

Front. Philos. China 2019, 14(4): 519–522
DOI 10.3868/s030-008-019-0031-7

SPECIAL THEME

Eric S. Nelson

Introduction to the Special Theme: Heidegger, Politics, and Chinese Philosophy

1 Heidegger, National Socialism, and Daoism

The three articles collected here examine Martin Heidegger's controversial political commitments and involvement in National Socialist Germany (1933–45), particularly in the context of the recently published *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Heften*), and his reception and interpretation of two early Daoist philosophical sources: the *Daodejing* attributed to Laozi and the *Zhuangzi*. These two engagements mark the beginning and end of National Socialist Germany. While Heidegger enthusiastically embraced and supported the National Socialist movement in the early 1930s, and increasingly became disillusioned with its course if not publically breaking with it, he devoted his attention to these two Daoist sources in the closing years of the Second World War and the initial years following the total defeat of Nazi Germany.¹

There have been many works discussing Heidegger's politics, which are entangled with his philosophy of history, as well as the Daoist influences on his thinking.² This special issue is one of the few discussions to question the intersections between his politics, the catastrophe of National Socialism, and the significance of Daoism in the emergence of his later thought. This

¹ On Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism and the *Black Notebooks*, see Nelson 2017b, 484–93. On his interpretation of Daoism, see Burik 2010, Davis 2016, 459–71, Davis 2020, 161–96, May 1996, Nelson 2017a, 109–29, Nelson 2019, 362–84, and Xia 2017.

² On Heidegger's philosophy of history, which would both entangle him with and differentiate his position from National Socialism, compare Nelson 2007, 97–114, and Nelson 2017b, 484–93.

Eric S. Nelson (✉)

Division of Humanities, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China

E-mail: hmericsn@ust.hk

historical nexus has allowed authors such as Xia Kejun to consider whether there was a “Daoist turn” in Heidegger’s thinking (Heidegger 2010; Nelson 2019, 362–84; Xia 2017).

Heidegger’s fascination with Laozi and Zhuangzi occurs while he is assessing the dangers of decision, self-assertion, and the will (concepts that he employed in his early support of National Socialism) and, in his Daoist reflections on a defeated Germany in “Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and an Older Man” (1945) published in *Country Path Conversations*, adopting a more radical language of letting (*lassen*) and releasement (*Gelassenheit*) in relation to the *Zhuangzi* (mediated through the translations of Martin Buber and Richard Wilhelm) in addition to German sources such as Meister Eckhart and Schelling.³ Heidegger’s Daoist oriented reflections from 1943 to 1950 are delimited by his cultural, philosophical, and political concerns, presuppositions, and his hermeneutical situation. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s reflections reveal Daoist dimensions to his thinking even if they do not constitute a “Daoist turn” as such. They disclose possibilities of letting and releasing as well as addressing other key themes of his mature thought: usefulness and uselessness, the thing, technology, poetic thinking, originary words, emptiness and nothingness, and dwelling.

2 The Contributions

Each of these three articles is concerned with intercultural hermeneutics and the connections between interpretation and politics: either in Heidegger’s encounter with Chinese forms of thought (the first and third articles) or in the differences between Chinese and Western discourses concerning Heidegger’s controversial political and racial remarks (the second article).

In the first article, Jean-Yves Heurtebise interrogates the extent to which Orientalism and Occidentalism are operative in Heidegger’s depictions of Daoism, the *Laozi*, and the *Zhuangzi*. Although Heidegger’s engagement with Chinese and Japanese sources has been inspirational for comparative philosophy, Heurtebise traces its limits and problems. Heidegger’s critique of

³ This point is discussed in Xia 2017 and Nelson 2019, 362–84.

the history of metaphysics, onto-theology, and technological civilization is primarily Occidental, requiring a confrontation with Greek origins that would lead to a renewal of European spirit. Asian forms of thought are conceived initially as mythical and subsequently as poetic discourses. Insofar as they offer supplementary insights without addressing the fundamental questions of philosophy as the history of being, Heidegger's discourse remains trapped within a dialectic of Orientalist and Occidentalist presuppositions.

In the second article, Liu Yu-Chao and Tsai Wei-Ding examine the academic micro-politics at work in the publication and interpretation of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*. The authors elucidate a number of notable differences in Western and Chinese academic discussions of these works and their anti-Semitism. This study has a significant implication for hermeneutics, revealing the striking role of micro-political concerns that guide interpretation itself and the conflicts between competing interpretations.

Mark Kevin S. Cabural, in the third article, addresses the links between Heidegger's understanding of the German vocation and mission, as formulated during his early support of National Socialism, and his interpretation of the *Daodejing* in his 1950 lecture "The Thing" (Das Ding). Cabural not only analyzes how this lecture should be interpreted as a reading of *Daodejing* chapter 11 and its conception of *wu* 無, but also how Heidegger's earlier descriptions of the German people and its mission intersect with the emptiness of the jug that in the generosity of its gathering and outpouring indicates a rejection of the National Socialist mission.

References

- Burik, Steven. 2010. *The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking: Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Davis, Bret W. 2016. "Heidegger and Asian Philosophy," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, edited by François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson, 459–71. London: Bloomsbury.
- Davis, Bret W. 2020. "Heidegger and Daoism: A Dialogue on the Useless Way of Unnecessary Being," in *Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology*, edited by David Chai, 161–96. London: Bloomsbury.
- Heidegger, Martin, 2010. *Country Path Conversations*, translated by Bret W. Davis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- May, Reinhard. 1996. *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East-Asian Influences on His Work*. London: Routledge.

- Nelson, Eric S. 2007. "History as Decision and Event in Heidegger." *Arhe* 4.8: 97–114.
- Nelson, Eric S. 2017a. *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nelson, Eric S. 2017b. "Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*: National Socialism, Antisemitism, and the History of Being," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, edited by François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson, 484–93. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nelson, Eric S. 2019. "Heidegger's Daoist Turn." *Research in Phenomenology* 49.3: 362–84.
- Xia, Kejun. 2017. *Yige Dengdai yu Wuyong de Minzu: Zhuangzi yu Haidege'er de Di'erci Zhuanxiang* 一個等待與無用的民族：莊子與海德格爾的第二次轉向 (*A Waiting and Useless Nation: Zhuangzi and Heidegger's Second Turning*). Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe.