

Marxism's "Warm Stream" Within Chinese Marxism

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Professor Roland Boer is a famous scholar who engaged in Marxist critique of religion, political criticism and biblical studies, who teaches at University of Newcastle in Australia, and received his Ph.D. from McGill University in Canada. Now he is one of the overseas talent professors at Renmin University of China. He published *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, which has translated into many languages and *Lenin, Religion, and Theology*, and *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* and other masterpieces, who is interested in Chinese Marxism recently. Associate professor ZANG Fengyu started an interesting conversation around cultural identity, Marxist view of religion, Chinese Marxism and other issues with Roland Boer in the last few days. Roland Boer's exposition on the "Warm Stream" within Marxism and Chinese Marxism has rich enlightenment significance, which cannot be ignored to help us better understand the cultural characteristics of Marxist beliefs and the connotation of the times of Sinicization of Marxist philosophy.

ZANG Fengyu: Hello, professor Boer, very nice to discuss the academic issues of Marxism and religion with you. I have seen your brief introduction on the website of University of Newcastle in Australia; the opening words are very attractive: "Roland Boer is not your average scholar, nor is he a typical theologian. The academic who enjoys stirring up debate with articles under such arresting titles as Lenin the Nudist, believes a measure of provocation is a good thing if it stimulates thought and discussion about religion." Indeed the case, your study on Marxism is full of opening ideas and from novel perspectives, and the words you wrote were very appealing. When I was reading these words, I often thought about an academic issue with the relevant view of life: What made you choose to study Marxism and religious issues as your academic direction?

Roland Boer: Hello, Fengyu. This interest goes back thirty years. My first degree was in Western Classics, with a focus on Classical Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. It was my interest in languages that took me to study what was called "divinity" at the University of Sydney in the 1980s. There I focused Classical Greek and Hebrew, in order to study the Bible in its original languages. This also entailed the ancient languages of Syriac and Coptic, since early versions of the Bible are written in those languages as well. As I was engaged in this study, I became interested in political and liberation theologies.

They used Marxist economic and social analysis to understand the inequities of capitalism, and then sought to connect these approaches with Christian theology. This may seem like a strange combination to some, but in Latin America, Africa and also in Europe, religious thought remains closely connected with Marxism in some way or another.

Then I decided that I would prefer to study Marx's own work, rather than read what others had written about him. This decision led to my Master's thesis, in which I focused on Hegel and Marx. This was primarily a philosophical study, with an interest in the religious dimensions and implications of their thought. My doctoral dissertation, at McGill University (1988-1993) carried on the dual interest. My thesis drew upon the Marxist literary theory of Fredric Jameson in order to interpret some biblical texts. I found that there was actually a tradition of Marxist approaches to the Bible, going back to Friedrich Engels. Since then, I have studied that tradition in detail, resulting in a number of books. Perhaps the most well-known is *Marxist Criticism of The Bible* (2003). A decade later I completely rewrote the book in light of further study. This revised version appeared in 2014 as *Marxist Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. In a related area, I have recently had published another study, called *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (2015). This uses Soviet-era Russian studies and the Marxist inspired *Régulation* theory to offer a complete reconstruction of the economies of ancient South West Asia (ancient Near East), in which ancient Israel was a small kingdom. It is a deeply Marxist reconstruction and I hope it provides a model that others can use. The response so far has been very positive.

ZANG Fengyu: This is an interesting study of religious economics. I remember Engels had studied the economic production of church in-depth, what he analyzed the monastery in detail--- Saint Gervais- de - Pratt (圣热尔门—德—普雷) ---is a memorable example. On the one hand, your writing is influenced by classical Marxist religious ideas, it was also reflected the characteristics of the Western Marxist religious ideas on the other. In addition to Fredric Jameson you just mentioned, I think Ernst Bloch, Alain Badiou also produced not little impact on you. Of course, your analysis on Marx, Engels and Lenin's religious ideas also shows that, in a unique research framework and some kind of cultural or religious context, you composited the religious thought in classical Marxism and Western Marxism. It also reflects the influence of European philosophical tradition to some extent.

