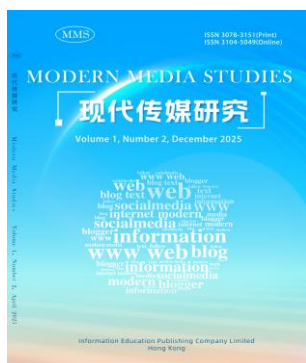




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Local Construction and Modern Practice of “Ontological Aesthetics”: A Review of Professor Jiang Fei’s *The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era*

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the new era, the “ontological turn” in Chinese aesthetics has become an established consensus within academic circles. Marx’s practical ontology and Heidegger’s ontological philosophy have provided crucial theoretical underpinnings for this development. In his new book, *The Ontological Turn and the Construction of Theoretical Forms in Chinese Aesthetics of the New Era*, Professor Jiang Fei zeroes in on the central topic of the “ontological turn” within the realm of Chinese aesthetics. By retracing the ideological origins of the “ontological turn” in Western philosophy, he reveals the influence exerted by Sartre and Heidegger on aesthetics during the new era, and meticulously analyzes the specific pathways, as well as the internal and external driving forces, of such influence. Moreover, using “ontology” as a guiding thread, Professor Jiang combs through the developmental trajectory and focal points of aesthetics in the new era. He synthesizes a multitude of aesthetic schools that have emerged since the new era began, summarizes the achievements and limitations of the “ontological turn”, and on this foundation, advocates for a modern Chinese aesthetics that is firmly grounded in the present, integrates key elements, and facilitates a seamless transition between ancient and

contemporary aesthetics.

Keywords: Jiang Fei; Practical Theory; Ontology; Chinese Aesthetics; Modernity

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标题: “存在论美学”的本土性建构与现代性实践——评江飞教授的《新时期中国美学的存在论转向与理论形态建构》

摘要: 新时期以来,中国美学的“存在论”转向成为学界共识,马克思的实践存在论与海德格尔的存在论哲学为其提供了关键理论支撑。江飞教授新著《新时期中国美学的存在论转向与理论形态建构》聚焦中国美学界“存在论转向”这一核心议题,通过追溯西方哲学“存在论”转向的思想源流,揭示萨特与海德格尔对新时期美学的影响,剖析其影响的具体路径与内外动因。同时以“存在论”为线索,梳理出新时期美学的发展路径与中心,整合新时期以来众多的美学流派,总结“存在论”转向的得与失,并在此基础上呼唤一种立足当下、融合中心、实现古今转换的现代性中国美学。

关键词: 江飞; 实践论; 存在论; 中国美学; 现代性

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1.Introduction

Professor Jiang Fei (Professor of the School of Humanities, Anqing Normal University, and Director of the Research Center for Aesthetics and Literary Criticism) has long been engaged in the field of aesthetics. His academic career has been profoundly influenced by two senior scholars in the academic circle: he studied under Mr. Tong Qingbing during his doctoral period, and later under Mr. Zhu Liyuan during his visiting study at Fudan University. He was particularly inspired by Zhu Liyuan's "practical ontological" aesthetics and successfully applied for the research project *The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era* during this period. His new book, *The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era* (Fudan University Press, 2025), as the final achievement of this project, collects his research results on "ontological aesthetics" since 2017, and comprehensively sorts out the reasons, characteristics, values and limitations of the "ontological" turn of Chinese aesthetics in the New Era. As Zhu Liyuan commented, "It is a rare monograph in Chinese academic circles that systematically sorts out and studies Chinese ontological aesthetics in the New Era" (Jiang Fei, 2025, P2).

