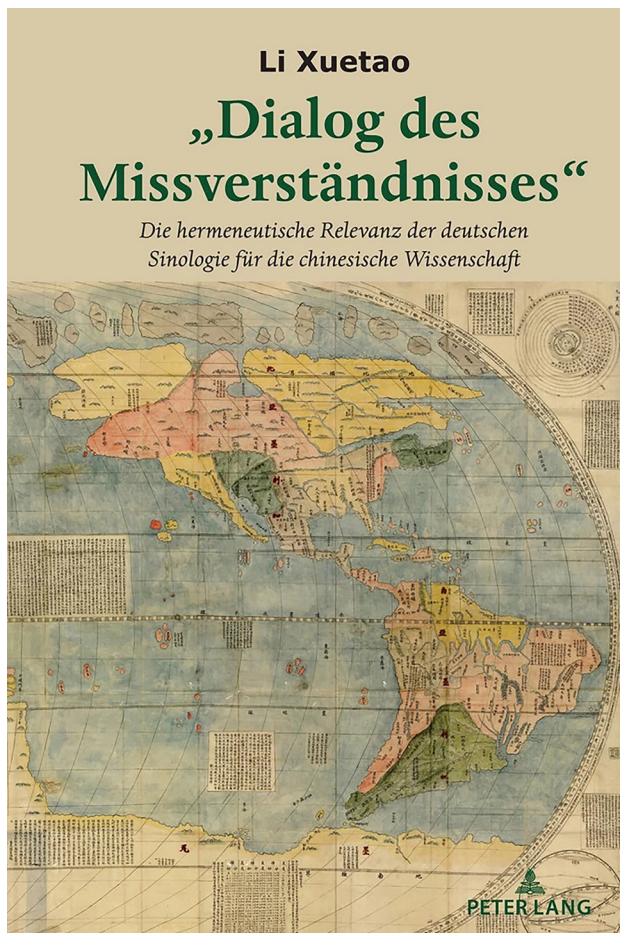


## Book Review

Li Xuetao: S. Weber (Trans), *Dialog des Missverständnisses—Die hermeneutische Relevanz der deutschen Sinologie für die chinesische Wissenschaft.*

Reviewed by **Sabine Weber**, University of Bonn, Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies, Bonn, Germany,  
E-mail: [weber@uni-bonn.de](mailto:weber@uni-bonn.de). <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6340-7974>

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Just from taking a look at Li Xuetao's *Dialogue of Misunderstanding—The Hermeneutic Relevance of German Sinology for the Chinese Academic World* (*Dialog des Missverständnisses—Die hermeneutische Relevanz der deutschen Sinologie für die chinesische Wissenschaft*, 2022) table of contents does seem to give reason for skepticism concerning the German edition's relevance: the preamble, for example, in large part consists of paraphrases concerning German hermeneutics, and Chapters 2 and 3 rely heavily on quotes from German primary sources. While providing new information for the Chinese reader, the German one may wonder whether they should not have turned towards the original primary sources in the first place. This estimation, however, only considers the work's informative, descriptive value. A closer look at the person behind the study, Li Xuetao, quickly reveals that this impression does not do his actual ambitions justice.

Inspired by his own time as a grad student in Germany, Professor Dr. Li Xuetao (李雪涛, \*1965), Professor at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and Dean of the Faculty of History since 2018, has since mainly dedicated his research to the field of the history of German-Chinese academic relationships and exchange. His methodological approach however was owed to his philosophical studies: he wrote his PhD thesis about the translatory processes framing the introduction of Buddhism into the Chinese speaking world,<sup>1</sup> and began to study and translate Karl Jasper's work on the philosophy of history as early as 1992.<sup>2</sup> Both the transfer of Indian philosophical ideas into the Chinese context as well as Jasper's concept of the axial age pose concrete examples of the creative potential latent in intercultural encounters. When Li slowly shifted his attention from religious to historiographical studies in the following years, it is—especially with regard to the contemporary international political climate—no surprise that he turned towards global history as his preferred structural approach. On Jasper's concept of the axial age, he commented in 2004:

The discovery of the “axial age” revealed a completely new perspective – a perspective which puts the focus on the history of man and the value of the different individual human cultures. Today, we can generally assume that world history and world philosophy correlate, and that their interdependency provides us with a broad and rich field. The importance of the intercultural processes of exchange and communication contained in it, however, became more and more apparent. And that is the reason why “communication” was announced by Jaspers as an independent and important philosophical concept in its own right.<sup>3</sup>

1 Published in 2019 under the title *Die Übertragung buddhistischer Sutras ins Chinesische: Theorie und Praxis am Beispiel von Zanning (919–1001)*. Großheirath: Ostasienvverlag, 2019.

2 Resulting in his translation of Jasper's magnum opus *Die Großen Philosophen*. Published in 2010 as *Da zhexuejia* 大哲学家 [The Great Philosophers]. Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2 vol.