Roland Boer: Yes, my dream had always been to study in detail the tradition of Western Marxism, since I sensed that it engaged extensively with religion. I was not to be disappointed, finding many works by leading Marxists that deal with religion. At one level, this should be expected, since Western Marxism is influenced by a European philosophical tradition that has engaged with religious thought for millennia. This study began more than a decade ago, and the project grew over time. The result was the five volume work, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth* (2007-2014). It deals with Marx and

Engels, studying many of their works related to religion but neglected by critics. It also offers studies of a range of Western Marxists, from Karl Kautsky to Alain Badiou. A follow-up book was a study of Lenin (2013). Many would assume that Lenin had little of substance to say about religion, but I found much more in his work than anyone – myself included – would have realized. My approach to all this material is as Marxist philosopher with a long-standing specialization in religious thought. In the process of this research, I have been able to develop a number of key ideas that arose from this study. One of those is what Ernst Bloch, the German Marxist philosopher, called the “warm stream” within Marxism.

I. Cultural identity and a “Warm Stream” within Marxism

ZANG Fengyu: Your lecture in School of philosophy at the Renmin University of China---“The Need for a ‘Warm Stream’ within Marxism” is quite fascinating. This research is full of vigor, in order to avoid the “stagnation” of Marxist philosophy and make it become a “warm stream” to attract people’s heart. I think it is really a theoretical interpretation of Marxist philosophy as a cultural belief. No doubt, the belief in Marxism made so many people toward the road that “work for the mankind”, and felt warm and happy from this. Although experienced all kinds of hardships in this way, because of the hope, Marxist believers felt glorious in their mission. The victory of Soviet Socialist Revolution also relied on people’s passions of the approaching ideal society, while the authors of Soviet Marxist philosophy textbooks mainly emphasized on the theoretical formula “material foundation determines the superstructure” and the objective law of nature and social development, to a certain extent, it weakened the desired color. What is your idea that how to understand Marx's philosophy as a cultural belief? Could this “warm stream” integrates with Marxist philosophical principle, and further develops its spirit of the times?

Roland Boer: The way I understand it is that Marxism has always contained a dialectic of objective and subjective approaches. These are usually understood in terms of the objective forces of history (economics, politics, social dynamics and class conflict) and subjective intervention. A revolution, for example, is the combination of these objective and subjective forces. The objective conditions may be ripe for revolution, but the revolution itself would not happen without the subjective intervention of the revolutionary communist party in the process. In doing so, the party actually alters the objective conditions. However, objective and subjective may also be understood in terms of what Ernst Bloch calls the “cold” and “warm” streams. The “cold” stream designates the scientific dimension of Marxism. Marx and Engel’s study of the dynamics of capitalism – in terms of the nature of capitalism, economic contradictions, class conflict and so on – is part of this scientific approach. One observes the situation and attempts to produce theories to explain those observations. Marx found the existing explanations of capitalism inadequate, so he set out to produce a new interpretation, which has been deeply influential ever since. Marxist economists, historians and social scientists continue this tradition in their further studies.

All the same, this is only one dimension. The other concerns, as you mentioned, is the “warm stream,” the realm of passions and emotions. This the Marxism of the “heart” and it is what inspires people to join the Marxist cause. In the past, this emotional commitment has enabled people to take part in revolutions, to be enthusiastic about the new society and work hard to build it. Some people speak of a “conversion” to Marxism, while others speak of “faith” in Marxism (as President Xi Jinping did in 2014). We may indeed speak of a “cultural belief,” which forms part of the cultural identity of a people. It would be possible to compare the influence of Confucius in Chinese society, where Confucianism has become part of the fabric of that society. My sense is that Marxism too may become part of the cultural fabric. These are all part of the “warm stream.” We may view the relation between these two dimensions as part of Marxist anthropology, the understanding of human existence. With our minds, we try to think and act according to reason, carefully weighing up a situation before acting. But we are also emotional beings, experiencing love and hatred, happiness and sadness, elation and dejection, enthusiasm and apathy, passion and indifference. In Western traditions, the rational mind has been viewed as superior and the emotions inferior and needing to be controlled by reason. This Western emphasis on the “cold stream” has also influenced Marxism, with the result of sidelining the “warm stream” of passions and emotions. The reality is, of course, far more complex, for our emotions influence our reason and vice versa. My understanding of Marxism is that both dimensions are crucial, in a dialectical form.

