Mossot had an opportunity to study Hegelian philosophy in China. They brought what they learned to the French world in the publication *Le noyau rationnel de la dialectique hegelienne; Traductions, introductions et commentaires, autour d'un texte de Zhang Shiyong* (1972). Additionally, during the 1980s and 90s, Professor Zhang attended a number of international philosophy symposiums in Europe and the U.S., opportunities that gave him the chance to interact with and further influence Hegelian scholars from around world. This essay will briefly outline Professor Zhang's work on Hegel. Hopefully it can give a new impulse to a greater variety of interpretations and understandings of Hegelian philosophy and thus provide a boost to the reinvigoration of the analysis of European philosophy in a global setting. Professor Zhang's accomplishment might also set a model for fruitfully navigating the wisdom of both East and West in order to better address some of the philosophical questions of our time.

### WHY HEGEL? THE STAGES OF ZHANG'S STUDY OF HEGEL

Professor Zhang, who is now in his early 90s, was educated in classical Chinese thought and culture in the 1930s. He began to study the Chinese classics with his father when he was only nine years old. Like many in his generation, his scholarly journey was intertwined with modern China's social and political turmoil. Those historical events have shaped his strong personality and reinforced his commitment to scholarly pursuits. He exemplifies and

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embodies the spirit and character of modern Chinese literati.

Zhang's work on Hegel has gone through two stages during the approximately 60 years from the beginning of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the current day. Between 1948 and 1978, political forces in China fought to control and even suppress the study of philosophy for its own sake. The thinking was that philosophy, regarded as an ideological tool, was obliged to serve the government's political agenda. The connection between Karl Marx and G.W.F. Hegel, therefore, gave Chinese scholars a natural reason to study Hegelian philosophy from the 1950s through the 1970s. Prior to the reform and opening policy in 1978, Chinese academics only paid attention to Hegelian philosophy (and despised Immanuel Kant's work) because of the influence of the "three conceptual resources of Marxist ideology" (马克思主义三个来源之说). These intellectuals repudiated the idealism in Hegel's philosophy and absorbed only the "reasonable nucleus" (合理内核) of his dialectics. In this guise, Hegel was the only Western thinker allowed any kind of discourse in the Chinese academic field. As a consequence of the political climate in China, in his early study of Hegel, Professor Zhang centered on the connection between Hegelian philosophy and Marxist thought. At this stage, Zhang's work was concerned with translation, interpretation, and discussion of the difference between Marx and Hegel's respective philosophies.

Since China's economic reform and opening policy began to be implemented in 1978, philosophy gradually gained its independence from politics, and Zhang enjoyed more freedom in his studies. Over the past 30 years, Professor Zhang's study of Hegel has shifted to highlight two topics: 1) Hegel's role in the philosophical transition from the modern to the postmodern period. In regard to this topic, Professor Zhang concentrates on the historical development of European philosophy from its traditional expression, represented by Hegel's thought, to contemporary and postmodern iterations. 2) The comparison between traditional Chinese philosophy and Hegelian philosophy. In his analysis of this topic Professor Zhang returns to his roots in classical Chinese philosophy to conduct a deeper comparative study between ancient Chinese thought and Hegelian Western philosophy, exploring and promoting the concepts of the human being's "subjectivity" and "nature of freedom" that he found in Hegel's philosophical system. Zhang states that *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a great work that clarifies the inevitable process through which human beings can finally achieve "self-actualization" and the "integration of subject and object." Zhang's interpretation and promotion of Hegelian philosophy is a wide departure from Chinese traditional philosophy, which insists on the idea of an inherent, inseparable "unity of nature and human beings."

#### THE METHOD OF ZHANG'S STUDY OF HEGEL

Hegel's work is very difficult even for a Western mind to comprehend. How, then, can it be understood by a Chinese one, conditioned to think and view the world so differently? In response to such concerns, Professor Zhang applies a traditional Chinese method of commentary to unpack Hegelian philosophy. In *Interpretation of Hegel's Logic*, Zhang breaks the text down paragraph by paragraph and chapter by chapter. He classifies each chapter into two parts: *interpretation* and *annotation*. This approach is a constant structure underlying Zhang's work.

The interpretation part of each of Zhang's chapters emphasizes the main issues—the difficulties faced by the interpreter, and Hegel's original intention. In the spirit of the Chinese style of scholarship, Zhang insists that one should not try to grasp the meaning of Hegel's argument from isolated words, sentences, and chapters, but rather attempt to find Hegel's original intention from a comprehensive perspective. This method of scholarship has a deep root in Chinese culture and is known as "seeing not only the tree but also the whole

forest”; the idea is that only by grasping the universality of a text can one gain access to the particularity of each section. This approach has been developed into an ontological statement about “the unity between one and many” (一多合一); in other words, it expresses that Chinese thought has “no separation between one and many” (一多不分).