With “ontology” as the core clue running through, the main content of the book is divided into three parts: the elaboration of basic theories of “being”, the analysis of “ontological” aesthetic schools and value reflection. The first part clarifies the context of the “ontological turn” in Western philosophy, takes Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger as key landmarks, and divides Western philosophy into two major periods: traditional ontology and existentialism. Starting from core concepts, it sorts out the philosophical turn of “ontology - epistemology - existentialism” and clarifies the “subversive” and “innovative” significance of existential philosophy to the previous two. The second part focuses on the Chinese context. By sorting out the humanistic turn in Chinese academic circles since the New Era and the acceptance process of Sartre and Heidegger’s thoughts, it presents the specific paths through which existentialism and ontological philosophy have influenced Chinese academic circles and further reveals the internal and external motivations for the “ontological” turn of Chinese aesthetics in the New Era. At the same time, it clarifies the diversity of this turn in theoretical forms and conducts in-depth introduction and evaluation on specific ontological aesthetic forms such as transcendent aesthetics, life aesthetics, daily life aesthetics, and body aesthetics. The third part discusses the value and limitations of “ontological aesthetics”. Supported by a multi-theoretical perspective, the book systematically presents the history, theory and practice of “ontological aesthetics” in the New Era. It comprehensively interprets and analyzes “ontological aesthetics” in terms of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures, the combination of ancient and modern times, and the connection between theory and practice, making it the first monograph that systematically studies “ontological aesthetics” since the new century.

2. The Emergence of Chinese “Ontological Aesthetics” Under the Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures

The evolution of Western philosophy began with ontology, then went through epistemology, and turned to existentialism. Starting from the concept of ontology, Jiang Fei defines “noumenon” under Christian Wolff’s notion of “ontology”, summarizing it into three core characteristics: essentiality, logicity, and variability¹. At the same time, starting from the material ontology of ancient Greek philosophical thought, he divides the philosophy from Plato, Aristotle to Descartes into the traditional ontology stage, and the philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger into the epistemology stage. Among them, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel represents the culmination and peak of the development of Western ontological philosophy. Although there are differences in the paths and focuses of ontological and epistemological philosophy in exploring the world, they show commonalities in aesthetic expression, both with distinct characteristics of subject-object duality and obsession with constructing metaphysical aesthetic systems. Jiang Fei holds that such theoretical flaws have provided internal opportunities for the turn to existentialism. In general academic cognition, Heidegger

¹ Ontology studies “being” itself, the research on the basic nature of all reality, and the theory of logical deduction of necessary truths about “being”. See Jiang Fei (2025): “The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era”, Shanghai: Fudan University Press, p.13.

is the initiator of existential philosophy. He conducted in-depth reflection on the previous philosophical traditions, believing that since Plato, Western philosophy has always focused on “beings” rather than the original “being”, leading to the long-term concealment and forgetting of “being”. Thus, Heidegger initiated the study of “being” itself, proposing that human beings, as “Dasein”, are the manifestation of “being” and the bridge to “being”. Eventually, “Dasein”, “being” and “being-in-the-world” became the core keywords of Heidegger’s existential philosophy, making it distinctly different from traditional ontological philosophy.¹ Different from the common academic view, Jiang Fei traces the ontological turn further back, arguing that it did not start with Heidegger but originated from Marxist philosophy. The classic propositions of existential philosophy, such as “Dasein’s being-in-the-world” and “the relationship between humans and the world”, were already discussed by Marx in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, namely, “Man is not an abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man - state, society” (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Communist Party of China, 2012, p.1). Further tracing back, Jiang Fei holds that the “ontological” turn began with Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and was completed with Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. In his view, the “ontological” turn was not a sudden theoretical rupture but a continuous development process: Marx marked the beginning of this turn, while Heidegger was its culmination. As he pointed out: “The significance of Heidegger’s proposal of ontology (i.e., ‘fundamental ontology’) lies in carrying out a revolutionary transformation in ontology, that is, Heidegger replaced the traditional metaphysical ontology with existential ontology and existentialism with epistemology” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.105).