ZANG Fengyu: Yes, there left many research spaces that were required to further study in this regard. It is also about how to promote the cultural connotation in today's social life with Marxist cultural consciousness. As you said, this subjective desire is related to people's cultural identity. I remember you studied Anatoly Lunacharskiy's Marxist views and religious thought in-depth; this Marxist atheist's philosophical thoughts are still instructive today. Living in a critical historical period, Lunacharskiy was aware of the far-reaching value of Marxist belief, and also deep understand the social function of religion. His exposition on “socialist ideal and socialist science” largely reflected over the years the academic circles' discussion of the relationship between Marxist philosophy and science. I think Marxism is enriched with a kind of metaphysics, meanwhile reveals the objective law of social development based on the economic structure. Marx integrated the two into the same historical process with the thinking mode of practice. Of course, this also requires a lot of careful research, for example, I am interest in this: How to maintain the proper position for the “cold stream” when we discuss the Marxist warm stream?

Roland Boer: I think it is important to understand the relation of “cold” and “warm” streams dialectically, so that one or the other does not dominate. When the “cold” stream is dominant, we find that there may be excellent technical studies of economics, society, politics and history. The attraction of the “cold” stream is that understands

Marxism as a science, with objective methods. This obviates the concern with political ideologies and parties. However, when the “cold” stream dominates for too long, it can lead to stagnation in Marxism. People begin to see it as one method among others and see no reason to be committed to a Marxist approach. This is where the “warm” stream has a crucial role to play in returning Marxism to a balanced approach. In the Russian situation, before and after the revolution, Anatoly Lunacharsky performed a crucial role in arguing that the “warm” stream should not be neglected.

Yet, there are dangers with too much of the “warm” stream. In this case, it can lead people to have unrealistic expectations and to rely too much on vague promises. In the past it has led to futile revolutionary activity, when the time was not right for such activity. Once let loose, these passions are difficult to control and may run in any direction. Too many socialist movements have suffered grave defeats as a result of this tendency. A good example is the socialism at the time when Marx and Engels were young men. The movement had done much good for workers, organizing them across nations. But it promised too much and had the potential to lead to profound disappointment when the promises were not realized. In this context, Marx and Engels realized the need for careful and sober analysis of economic and social forces. They saw this as a much needed counter-balance to the “warm” stream of the early socialists.

ZANG Fengyu: Your view of this is very enlightened. I think the Soviet textbook contained some correct basic principles, while how can we use these words to explain specific things, not limited to abstract dogma, worth pondering. I recently attend an international conference “Kosik and Dialectics of the Concrete” in Czech, which gives me an opportunity to further understand Kosik’s philosophy and the international scholars’ new interpretations. Kosik combined Heidegger’s ontology, Lukacs’ thoughts of the totality and Marx’s critique of political economy opened a new horizon of Marxist study, which was ever very popular, and he also allow people to re-examine the Soviet textbook thinking. Of course, there are many kinds of examine modes, for example, it was noticed that some of the important ideas in the Soviet textbook comes from Dietzgen and even eighteenth Century French materialists, which has certain discrepancy with historical materialism that Marx emphasized. More to the point, the Soviet textbook thinking was lack of specific sense, strengthening the “warm stream” of Marxism, should we consider the issues of the concrete? In other words, how can we construct the actual relationship between this warm stream and daily life. I think Chinese people has been understanding Marxism in the situation of daily life, willing to analyze and solve some specific problems with the application of Marxist philosophy in real lives, which seemed to be used to explain what you stressed “warm” stream.

Roland Boer: Perhaps I can say in it this way. During the spring semester of 2015, I had much opportunity to talk with students about their understanding of Marxism and the CPC. To my delight, I found that two thirds of my graduate classes are either members or studying to be members of the youth organization of the CPC. When I

asked them the reasons for joining, they gave some intriguing answers. Initially, some said it was to get a better job when they finished study. One or two who were not members said this is a way of criticism, since they saw it as the only reason. But in others I detected a positive dimension to this reason: this is a sign of the integration of Marxism and the CPC in the everyday lives of people. In this sense, the fact that you may be eligible for a better job – as a sign of merit – is a wise move. Further, others said that they had joined because of parents or grandparents, who had influenced them deeply. I am told that this is a very Chinese answer, since the family is a very strong feature in the lives of most. Here too I sensed a way in which Marxism is becoming part of the fabric of Chinese life. But the most interesting answer was the strong sense that by joining the CPC, these young people felt they could contribute in their own way (however large or small) to the collective good of China itself. It struck me that despite the incessant push towards individual satisfaction (self-interest) in China, this larger sense of the collective good remains strong.