In the annotation part of his work, Professor Zhang also employs two methods: one is annotating in association with related materials from Hegel’s other works, thereby making a link with *Hegel’s Logic* and thus enabling readers to have cross-references within a wide range of Hegel’s work; the other method is to present Western interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy. This labor-intensive approach requires that Professor Zhang acquire extensive and wide-ranging familiarity with Western interpretations of Hegelian philosophy. As chief editor of the *Dictionary for Hegelian Terms*, Professor Zhang wrote about 100,000 words of the text himself. Every entry is based on the original German version of Hegel’s work. Consequently, every entry is like a piece of a condensed thesis from Hegel. The main purpose of this dictionary is to give Chinese readers a well-informed entry into Hegelian thought and provide scholars with a convenient resource to aid in their study of Hegel. As Professor Zhang’s graduate student at Peking University in China, I witnessed firsthand his profound and far-reaching knowledge of Hegel during the compilation of this work.

#### THE MAIN CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF HEGEL IN CHINA

Professor Zhang’s extensive study of Hegel has created a contemporary Chinese model for the treatment of philosophical thought from other cultures. First, this model carefully explores what Chinese scholars can learn from the “otherness” of different schools and cultures of thought. Second, this model takes otherness into its own tradition and integrates it into a unity of differences.

Making use of this twofold method, Professor Zhang has provided many interesting and innovative explanations of Hegelian philosophy. He maintains that Hegelian philosophy plays an important role in the link between modern metaphysics and post-modern phenomenology. Far from the assault on Hegel’s “subjectivity” made by some Western postmodern philosophers, Zhang’s interpretation promotes the “subjectivity” in Hegelian philosophy to a key role. While some Western postmodern philosophers argue against Hegel’s views on subjectivity, Professor Zhang emphasizes the positive influences of Hegelian philosophy on modern and contemporary thought. He declares that Hegelian philosophy not only represents the peak of traditional metaphysics, but also contains and foreshadows the collapse of metaphysics itself and the conception of many important thoughts in modern and contemporary philosophy. In fact, many famous modern and contemporary philosophers have achieved as much as they have only through standing on the shoulders of Hegel, according to Zhang. Writing in honor of the 200-year anniversary of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Zhang’s essay “Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*” enumerates the many ways in which modern and contemporary phenomenology has been inherited from Hegel. “We always say Hegel is the epitome of traditional metaphysics. But rather, Hegel is the precursor of modern and contemporary philosophy” (Zhang 2007, 4). The slogan of the phenomenology movement, “Returning to the Substance Itself”(现象学口号“回到事情本身”的源头), which is one of the most important intellectual trends in modern and contemporary philosophy, is similar, according to Zhang, to saying “face to the substance itself”(面向事情本身). According to Zhang, this concept dates back to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and cannot be correctly understood or elaborated on by contemporary philosophers without Hegel’s idea that “the substance is the subject”(实体本质上即是主体).

Professor Zhang gives an example from a Chinese context to explain his meaning. He

asks, “What is the nature of the Confucian temple in Qufu, Shandong when one first sees it?” It is only through a complete *process* of visiting the temple, Zhang tells us, that one can appreciate gradually the wholeness of a Confucian teaching. Zhang utilizes this example to clarify the Hegelian view of process and wholeness. From the preface of the book, Hegel points out “the conclusions and outcomes of philosophy are not the sole pursuit. What really matters is the process that achieves the outcomes, which is the ‘actual unity’ (现实的整体) which realizes the purpose. And this process or unity is the whole process of practicing the conclusion that ‘the substance is the subject’” (Zhang 2007, 4). So, according to Hegel, the “substance” is the object to the conscious self (作为认识者的自我), the subject. At the beginning of cognition there is an opposite relationship between the substance and the conscious self, or between the object and the subject. However, with the process of cognition, the substance reveals its nature, and at the same time, it embodies the subject gradually. That is to say, the object reveals its characteristics as the conscious self gradually; the object becomes more like the subject. And the opposition between the object and the subject collapses and they become a unity as the substance reveals itself as the subject fully. The whole of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is the description of the process of the substance becoming the subject.

