



# The “Other” Measure—the “Other” Technology? Heidegger and Far East Traditions—Commentary on Shan Wu’s Refining Technopoiesis: Measures and Measuring Thinking in Ancient China

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In our philosophical attempts to understand technology, we usually address two questions, namely, what technology *is* and what technology *can be*. The latter seems to be heading toward the future as we seek to change the dissatisfactory current state of affairs. Yet, going forward does not always mean moving straight ahead; sometimes it requires taking a few steps backward. This could entail turning toward Aristotle and forgotten dimensions of technology, such as *technopoiesis*, which points to the significance of the technical process in and of itself (Amzallag, 2021); or it could entail taking a look at ancient China, where, as the paper by Shan Wu (2023) brilliantly shows us, the measurement system—rather than binding the thing being measured—enabled one to deal in a non-essentialist way with it, thereby capturing its own character. In this paper, I would like to comment on the proximity between this early approach and Heidegger’s own way of questioning our contemporary account of measurement, which is of crucial importance for his critique of technology.

Heidegger’s preoccupation with the problem of measurement can be observed throughout his entire philosophical pathway: it starts in *Being and Time* (1927) and resurfaces in his investigations in the 1950s. While there are some differences between his earlier and later accounts, the underlying idea is one and the same: defining objective (that is, unified and standardized) measures is always subjective. This claim is not as paradoxical as it may appear at first glance; it in fact reflects the urge of the modern human being as a subject to take over reality and organize it according to itself. By this token, objective measures are external or alien (not their own) to the measured things. In Heidegger’s view, such an account cannot grasp the ontological peculiarity or “ownness”—neither of human beings nor of other beings. Heidegger’s approach, however, does not target the inaccessibility of things.

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Heidegger's idea of "de-distancing" concerns not some "longer" or "shorter" length, but rather, pertains to one's attitude to things. According to Heidegger, it is a thing's "own thoroughly intelligible definiteness" that constitutes the kernel of the proper measure (Heidegger, 1996, 103). Although, as he claims, we often employ the regular units (e.g., "half an hour"), these mainly express how familiar a particular thing is to a given Dasein. That Dasein, however, does not measure the thing—it "merely" turns the thing toward itself, orienting it to its ownmost. That is to say, the thing itself is the source of its own measure. Dasein orients itself toward that "own measure" in order to be able to deal with it (Heidegger, 1996, 103).

The opposite stance, labeled by Heidegger as subjectivism, is the ground of the modern technology we are all familiar with. Most clearly, the link between technology and (improper) measurability is expressed by the distinction between "calculative thinking" (*rechnende Denken*) and "reflective thinking" (*besinnliche Nachdenken*), to which Shan Wu (2023, 2, 11) aptly alludes. Heidegger describes the first as incessant planning and counting, regardless of whether using numbers or not. It evaluates everything in terms of profitability. This calculation is also focused exclusively on human interests and their constant expansion. This is the only determinant—a measure—for this type of thinking. Heidegger contrasts it with contemplative, pensive, and meaning-seeking thinking, which also looks for the "other" measure.

In Heidegger, this "otherness" cannot be narrowed down to being simply "different" or constituting "another option." According to the author of *Contributions to Philosophy*, such otherness names the radically altered account, directed at that which belongs most to the being—its "ownmost." In this sense, what is "other" is always "first" as being the most primordial, decisive, and related to the source or origin of things (Heidegger, 1999, 4–5). Therefore, it is also "proper"—like the measure for which he searches.

The combination of the other/proper way of measuring and reflective thinking is the main issue in the essay, *...Poetically Man Dwells...* (1951). Heidegger asks (again) the (rhetorical?) question: "Is there any measure on earth?" To ponder this, Heidegger explores the problem of "taking-measure" (*Maß-Nahme*). It is related to his account of proper thinking as being inherently actively-receptive, which is expressed by the formula "taking-heed of" (*in-die-Acht-nehmen*) (Heidegger, 2001, 223). It allows Heidegger to reiterate the argument from *Being and Time* that the disclosure of being is *the proper (ontological) measure*. Human beings should focus on this if they seek to cut themselves off from modern subjectivism. Heidegger advocates for this approach to measuring, even though it may seem "perplexing" both "to the common notions of mortals" and for science—lacking as it does in any "palpable stick or rod" (Heidegger, 2001, 223).