In this situation, it is vital to infuse among such young people not only the scientific credentials of Marxism, but also the passion, excitement and enjoyment of Marxism. This should involve an awareness of the contributions Marxism and socialism have made to human society, but also the potential for further contributions. It also involves an awareness that even one's preference for scientific study, or a philosopher's work, or literature is influenced by a dimension of the emotions. We have an emotional attachment to a certain discipline or approach that goes beyond a reasoned decision. For me, the possibility of playing and laughing with and in Marxism is very important. It is not merely serious, sober and unsmiling study; it is also the opportunity to enjoy life in and through Marxism. A good slogan here, which captures this sense: "the party is not over." Marxists should really know how to enjoy life and themselves. This is also a very personal issue for me: I find that as I get older I become more optimistic, since Marxism provides that optimism and energy for life.

ZANG Fengyu: I think this reflects the cultural identity with historic features. Chinese undergraduate students are almost familiar with the basic principles of Marxist philosophy, and they are very interested in historical details during the formation and dissemination of Marxism. When you taught Marxist and religious issues, you could feel they didn't feel strange with Marx's critique of religion and young Hegelian studies of religion. Of course, many of your micro interpretations made them feel fresh. To a large extent, the reason Marx's critique of Baüer was Baüer's explanations of self-conscious philosophy which was based on the critique of Bible. In Marx's view, theology has no relationship with realistic secular world, so it should change the critique of the heaven to the critique of the earth. To this end, he made a serious criticism to Baüer who taught him Isaiah when he was an undergraduate student. Baüer, Marx's previous teacher and friend, was later become a member of "The Free". Of course, Marx's critique of "Jewish question" and fetishism had more realistic effects. To him,

the worship of money, goods or capital is actually an illusion. From this we can notice the position of fetishism which is still exist in contemporary society.

Roland Boer: Before I deal with fetishism, I should point out that Bauer was in many respects one of the leading radicals in Germany at the time. He had developed, on the basis of his Hegelian approach to biblical criticism, a position that was thoroughly atheistic and deeply critical of religion and the Prussian state. His argument was based on the criticism of religion as a false universal: it claimed universality from a specific and limited location and thus became dogmatic, oppressive and reactionary. In order to realize a free and infinite self-consciousness, religion must be discarded and the state must become atheistic. In Prussia at the time, this was a deeply radical position, which cost Bauer any chance of a university position. Marx's response is that Bauer's search for real freedom is misdirected, for even in a secular and atheistic state, religion finds new forms to express itself. The answer is not to focus on religion, but on the deep alienation of human existence.

As for the fetish, it is the core religious idea that Marx reshaped in a very innovative fashion. Marx worked with the fetish for forty years, having first encountered the idea in the early 1840s in the work of the anthropologist, Charles de Brosses. A fetish is an object attributed with distinct powers in human transactions, powers that are simultaneously transferred and yet have a real force. It was first described and named by Portuguese explorers in Africa in the fifteenth century. Over the following centuries, it became a key category for analysing so-called "primitive" religion. Marx found the philosophical idea of the fetish extremely useful for analysing labour, money, commodities and capitalism itself.

ZANG Fengyu: This idea was later used by Marx to analyze the logic of the Capital, and then its reality made itself more powerful than young Marx's almost pure philosophical analysis. Businessman enjoys fame and fortune in the process that money produces money. The fascination with things or money almost becomes many people's belief, the reality of which makes it different from traditional religious beliefs. The concepts of productions are also used as a weapon to produce money, in the process of the speculation of the concepts, the goods have been proliferating. Of course, some of them become broken foam. Facts have proved that the financial crisis has not disappeared, even more difficult. With the advent of Internet financial, the developmental environment of the real economy has undergone great changes. The studies of some related important issues really need to get rich ideological resources in Marx's critique of fetishism. Undoubtedly, cultural beliefs in nowadays is still the focus of people's spiritual life. When fetishism occupies people's hearts, when people no longer advocate noble cause, our society will suffer serious problems.

Roland Boer: Yes. Since his most well-known usage of the idea comes from the section on the fetishism of commodities from the first volume of *Capital*, I will say a

little about his usage there. Marx was seeking a way to speak of a double process: the fetishism that attaches itself to commodities is simultaneously a transferral of powers from workers to the product of their hands and a reality of such commodities. In other words, commodities seem to gain human attributes as they interact among one another, while workers become more and more like things (reification). At the same time, the power or fetishism of commodities is very real, for it affects workers directly. How to speak of such a process? Marx works at the edge of language, arguing that the fetishism of commodities is both illusory and real, imperceptible and perceptible, mysterious and concrete, mist-enveloped and actual. In the process, he coins a crucial phrase: “socially valid as well as objective thought forms [*gesellschaftlich gültige, also objektive Gedankenformen*].” Thought forms can become objective and socially valid.