One hundred years after the publication of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, reiterated that coming to the object is “approaching to the substance itself”(走近事情本身). Later Husserl improved this remark to “returning to the substance itself.” This kind of claim, according to Husserl’s own explanation, focuses exclusively on how the substance emerges in our consciousness, and at the same time excludes anything outside the consciousness. For the purpose of “returning to the substance itself,” Husserl introduced a series of concepts and a terminology designed to reduce everything to the substance which only exists *relative to* the consciousness, to the substance which only exists *in* the consciousness, including “suspension” (悬置), “phenomenological reduction”(现象学还原), “transcendental reduction” (先验还原), and “essential reduction” (本质还原). As a result, the “general essence,” which is the focus of phenomenology, becomes the substance existing in the consciousness, and is not something that transcends the consciousness.

Although there are differences in the methods and the objectives of Husserl and Hegel, we can see that Husserl’s “returning to the substance itself” is the echo of Hegel’s “dedication in the substance” (致力于事情) and “the object is the subject”(实体本质上即是主体). This is how Zhang obtains the connection between Hegelian philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology. Zhang’s work was the very first effort in China to introduce phenomenology to Chinese academics; clearly, he was the forerunner of Chinese phenomenology.

#### HEGELIAN SUBJECTIVITY AND CHINESE UNITY BETWEEN HEAVEN, EARTH, AND HUMAN BEINGS

What has Professor Zhang found in Hegelian philosophy by looking through a Chinese lens? According to him, there are two crucial issues in Hegelian philosophy that can make good focal points for a cross-cultural dialogue: a) human “subjectivity” and b) the nature of freedom. In his book: *The Process of Self-Realization: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Zhang takes Hegel’s work as expressive of the way to attend to “self-actualization” and achieve the “unity of subject and object.” This understanding grows out of Zhang’s Chinese philosophical context and background. Zhang believes that the Chinese vision of the unity of heaven, earth, and human beings is an important theme throughout the Chinese philosophical tradition; yet this vision ignores human subjectivity and freedom. Identifying this

deficiency through his study of Hegel might be one of the most important contributions Professor Zhang has made to the development of Chinese philosophy.

Professor Zhang also specifies the similarities and differences between Hegelian and Chinese philosophy, especially on the problem of dialectics. According to him, Hegel's philosophical quest is to uncover how subjectivity overcomes objectivity. Zhang holds that the principal thinking pattern in Western traditional philosophy is that of the "subject—object dichotomy." Although Plato is the initiator of this thinking pattern, it is Descartes who actually founds the kind of "subjective philosophy" (主体性哲学) that employs the "subject—object dichotomy."

"Subjectivity" refers to the initiative of subject, that is, how it cognizes and occupies the object. Hegel's is the epitome of traditional subjective philosophy. He insists that there is no absolute opposition between subject and object; their relationship is dialectical. This is what he calls the "unity of opposites" (对立统一), or the synthesis between subject and object. The "unity of opposites" in Hegelian philosophy shares some similarities with the concept of the "unity of Yin and Yang" (阴阳合一) in Chinese traditional philosophy in that they are both "opposite and complementary to each other" (相反相成). Moreover, Zhang holds that Hegel emphasizes unity, which means the individual is subordinated to the collective. This is also similar to the collectivism found in traditional Chinese culture. Before the foundation of the People's Republic of China, some scholars exaggerated and even distorted this aspect of Hegelian philosophy, and tried to obliterate its "subjectivity" entirely in order to serve the authoritarian regime. Zhang privileges the collective over the individual, but recognizes that the subjective remains an important aspect in Hegel's conception of unity.

In fact, Hegel's "unity of opposites" is entirely based on the "subject—object dichotomy." Hegel's "unity of opposites" asserts that the "positive" inherently contains the "negative" within it (内在的). Interpreting this comment, Zhang says we have to admit that "inherently" here refers to the "unity of Yin and Yang" as being "opposite and complementary to each other." As we can see, for Zhang, there are important similarities between Hegelian philosophy and Chinese traditional philosophy.

However, Hegel integrates his dialectics with his "absolute idealism" (绝对理念), which is supersensible and insubstantial, and is a variation of "binary antagonism" (二元对立论), after all. Hegel's absolute idealism has its externality and its other side (彼岸性), which differentiates it from the dialectics found in Chinese traditional philosophy. Chinese dialectics emphasize the concepts of "oneness of heaven and human being" and "continuity through change." Both are within the range of objective reality. They do not admit the existence of a supersensible world. The concepts of "opposite and complementary to each other" and "interchange with each other" both focus on the relationship among objects in the real world. All the objects of reality are interrelated and integrated into a unity, and this is the meaning of the Chinese "unity of opposites."