In addition to the internal evolution of theory and the promotion of outstanding theorists, Jiang Fei further points out that the “ontological” turn in Western philosophy is also rooted in a specific historical and cultural context: the alienation of human beings in the capitalist era, reflections on the value of life under the invasion of science, and the humanistic turn and existential movement inspired by modern dilemmas such as belief and spiritual crises. It was against this background that “existential” philosophy emerged, evolving into two major theoretical forms: Marx’s practical ontology and Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. Marx’s practical ontology “takes practice as the foothold... profoundly reveals the ontological relationship between humans and nature, humans and the world, realizes the organic unity of practical view and ontology... and resolves the ready-made subject-object duality through generative practice” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.105). As the culmination of modern philosophy and the pioneer of post-modern philosophy, Heidegger’s existentialism absorbed the core experience of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. By distinguishing between “being” and “beings”, he pointed out that human beings, as “Dasein”, are special beings, emphasizing the “coexistence” of humans with others and the world, and “poetically dwelling” on the earth in an authentic state, ultimately constructing a

¹ Traditional ontological philosophy emphasizes “being” itself, pursues the entity of matter and spirit and the supersensible world through logical thinking. Existential philosophy focuses on how beings exist, is based on the sensible world, comprehends the relationship between humans and the world through practice, and emphasizes a realistic and specific existence.

new fundamental ontology (i.e., the “new metaphysics” he advocated), among which “human beings”, “freedom” and “heaven, earth, gods and humans” are the core keywords. Although Marx and Heidegger took different paths, they both transcended the epistemological thinking mode of subject-object separation in their own theoretical ways, bridged the split between humans and the world, and finally returned philosophy to “human philosophy”. Following this was the turn of aesthetics: aesthetics no longer separated from human being’s thematic basis and discourse resources for the “ontological” turn of Chinese aesthetics in the New Era.

In the second chapter of the book, by sorting out the literary history and academic history since the New Era, Jiang Fei systematically explains the humanistic historical context of the “ontological” turn of Chinese aesthetics, including the “human nature” theme running through the “aesthetics upsurge”, the discussion on image thinking, and the discussion on alienation theory, as well as the ideological inspiration brought by Sartre and Heidegger’s existentialism and ontological philosophy. This sorting out clearly shows that China in the New Era already had the soil for the growth of “ontological aesthetics”. On this basis, Jiang Fei further analyzes the generation reasons of Chinese ontological aesthetics from three dimensions: internal motivation, external resources and core forces. Thus, under the joint action of Western ideological influence, Chinese theoretical context and realistic context, ontological aesthetics was officially born in the New Era, deriving various forms of ontological aesthetic theories.

3.The Diverse Forms of “Ontological Aesthetics” Under the Combination of Ancient and Modern Times

Since the New Era, especially after 1990, the pattern of “practical aesthetics” dominating Chinese aesthetic circles has gradually been broken. Changes in the realistic context, internal theoretical limitations and the influence of Western modern and contemporary philosophy have made traditional practical aesthetics increasingly questioned and tend to decline. At the same time, an “Heidegger boom” emerged in academic circles, and the research enthusiasm for Heidegger’s thoughts in China far exceeded the “Sartre boom” in the 1980s, making Heidegger the core ideological source for the development of aesthetic theories during this period. When many scholars look back on the academic context of this stage, they all focus their research on Heidegger, as Liu Xiaofeng directly pointed out in *Heidegger and China*: “We deeply feel that the person who can bring a historic turn to Chinese thought is none other than Heidegger” (Liu Xiaofeng, 2017, p.6). Based on this, taking the universally recognized “ontological” turn in academic circles as the direction and the influence of Heidegger’s thoughts on Chinese scholars as the clue, Jiang Fei integrates various aesthetic forms emerging since the New Era after practical aesthetics, incorporating neo-practical aesthetics, post-practical aesthetics and other related aesthetic theories into the theoretical category of “ontological aesthetics”. At the same time, based on the degree of absorption of Marx and Heidegger’s existential philosophy, he classifies many aesthetic forms in the New Era into two categories: one category “takes Marx and Heidegger’s existential philosophy as the basis and has distinct characteristics of ontological aesthetics” (Jiang Fei, 2025,