In order to gain this insight, Marx made use of a religious category: fetishism. In the subsequent volumes of *Capital*, he developed this initial insight much further. Indeed, he came to argue that fetishism operates at the core of capitalism. The belief that money simply produces money, without the crucial intermediate stage of commodity production is the ultimate fetish. The idea that we can generate money in and of itself, or what is now called the “financialization” of the market, is fetishism through and through. So much so that Marx coins another term: capital-fetish. The fascinating dimension of this argument is that Marx used an idea drawn from the study of religions to express the internal and very mysterious functioning of capital.

ZANG Fengyu: You have just talked about Marx’s critique of Hebrew Bible, which is almost the general idea of western Marxists’ studies of religion, and this kind of criticism finally reflects dialectical criticism and historical criticism. According to detailed interpretations of Marxist texts, many Western Marxist philosophers studied the issues of religion and its history from the perspective of productive mode, class differences, conflicts and other aspects, in which productive mode is regarded as the key perspective of the interpretation of the bible. This study is quite realistic -- it transformed the study of religious doctrine into “criticism of the earth”. I argue that Marxists’ interpretations of the religion mainly pointed to the study of the social function of religion. In Marxist classical writers’ interpretations of the religion, “theory of religion as opium” and “theory of religion as inferior wine” were famous. Of course, in the sentence “religion is the opium of the people”, “Opium” is not referring to the drug. It can be seen in Young Engels’s *The condition of the working class in England*, and Engels’s “theory of religion as ideology” had quite profound meanings. In Engels’s view, religion is an “ideological system”. Chinese famous religious scholar--- Fang Litian understood religion as a culture. I think this understanding comes from Marxist view of culture and it is also indeed a necessary perspective.

Roland Boer: Let me begin with a comment on the term “religion.” Recently, there has been renewed debate over the history and uses of the term. The word originally comes from Latin, “religio,” it has always had an important social dimension, in the

sense of connecting people with a larger social whole. More recently, scholars have focused on the European colonial sense of the word. When European colonists began exploring and conquering the rest of the world, they encountered many different expressions of what they called “religion.” But what did they mean by the term? They used Christianity as a model: a “religion” had to have a god or gods, institutions like a “church,” a body of religious professionals and a system of thought that we may call ideology or theology. So they began to name other bodies of cultural and ideological practice as “religions,” giving them names such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism and even Confucianism at times. The problem of course was that not all such systems fit the definition, such as Confucianism, which has no gods and so on. Clearly, “religion” is an abstraction from specific conditions. However, it is an abstraction with which we need to work.

In many respects, Marx anticipated this approach, although with a specific materialist understanding. For Marx, religion is produced out of alienated social and economic conditions. It offers some promise of a better world in response to this world with all its problems. This is the reason why Marx felt that attacking religion was a mistake, since it is not the cause of problems but the result of social problems. These are the problems that need to be addressed. Even with this insight, my sense is that Marx did not give enough attention to another dimension of religion. This is understandable, since his main focus was on understanding the economic and social dynamics of capitalism. However, we do find a glimpse of that other dimension in his early comments on “opium of the people.” In his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction” he writes: “*Religious* suffering is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.”

The opium reference comes at the end of this paragraph. Before it Marx points out that religious suffering may be an expression of real suffering; religion may be the sigh, heart and soul of a heartless and soulless world. But it is also a *protest* against that suffering. Religious suffering challenges real suffering. It questions suffering, asks why we are suffering. In other words, Marx allows here a small positive role for religion – as protest. How can religion be a protest? Marx is aware that religions offer a better alternative to our current life. That alternative may be in a heaven or it may be in the future. But the imagination of a better alternative to our current life is at the same time a criticism of this life. Religion in its own way says that this life is not as good as it could be, indeed that this life is one of suffering.