3 Li, Xuetao 李雪涛 (2004). *Yasibe'ersi de shijie zhexue ji shijie xueshi guannian* 雅斯贝尔斯的世界哲学及世界哲学史的观念 [Karl Jasper's Concept and History of a World Philosophy]. *Kaifang shidai* 開放時代 [Open Times], 1. Online: <http://www.opentimes.cn/Abstract/660.html>.

And concerning the approach of global history or *entangled history*, he said in 2021:

World history is understood in terms of so-called *entangled history*. It is very true that the contemporary research in world history is indispensable in order to break through the nationalistic limitations of mainstream methodology and theory. The simplifying perspectives of ethnic histories or eurocentrism are completely inappropriate for this kind of research. In a continuous process of interaction, the observed object of research and its active perception are always mutually constative.<sup>4</sup>

The call for an open dialogue, the reduction of nationally limited and dogmatic thought runs like a golden thread through nearly all of his publications, mostly hidden in quotes of renowned foreign or Chinese scholars and experts. That these are more than just individual, topic-related statements becomes especially visible in essays, that, content-wise actually have no relation to these kinds of ideas. In 2010, for example, Li published an article in a Chinese art and culture journal on records of the Cologne Cathedral written by Chinese travelers in the 19th century. This exclusively descriptive and historiographical text ended with the following section:

“Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) used Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) concept of ‘pre-understanding’ to describe this ‘understanding prior to understanding.’ While this is an unavoidable step in the larger process of understanding, it is simultaneously also a necessary preliminary stage which guarantees the openness and plurality of understanding. [...] Gadamer developed his hermeneutical principles of ‘situatedness of understanding,’ ‘fusion of horizons’ and ‘historical consciousness’ on the basis of Heidegger’s philosophy. If we look at human culture as a kind of collective, overarching artwork which simply exists in different versions or languages, then every attempt to understand the West has to be conducted inside the given paradigms of time and space as determined by historicity. Although the hermeneutical and the work exist inside the boundaries of happening, they are also in a state of continuous becoming. The horizon of understanding is therefore part of contemporary being, but simultaneously also subject to a constant process of becoming and change. If we consider this, then this eternally strived for, so-called ‘absolute truth’ or ‘dogmatically correct’ cannot exist—understanding is defined by change and plurality. Without a past, there could have been no contemporary horizon. It was therefore not only the scholars of the Late Qing who were subject to the process and context of understanding. For us today it would be just as futile to try to think ourselves outside our own epistemological restrictions ...”

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4 Li, Xuetao 李雪涛 (2021). Die Geschichte der chinesisch-ausländischen Beziehungen ist die wahre Weltgeschichte [The History of Chinese-Foreign Relations is the Real World History. Online: <https://www.writing-history-with-china.phil.fau.de/resources/translations/li-xuetao-die-geschichte-der-chinesisch-auslaendischen-beziehungen-ist-die-wahre-weltgeschichte/>. Translation of Li, Xuetao 李雪涛. Zhong-Wai guanxishi caishi zhenzheng de shijieshi: 中外关系史才是真正的世界史. *Shanghai shida xuebao* 上海师大学报 [Shanghai Normal University Journal], 3. Online: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SapDwM8rNoaNFoqDPsAwjQ>.

Neither Gadamer nor Heidegger had been mentioned before. But, a person who had been mentioned was the political activist Kang Youwei—the author had decided to quote his political convictions in the context of Kang’s descriptions of the Cologne Cathedral: “The people of our nation cannot refrain from reading Chinese books, cannot possibly travel to other countries. To check and examine each other and engage in critical discussion—this is not something that threatens mankind, but its exit from savagery.”<sup>5</sup>

Returning to our book at hand, it becomes quickly obvious that all the included articles and essays follow the same line of argument.

In this regard, the book’s opening section, the preamble, poses the study’s intellectual and methodological fundament. While content-wise applying Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s hermeneutical approach of understanding to the situation of intercultural exchange, Li simultaneously uses it in order to destigmatize mechanisms of encountering the other which are normally seen as threatening or harmful (prejudice, heresy) and thereby emphasizes their latent creative potential. In pointing at the historical nature of understanding, he deconstructs the monolithic dogma of a universal sovereignty of interpretation as ahistorical. As a subject to hermeneutical change, the observed phenomenon is therefore inevitably an object to continuous reevaluation. But instead of considering this cognition a threat to his own (world-)image, Li—in unison with thinkers like Kang Youwei—emphasizes its inherent chance of mutual growth. Even the “progress of all humankind” seems (admittedly idealistically) possible to him. For this “progress” in the process of understanding is always mutual: the other is observed from the perspective of the self. As such, the other is put into a new context, which then again creates a new approach for its understanding.