p.273), including transcendent aesthetics, ontological aesthetics, practical ontological aesthetics and ecological ontological aesthetics; the other category is “the absorption and reference of Marx and Heidegger’s existential philosophy” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.273), where existential thoughts only serve as part of their theoretical basis. This type of aesthetics focuses more on the concrete dimension and daily life concerns, including life aesthetics, linguistic aesthetics, daily life aesthetics and body aesthetics. Centering on these eight forms of ontological aesthetics, he systematically analyzes their theoretical connotations and construction paths. In terms of specific interpretation, he selects representative theorists and their viewpoints in various aesthetic forms for in-depth interpretation: Yang Chunshi’s transcendent aesthetics, Pan Zhichang’s life aesthetics, Zhang Hong’s ontological aesthetics, Wang Yichuan’s linguistic aesthetics, Zhu Liyuan’s practical ontological aesthetics, Zeng Fanren’s ecological aesthetics (Shengsheng aesthetics), Liu Yuedi’s daily life aesthetics and Wang Xiaohua’s body aesthetics are the main objects of his interpretation and argumentation. He also makes a relatively detailed sorting out and explanation of the theoretical propositions, core characteristics, academic significance and limitations of each aesthetic form.

In addition, Jiang Fei also distinguishes the similarities, differences, disputes and dialogue relations between various aesthetic forms. When discussing the commonalities, he holds that they “have organically integrated existential thoughts into their respective ideological resource structures and theoretical discourse frameworks, established original aesthetic ‘noumena’ on the basis of modern existentialism, attempted to break the deep-rooted subject-object dualistic thinking, directly or indirectly took ‘practical aesthetics’ as the object of reflection and transcendence, and intended to build a ‘modern Chinese aesthetics’ that is different from traditional aesthetics and synchronized with world aesthetics” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.272). In fact, in addition to the reference to Western existential thoughts (especially Heidegger’s existential philosophy) and the reflection on practical aesthetics, the absorption and internalization of Chinese traditional cultural resources are also typical characteristics of Chinese aesthetics since the New Era.

When discussing these eight aesthetic forms, Jiang Fei intentionally or unintentionally connects them with Chinese traditional cultural thoughts, which is specifically reflected in four aspects: first, regarding Yang Chunshi’s transcendent aesthetics, Jiang Fei points out that he excavated the intersubjective relationship between humans and the world and the aesthetic concept of “integration of scene and emotion” from the thought of “harmony between heaven and man”, defined it as the intersubjective core of Chinese aesthetics, and finally absorbed it into the theoretical systems of transcendent aesthetics and intersubjective aesthetics. Second, the “oneness of all things and benevolence” advocated by Pan Zhichang’s life aesthetics absorbs various traditional ideological resources: it not only includes Confucius’ “the world returning to benevolence”, Taoism’s “oneness of all things” and the cosmic generation theory of *I Ching* but also draws on Wang Yangming’s viewpoint of “benevolence as the oneness of all things”. On this basis, Pan Zhichang constructs an aesthetic system centered on “love”, “life” and “emotional ontology”, and connects it with concepts such as “human beings”, “being-in-the-world” and “freedom” in contemporary existential thoughts, realizing the

modern transformation of traditional thoughts and aesthetics, “reinvigorating the modern value and future mission of ‘life aesthetics’ through the dialogue and integration of ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.183). Third, when talking about linguistic aesthetics, Jiang Fei advocates that the construction of Chinese linguistic aesthetics should “deeply explore the tradition of ancient Chinese linguistic philosophy and aesthetics, and carry out modern interpretation and creative transformation”, pointing out the inherent principle of ancient-modern transformation in ontological aesthetics, and emphasizing that in constructing Chinese aesthetics, we should draw resources from Chinese traditional philosophical thoughts to build a real modern Chinese aesthetics. Fourth, Zeng Fanren’s ecological aesthetics and Shengsheng aesthetics are the inheritance and innovation of Heidegger’s “heaven, earth, gods and humans” and Taoism’s “harmony between heaven and man” natural and ecological thoughts. As Jiang Fei said, “Whether Confucianism or Taoism, ‘harmony between heaven and man’ jointly indicates an Oriental or Chinese ecological existential philosophical wisdom, that is, not separating and opposing humans from nature, but unifying them in the original sense of ‘Tao’” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.239). Thus, based on learning from the West, connecting with tradition and focusing on the realistic demand of China’s “ecological civilization construction”, ecological aesthetics has completed the creative transformation of traditional Chinese ecological aesthetics. The excavation of Chinese traditional thoughts is one of the main characteristics of aesthetics since the New Era. If Heidegger’s existential philosophy, as a foreign ideological resource, has consistently permeated the aesthetic forms and schools since the New Era with internal thoughts such as “human beings”, “being”, “Dasein”, “language” and “being-in-the-world”, then the ideological resources of Chinese traditional philosophy and aesthetics have been engraved in them as native internal cultural genes, completing their generation and transformation with the help of foreign resources.