ZANG Fengyu: Indeed, Marx noticed people believed in religion because they denied the existing world. People can relieve the pain in the religion, but this is not the end of suffering. The realistic suffering must be solved in the reality. Here he regarded religion as a painkiller, which does not have no effect, but the effect is present in the imagination. If we want to solve the problem, we have to criticize the earth. It needs to

be understood in the historical context that the term opium Marx referred to. Because of twice breakout of Opium War in China, Chinese people's understanding of opium was almost completely negative. What Lenin said "inferior wine" and Marx said "opium" means similar. At this point, I tend to seriously interpret Engels's view. For young Engels, denying religion is a gradual process, he talked about religion and reality with some clerical friends in his early years. After Marx's death, Engels wrote several important religious studies; his paper "on the history of early Christianity" is particularly good.

Roland Boer: What about opium itself? The word is quite ambivalent, having both positive and negative associations. In a nineteenth century context, opium was regarded as a beneficial, useful and cheap medicine, especially for the poor who could not afford a doctor. It was also seen as a source for inspiring the imagination of artists and writers. On the other hand, opium was at the same time (and more so later in the nineteenth century) seen as a curse. Many began to see that opium did more harm than good, for it led to addiction, illness and early death. As a result, opium was the centre of debates and parliamentary enquiries in the United Kingdom, which had benefited so much from the opium trade. Opium was both praised and condemned; it was seen as both a cheap medicine and a dangerous curse. It is worth noting that Marx himself regularly used opium. He took opium to deal with his liver illness, skin problems (carbuncles), toothaches, eye pain, ear aches, coughs, and so on. These were the many illnesses that were the result of overwork, lack of sleep, bad diet, chain smoking, and endless pots of coffee. Clearly, Marx's personal use of opium influenced his use of the metaphor for describing religion. It helped stop pain, perhaps even assisted him recover from his illness, but it was ultimately not of much use in dealing with his deeper problems. For Marx opium was a very ambivalent metaphor. This is precisely why he chose it as a metaphor for religion. Like opium, religion may be source of hope, a way of curing an illness, a sigh for a better world; but it is also a result of world that is not right. It may even be a source of harm in its own right.

Engels would take this ambivalence in religion much further. He made the arresting argument that religion may be revolutionary. His family was of the Reformed (Calvinist) part of Christianity. Engels was a devout young man, who read deeply in the newest philosophy and biblical criticism. This reading challenged his faith, so that eventually he lost that faith. In the process, he argued with his close but pious friends (especially Wilhelm and Friedrich Graeber). Their arguments concerned the Bible, theology and philosophy. But in the process of those arguments he gradually realised – painfully – that he was losing his faith. He may have been devout, but he was also critical. He saw the many hypocrisies of the people in his hometown of Elberfeld. They were, in his eyes, deeply conservative and yet they did not hesitate to exploit people when they could. In other words, they may be pious on Sunday at church, but for the rest of the week they were not so at all.

ZANG Fengyu: By the time he published many articles under the pseudonym ‘Oswald’, while he told this to Graeber brothers, and hoped they could keep his secrets. Young Engels’s writing was very beautiful; his criticism of social realistic problems was penetrating. As you said, he did his best to disclose these hypocrisies, and this process in fact reflected the changing in his mind. In his later years, Engels paid more attention to the history of religion, and he also discussed the relationship between philosophy and religion in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German classical philosophy*. Many of his analysis were specific and practical, for example, his view on the relationship between religion and the peasant wars and the spread history of socialism was very insightful. Especially his discussion about what time the religion will be end was intriguing, “when Man proposes, and Man disposes”, which means we should understand the law of religion in accordance with the laws of history.

Roland Boer: I agree with you. Through all of this, Engels began to notice an ambivalence in Christianity. It may be deeply conservative, opposed to new discoveries in science and philosophy, indeed opposed to new political directions and supportive of the status quo. At the same time, it could also challenge the very same powers in a revolutionary manner. This insight would grow over the years. On the one hand, it is not uncommon to find in Engels’s works statements concerning the negative and reactionary elements of religion. He writes that religion is a source of mystification and deception. Sometimes for Engels the struggle for communism is also the struggle against the evil effects of religion. At the same time, Engels argues again and again for the revolutionary potential of Christianity. Already in his early twenties, he notes what can only be called a revolutionary Christian tradition, with leaders such as Thomas Müntzer, Etienne Cabet and Wilhelm Weitling. Over the following years, Engels would develop this argument further, beginning with a study of the Peasant Revolution in Germany in the sixteenth century. Led by Thomas Müntzer, the direct inspiration of this revolution was Christian theology, or rather, the Bible.