Such a quantitative measurement is required by modern technology, which, according to Heidegger, is a paradigm of domination. More precisely, it is a drive (or desire) to transform everything into easily manageable objects or actually exploitable resources. This standardization and uniformization of measures not only facilitate but also *fix* the thing being measured into manipulable units.

Instead, Heidegger advocates providing beings with a "fitting (*anmessende*) response" (Heidegger, 1968, 187; see Kleinberg-Levin, 2005, 229), which he further specifies thus: "when we handle a thing, for example, our hand must fit itself (*anmessen*) to the thing" (Heidegger, 1968, 187). Heidegger hereby suggests that we must make concessions—that we must adjust ourselves to the beings we deal

with. The proper way to take measurement lies at the heart of this adjustment: *Maß* constitutes the core of *an-mess-en*. This seems to echo Heidegger's observations from *Being and Time* on *zugeschnittene Umgang*, that is, "dealings geared to useful things" (Heidegger, 1996, 68), or as John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson translate, "dealings cut to [equipment] own measure" (Heidegger, 1962, 98).

Heidegger's postulates also resonate well with the ancient Chinese views on measurement, in particular the creative process of inscribing the bronze bells and searching for the proper *yinlii*, as described by Shan Wu (2023, 18). Her study offers an alternative trajectory to the ones we are accustomed to; she does not write about linear "progress" or development. In other words, instead of measuring the historical objects and practices against our modern understandings of "practice/practicality," creativity, "measures," etc., she aims, in accordance with ancient Chinese approach, to let "the words and devices speak for themselves, measuring (and being measured), as much as possible, by their own standards" (Wu, 2023, 17). Doesn't that sound like a prime example of a Heideggerian demand?

In this sense, besides providing a thoroughly in-depth study on techno-onto-poiesis, Shan Wu inspires us to include another angle in comparative analyses of Heidegger and Far East philosophies. The field has attracted lots of scholarly attention for many years and has resulted in numerous great works (Chai, 2022; Davis, 2013; Ma, 2008). This concerns not only studies in general comparative philosophy but also in the philosophy of language, philosophy of art, and environmental philosophy, the last of which benefitted in a particularly fruitful manner from these investigations. Linking Heideggerian inspirations with Daoist and Buddhist traditions enabled it to offer a highly original way to reconceptualize environmental issues, giving rise to the "deep ecology" movement in the 1970s (see Zimmerman, 2006). Heidegger's views on technology, in particular underlying its exploitative tendencies, were one of the most important contact points between his thought and Eastern philosophies in this regard, as both parties criticize human oppressiveness toward nature. Wu's study, in turn, encourages us to approach the convergence of their perspectives on technology, with a special focus on the issue of measurement, directly from the point of view of philosophy of technology. To put it differently, her work motivates us to look into the discourse of the measuring techniques of ancient China and juxtapose them with Heidegger's critique of technology. The idea of *wu-du* (or the archaic fivefold), for instance, adds another one to the handful of concepts from Eastern philosophies (along with *wuwei*, *dao*, emptiness, or thing) that elucidate and underpin similar ones from Heidegger's ontology. Likewise, the tension between the ontic and ontological aspects that occurs in the phenomenon of *liang* appears to constitute a significant parallel between Heidegger's views on the problem of measuring and ancient China's approach to it.

Finally, Wu's examination of measurement in ancient China does not treat it as necessarily belonging exclusively to the foregone Arcadian past (Wu, 2023, 17). Her study, in the same vein as Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's views on technology (downplayed by Amzallag, 2021) and his quest for a different way to measure (passed over by Crease, 2011), makes a call for re(de)fining what technology can be, searching for the alternative to its currently dominating form. That is to say, turning to *the other*—not simply different, but original—*measure* enables us to imagine *the other technology*, within which framework both human and non-human beings can be freed to reveal their ownmost.

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