More importantly, Jiang Fei also pays attention to the emphasis on reality in New Era aesthetics. He holds that in addition to following the lofty characteristics of classic aesthetic thoughts - that is, focusing on the construction of metaphysical systems with basicity and logic, contemporary Chinese aesthetics also emphasizes realistic, social and other concrete daily life, thus ushering in a turn to daily life, “gradually moving from abstract theories and philosophical halls to the general public and intervening in daily life” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.245). This is reflected in aesthetic forms with realistic intervention and perceptibility such as daily life aesthetics and body aesthetics. Thus, under Jiang Fei’s elaboration, the “ontological” turn of Chinese aesthetics since the New Era has shown the characteristics of integrating Chinese and Western cultures, combining ancient and modern times, and being rooted in reality. These diverse but coexisting aesthetic theories complement each other, dialogue and communicate, and jointly participate in the construction of Chinese aesthetic theories and systems in the New Era, injecting impetus into the prosperity and development of contemporary Chinese aesthetics. It can be said that this turn, based on traditional Chinese aesthetic thoughts, taking Marx and Heidegger’s existential philosophy as the edge, and driven by the realistic context and modernization process, has finally given birth to a diverse and coexisting pattern of contemporary Chinese aesthetics.

4. The Value and Direction of “Ontological Aesthetics” in the Chinese Context

The future development direction of Chinese aesthetics is a key concern of the current aesthetic circle, and many scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on it: Zhu Liyuan clearly points out that “the future development of Chinese aesthetics should be based on the overall development of Chinese aesthetics and the historical process of the localization of Marxism, reflect the specific context of contemporary China, and put forward and think about unique Chinese aesthetic issues. Practical ontological aesthetics has made a preliminary attempt in this regard” (Zhu Liyuan, 2021, p.182); Zhang Yuneng advocates that “to further develop contemporary Chinese aesthetics, we must more resolutely support and enrich the practical viewpoint, deepen and improve practical aesthetics, encourage the contention of a hundred schools of thought, and seek common ground while reserving differences” (Zhang Yuneng, 2021, p.33); Peng Feng focuses more on solving specific problems, holding that “we should do less abstract aesthetic theory construction and solve more specific aesthetic problems... In today’s fields such as the evaluation of environmental aesthetic value, the coexistence of diverse cultures, and the changes of aesthetic taste, there are a large number of specific problems waiting for us to solve. Replacing system construction with problem-solving will become an important feature of Chinese aesthetic research in the 21st century” (Peng Feng, 2009, p.303). Zhu Zhirong and Wang Huaiyi emphasize the integration of multiple resources and the excavation of deep local culture, proposing: “We should not only learn and inherit the thoughts of Marx and Engels, but also draw on various beneficial components from Western philosophy, psychology and other aesthetic thoughts, and it is particularly necessary to enter the deep structure of Chinese culture and aesthetics” (Zhu Zhirong & Wang Huaiyi, 2008, p.15).

From these discussions, it can be seen that although scholars have different focuses, attention to Marx’s practical view, Western philosophical thoughts, Chinese traditional culture and realistic problems has become a common consensus in academic circles. Constructing a Chinese aesthetic form with diversified coexistence, integration of Chinese and Western cultures, and combination of ancient and modern times is the common pursuit of scholars. In the fifth chapter of *The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era*, Jiang Fei also conveys this expectation. He holds that the ontological turn has promoted the development of this aesthetic ideal to a certain extent, which is reflected in three aspects: first, the ontological turn has enabled Chinese aesthetics to get out of the cage of rationality, move towards perceptual daily life, and promote the generation of a new type of “relational aesthetics” between humans and the world; second, the ontological turn has broken the dominant position of practical aesthetics, formed ontological aesthetics with diverse theoretical forms, and promoted the diversified development of aesthetic discourse; third, as a modern Chinese aesthetics that combines ancient and modern times and integrates Chinese and Western cultures, ontological aesthetics has activated traditional Chinese aesthetic thoughts, promoted the acceptance of Heidegger’s thoughts in China, and “provided an enlightening ‘Chinese plan’ for world aesthetics” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.280).