The final statement had to wait until just before his death in 1895, although he had been thinking about it for about 40 years. Now he provocatively argued that the origins of Christianity were revolutionary, religiously and politically. Engels based his argument on three points: 1) early Christianity drew its followers from amongst the poor and exploited, the peasants, slaves and unemployed urban poor; 2) early Christianity shared many of the features of the communist revolutionary movement in which he was involved – such as sects, struggles, lack of finance, and false prophets; 3) eventually it took over the Roman Empire. We may disagree with some aspects of Engels’s argument. But my point is that he makes this argument at all, which is very clear in *On the History of Early Christianity*. It is fair to say that various socialist movements have struggled with this argument. Some have worked closely with religious revolutionaries, as in South America and Africa.

II . The international historical meanings of Chinese Marxist philosophy

ZANG Fengyu: Recently, You started to study Marxist theoretical process of Chinese academia, and introduced the important achievements of Chinese Marxist scholars into international academia, so as to enrich Chinese factors of international Marxist studies. This exploration is appreciated, which will help Chinese scholars' Marxist studies get rid of the barriers of language and other factors and entry into international perspectives. You are trying to further this research from two perspectives--- philosophy and literature, which relates to the interpretation of the discourse system of Chinese Marxism, and the understanding of the Sinicization of Marxist Discourse System is one of the key to grasp the style of Chinese Marxism. Fully exploring the connotation of the theoretical structure and practical logic which contains within Chinese Marxist discourse revealed a historical confirmation of the theoretical research and practical exploration in Oriental Marxism outside European Marxism and Anglo Saxon Marxist academia. Generally, it has a very deep relationship with Chinese traditional culture. In your opinion, what are the most prominent national characteristics of Chinese Marxist philosophy?

Roland Boer: My thoughts here are very preliminary, since this project has only just begun. I view the situation as an outsider who is slowly gaining a greater sense of Chinese life and Chinese Marxism (through living in China for three months each year). This enables some insights that a foreigner may bring, but also entails some blind spots that need to be overcome through further study. I have become acutely aware of the shortcomings of foreign Marxist understandings of the situation in Chinese philosophy. These studies focus overwhelmingly on the work of the early communists, especially Chairman Mao, until the 1970s. This is partly the result of the international "Maoist" movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but my sense is that it is also the result of the lack of success of any socialist revolution in Western countries. This mindset is influenced by a perspective of "before October," before the revolution, and their interest and research is determined by this perspective. By contrast, I have noticed that Chinese philosophers are interested as much in the time "after October," after the revolution. The issues that appear after the gaining of power and during the difficult period of dealing with counter-revolution and long term development mean that scholarship has its hands full. New solutions must be found; new directions of thought are fostered; new proposals must be assessed and examined.

The best example is the importance of the period with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the thought and policies fostered by Deng Xiaoping and afterwards. Many foreign Marxists are not interested in this period, seeing it as a turning away from the era of Chairman Mao. The result has been that many developments in Chinese Marxist philosophy over the last three or four decades are largely ignored by foreign Marxist scholars. By contrast, the time of "reform and opening up" is vital for Chinese Marxist philosophy. My understanding is that most Chinese Marxist philosophers see this period in complex continuity with the period of Chairman Mao. I am only beginning to

appreciate this approach and it will take much further study to understand it better.

ZANG Fengyu: I deeply appreciate your view. Foreign scholars' studies of Marxism in China before 1976 were very rich, especially the works on Chinese revolution and the spread of Marxism in China and Mao Tse-Tung's philosophical thought were considerable, but the studies on Chinese Marxist philosophy after 1978 were quite limited. Foreign scholars were lack of understanding of the progress of Chinese Marxist philosophy since the reform and opening up because of the preferences. This situation has formed a strong contrast to Chinese scholars' almost full understanding of the development of western world. I think that the progress of Chinese Marxist philosophy since the reform and opening up more fully shows that Marxism and Chinese traditional culture are perfect harmony. On this issue, I had chat with Professor David McLellan. He once said he would like to increase some new contents of Chinese Marxist Philosophy in new version of his book *Marxism after Marx*, which I looked forward to. The plan you discussed is also making look forward to. By the way, I appreciate your invitation, willing to participate.

Roland Boer: I feel a further feature is that Chinese Marxist philosophers are much more aware of international developments. By contrast, foreign scholars have far less knowledge of developments in China. This observation pertains to areas such as philosophical ethics, political philosophy, debates over civil society, anthropology, culture, and, more recently, religion. For this reason, the new project is to ensure an international conference dealing with Marxism and Chinese philosophy, with philosophers from China participating and presenting papers.