Contrarily, Hegel's "unity of opposites" between subject and object is a long process wherein the subject keeps overcoming the counteraction from the object. A smaller unity is achieved when a smaller counteraction between subject and object has been overcome, and then the smaller unity faces a bigger counteraction. It is only because of the subjectivity of the subject that the smaller unity overcomes the bigger counteraction and turns into a bigger unity, etc. Finally, the biggest unity—the "absolute subject" (绝对主体) (namely, the "absolute idea" and the "absolute spirit")—is the final conciliation of any counteraction. Zhang refers to the work of Josiah Royce: the "absolute subject" seems an experienced winner who has defeated various sizes of counteraction (Zhang 2010, 125). Self-actualization in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a vivid process of searching for self-independence and

self-certification (独立自我神采飞扬的历程).

Comparing this view with Chinese traditional thought—the “oneness of heaven and human being” and “continuity through change”—the Chinese view aims to drown the self in “oneness” and “unity.” It tries to erase the differences between others and the self, between the object and the self. The “obliteration of self-consciousness” (无我) is the ultimate ideal of life. To be specific, the subject, or the self, is subordinated to various social communities (e.g., family, clan, race, and nation). The individual is forced to depend on and be subject to these social communities. Self is afraid to exert freedom, and can only say and do things within the range of social permission; in other words, the self is drowned in its unity with nature, and the ignorance of subjective power by which human beings can recognize and conquer nature finally results in the underdevelopment of science in China, according to Zhang.

As for Chinese dialectics (i.e., the “oneness of heaven and man” and “continuity through change”), the self-actualization process is a period of history in which the self tries to stand outside of the feudal social communities and the unity of nature to become an individual with its own initiative. According to Zhang, this period of history has not been completed in China. Compared with the West’s vivid self-actualization process, the Chinese one is rather solemn. This difference results from the two different dialectics of traditional Chinese and Western philosophies.

For the sake of the development of Chinese and Western philosophy, Professor Zhang believes that these two entities should embrace and complement each other. Both Chinese and Western philosophy have their merits and drawbacks. The complementation and integration of Chinese and Western cultures is a central trend of economic globalization and increasing cultural communication. However, this complementation and integration does not mean random mixing. The future might hold a merged but different Chinese-Western culture that results from retaining each culture’s advantages while absorbing the strengths of the other.

Zhang argues that concepts Western culture previously regarded as enlightened, such as “democracy,” “science,” and “subjectivity,” have revealed their various disadvantages: “ego inflation” (自我膨胀), “ultra-individualism,” “hegemonism toward nature” (对自然的霸权主义), “indulging in science” (科学至上主义), and “anthropocentrism,” etc. All of these disadvantages can be summarized as “despotism of the self” (自我专制主义) or “self-exclusivity” (唯我独尊). Chinese traditional culture, on the other hand, which bases its philosophical worldview on the “oneness of heaven and man,” emphasizes community consciousness. When it comes to difficulties, individuals should work tightly with each other, concentrating everyone’s energy to form a unified, intact power. Zhang thinks this kind of behavior has merit and should be maintained, but that the main drawback of Chinese culture is that the individual is drowned in the community and lacks initiative and creativity. Professor Zhang advocates the integration of a different concept, to be distinguished from the community-prior idea in Chinese culture, the individualism in Western culture, the others-prior concept (以“他人”优先的观点) suggested by Emmanuel Levinas, and the idea of combination with nature (万物一体) as applied by Western contemporary scholars.

Zhang’s new concept of the “oneness of heaven and man” seeks to bring the spirit of subjectivity in the Western “subject—object dichotomy” into the Chinese traditional concept of the “oneness of heaven and man.” Zhang holds that the outcome will be “everything merging together but holding its own merits” (万物不同而相通). Under this “merging but different” concept, we not only admit the specialty of the individual by recognizing its uniqueness, but also embrace the supportive and responsibility-generating idea of acknowl-

edging that everything is interrelated. The idea of respecting others means at the same time the recognition of the respective selves (他人各自的“自我”), or respecting the specialty of others. The “self” reiterated by Professor Zhang is nothing but the “self” held by everyone, not the exclusivist “self” of individualism and self-despotism. In our current context, the idea of “loving others” is expressed by Zhang in Chinese as “benevolence means to love others” (仁者爱人)—an idea first suggested by Confucius. This should also be understood in such a way as to favor the admission and value of others’ respective “selves.” Zhang holds that at the core of thousands of years of Chinese feudalism was the goal of obliterating the specialty and freedom of others in order to implement the enforced uniformity of Procrustean policy (强求一致). Zhang believes this is why the idea of “loving others” cannot come true in China. Only by respecting others’ “selves,” by bringing the Procrustean policy to an end and creating a “merging but different” world, can the idea of “loving others” become possible. If this process does come to fruition in Chinese culture, the world may enter the time when the Eastern “sleeping lion” will become powerful.

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