This in turn highlights the contrasts to the self, which opens up new possibilities of perceiving the familiar – self and other get newly evaluated, reconsidered, discussed. And this is the absolute basis for sound and professional future-oriented academic work: “Without fresh academic views texts from sinological antiquity would become meaningless [...] If contemporary Chinese academia does not apply the research models of modern scientific discourse, does not integrate itself into the critical consciousness of today, it cannot and will not survive.”

Both the already mentioned political climate as well as Li’s comments on the predominant tenor in the academic world show that such an open attitude towards an unbiased cultural and scholarly dialogue is anything but the norm. Already in his preamble, he states: “Many sinological sources, personalities or phenomena possess a unified and standardized interpretation in the Chinese context,” or “Chinese scholars of fields like Chinese history, literature or philosophy tend to refer to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

individual misunderstandings of foreign colleagues to completely refrain from intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches [like these].”

This tension between domestic and foreign scholarship is the topic of Chapter 1, which in following the methodological groundwork of the preamble discusses the nature of the core problem—and as such implicitly the main target of Li’s criticism. While with regard to content, the interview with Fabian Heubel provides an introduction in the problem’s history and its contemporary debate in the field, the discussed examples concerning the disputes between the disciplines of Sinology and National Studies illustrate the problems’ ideological foundation. “Pipe dreams of a pure culture” or “narratives with a sovereign universality” oppose the open dialogue and therefore the future-oriented and unrestrained development of academic research. Chapter 2 then reveals that this criticism was not only directed towards the sinological world alone. In his overview of the history of the development of foreign Sinology in China during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Li discusses concrete cases in which German sinologists contributed to other disciplines in China and therefore had strong impacts on the Chinese education system of today. This means that the historical overview on the one hand provides an example of the beneficial potential inherent in intercultural cooperation and exchange, while simultaneously offering the historical evidence for the intrinsic necessity of intercultural exchange for the development of the sciences as well as the multicultural core structure of modern China. This line of argument is substantiated by correlating quotes from renowned thinkers like Cai Yuanpei (“The independence of spirit, the freedom of thought”).

With his articles, Li therefore concretely responds to potential apprehensiveness of nationalistic, conservative or ethnocentric thinkers. His repeated inclusion of supporting statements from great personalities from Chinese political history (Kang Youwei and Cai Yuanpei are both seen as driving forces behind the structural foundation of the modern Chinese state and the assertion of Chinese culture) serve as soothing answers to implied allegations of a renunciation or potential loss of cultural identity. From this perspective, certain passages in Chapter 2 shine in a different light. While Wolfgang Franke’s statement that he in spite of his open appreciation for Chinese culture “never lost his own individual point of view” initially appears very much out of context, its function with regard to Li’s overarching criticism becomes clear: the recognition of the achievements of another culture does not necessitate a loss of one’s own roots. Rather, here lies the very core of the potential of intercultural discourse: the possibility to combine ideas which previously had been completely ignorant of each other. And by historically retracing the international elements of contemporary Chinese society and culture, he confronts ideas of nationalistic ideology and thought with a Chinese identity which is and has always been a process of multicultural and global exchanges.

While Chapter 2 and 3 are thus concerned with the life and work of two influential German sinologists in terms of content, they have a structurally parallel function as argumentative examples for Li's point of view. Wolfgang Franke, the focus of Chapter 2, owed his discovery of the value of Chinese inscriptions in Southeast Asia to his German academic background, and the missionary Richard Wilhelm, the subject of Chapter 3, was able to decipher and translate the cryptic depth of the Book of Changes for the broader German audience thanks to his theological education. The scholarly impact of both contributions is still felt in European Sinology as well as Chinese academia.

*Dialogue of Misunderstanding* is the author's direct response to ideas of fear of criticism, nationalistically motivated narrow-mindedness and narratives of monolithic social and culture systems. Li argumentatively refutes the apprehensions underlying these mechanisms and simultaneously exposes their inherent dangers of academic stagnation and intellectual-cultural limitation. Instead, he demands the very title-giving dialogue, which, defined by different perspectives, openness and critical thought, provides new insights for all contributing sides. And even though it is already apparent from the work itself, I myself during my years at his Institute for Global History was able witness that this appeal is not limited to the Chinese academic world. Global History is also always Contemporary History.

Coming back to our question from the beginning of this essay, it becomes clear that the book states a model example for what is called "change of function" in translatory science. In his original Chinese monograph, Li addresses a Chinese academic readership and uses the study of the history of German Sinology in order to parallelly point at certain alarming developments in contemporary Chinese academia and society. This way however, the German version becomes a testimonial of the current events in global Sinology. It provides the German reader with an insight into the problems and discourses of a colleague working in the China of the 21st century, and gives an elaborate example of the means and measures with which he tries to tackle them. With this work having therefore become a contribution to the contemporary history of international Sinology, the protagonist of the German edition is not a German, but the Chinese sinologist Li Xuetao.