Admirably, Jiang Fei does not blindly praise ontological aesthetics, but objectively examines it from a dialectical perspective, pointing out the limitations of current ontological aesthetics: that is, it still adheres to the traditional obsession with ontology and lacks diversity in multi-discourse; in addition, due to the lack of sufficient dialogue and communication between various internal aesthetic forms, the whole focuses more on abstract theoretical construction and insufficiently intervenes in realistic, daily and social issues. While pointing out the problems, Jiang Fei also clarifies specific solutions. From a general direction, Chinese traditional philosophy provides discourse resources and ideological inspiration for breaking through these limitations. The concepts of “incarnation of Tao” and “Tao is not far from man” provide references for existentialism to break through the obsession with ontology; Wang Fuzhi’s philosophical thoughts provide ideas for the combination of harmony between heaven and man and subject-object duality. Thus, it can be seen that the future development of Chinese ontological aesthetics needs to explore a path of breakthrough from “unity of substance and function”, so as to construct a “hybrid aesthetics that integrates the wisdom of Western pragmatic philosophy and aesthetics and Chinese traditional philosophy and aesthetics, establishes a unity of substance and function, and is closely related to current artistic practice and perceptual life... truly constructs a kind of ‘aesthetics beyond aesthetics’ in the world aesthetic pattern” (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.290), that is, an ontological aesthetics with both modern attributes and Chinese characteristics.

It should be said that Jiang Fei’s view and logical thinking are highly consistent with the current aesthetic reality, academic ecology and mainstream discourse situation in China. Since the New Era, research in the fields of literature, literary theory, aesthetics and other humanities and social sciences has undergone significant turns: from initially following Western theories as models in the early stage, to exploring traditional cultural resources to establish their own subjectivity, and then to focusing on realistic problems and attaching importance to intervention in contemporary society. This process marks that Chinese academic research has gradually got rid of passive imitation of the West and begun to explore and construct its own unique discourse system and theoretical framework. Among them, “pursuit of modernity” and “local construction” have always been the core themes running through. Scholars have unanimously turned their attention to traditional culture, abandoned the previous abstract theoretical discourse, and instead focused on specific people, events and emotions, striving to construct a Chinese academic research paradigm with realistic concerns, local roots and modern character. Whether it is the exploration of the “Chinese school” in comparative literature, the “Chinese hermeneutics” advocated by Zhang Jiang, the “Shengsheng aesthetics” proposed by Zeng Fanren and Cheng Xiangzhan, or the current popular research on “online literature going overseas”, all confirm the emphasis on Chinese cultural subjectivity in current Chinese academic research, that is, taking China as the cultural position, drawing nutrients from ancient traditional thoughts and realizing creative transformation; when learning from Western cultural thoughts, we also pay attention to adaptation to the local context, so as to construct a diversified and modern Chinese academic research paradigm.

Against this background, Jiang Fei’s call for establishing an ontological aesthetics “with modernity,

Chineseness and realistic concern” is a response to the current academic and mainstream ideological circles. In addition, as a rare monograph that systematically studies the ontological turn of Chinese aesthetics in the New Era, Jiang Fei’s *The Ontological Turn and Theoretical Form Construction of Chinese Aesthetics in the New Era* can be described as a pioneering work in the study of contemporary Chinese ontological aesthetics (Jiang Fei, 2025, p.2). It comprehensively and in-depth clarifies the development process of Chinese ontological aesthetics from the perspective of Sino-Western cultural dialogue, profoundly discriminates the key terms in the ontological turn, summarizes the Chinese experiences and problems under the turn, not only lays an important foundation for the subsequent advancement of domestic aesthetic and ontological aesthetic research, but also incorporates Chinese experiences into the world academic perspective, providing a “Chinese plan” for Western and world aesthetic research.

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