My sense is also that Marxism had led to a reinvigoration of Chinese culture. Traditions are never static, but always change and adapt in light of circumstances and contributions from new generations. The same applies to Chinese culture. Multiple factors play a role here: China's rising power on the world stage, with the profound ramifications being felt everywhere; the constant renegotiation of foreign and Chinese contributions in dealing with the changes; the reinterpretation of the Chinese Classics, which always marks a change in the understanding of those Classics; and the long-term presence and indeed infiltration of Marxism in Chinese culture. I would even be so bold as to suggest that something analogous is happening to when Buddhism became part of Chinese culture. It led to a reinvigoration of that culture in unexpected ways, seeking to find new answers to the question, "what is China?" It seems to me that Marxism is beginning to have a comparable effect, although we will need to wait to see the results of that process.

ZANG Fengyu: I agree with your opinion. The spread of Marxism in China had made it as an important part of Chinese culture, and it embodies the unique culture at every stage of the social development of contemporary China. The Sinicization of Marxism is indeed a process of choice, which reflected the Chinese cultural style and time

characteristics of Marxism. Since Chinese reform and opening up, the academic studies and realistic studies of Chinese Marxist philosophy were regarded as both important, in which the text interpretations, the re-explanations of the principle and the studies of realistic problems reflected a splendid sight. Dialectical materialism, historical materialism, practical materialism, Marx's theory of value, Marx's theory of humanity had been systematically studied, and the innovative academic research which is represented as by Marxist political philosophy has been playing an increasingly important realistic role in recent years. Most of foreign Marxists' masterpieces, foreign Marxist academic schools and representatives were translated and introduced systematically. However, because of the limit of language and other perspectives, the levels of the internationalization of Chinese Marxist philosophical researches were not high. This phenomenon urgently needs to be improved. You have been living in China for more than three years. I feel you have some intuitive understanding of recent academic productions of Marxist studies in China.

Roland Boer: I plan to turn my full attention to developments in Chinese Marxist philosophy later in 2016, after I have completed a couple of current projects. I have made some preliminary studies of some areas and can at least say something about them. I am very interested in the Sinicisation of Marxism. Obviously, there is much debate and discussion concerning this topic, with articles and books and even whole journal series devoted to it. Studying some of this material soon brings to light a number of regular topics: 1) the importance of diversity in the Marxist tradition, in which the core principles are applied and developed in different societies; 2) the creative and flexible application of Marxist theory to Chinese conditions in light of China's specific historical development; 3) Marxism is a living tradition, with new viewpoints, propositions and ideas; 4) socialism with Chinese characteristics refers not merely to economics and politics, but to all aspects of human existence and study, including philosophy and culture; 5) peaceful socialist modernisation; 6) seeking truth from facts, in which the truth in question is materialist truth and the facts arise from the realities of socialist construction (economy, scientific investigation and politics). However, I am most interested in both the way Marxist thought has developed in China without extensive interaction with religion (as in Europe) and the discussions concerning contradiction.

ZANG Fengyu: As you said, the content of modern Chinese culture is abundant. It is usually considered that Marxism is the dominant content, while Chinese traditional culture and modern western culture are important contents, in addition to the integration of other regional cultures and the birth of emerging cultures. Marx's philosophy derived from west modern society, of course, it is mainly expressed as a form of the social criticism. The relationship between the two cultures is clear. In contrast, the relationship between Marxist philosophy and Chinese traditional culture is somewhat complicated. For example, when we say "Chinese philosophy", it is generally believed as Chinese

traditional philosophy, in fact what we say maybe today's Chinese philosophy research, including Marxist philosophy, foreign philosophy, Chinese philosophical history, ethics, religious philosophy and other fields. There is a reference to the ambiguity. As we say, it was Marxism realized the revival of Chinese culture, which does not mean that Marxism realized the renaissance of all Chinese traditional culture. Of course, the modern Chinese culture what Marxism promoted is come down in one continuous line with Chinese superior traditional culture. As the dominant ideology of Chinese ancient society, compare with other traditional cultures, the influence of Confucianism is obviously bigger. The relationship between Marxism and Confucianism is also getting more attention. Here is a view of keeping pace with the times, to study in what sense Marxism updated Chinese traditional culture, which is also related to the understanding of Chinese characteristic socialist culture.

Roland Boer: The relationship between Chinese traditional culture and Marxism is a fascinating one and of course one of the factors that has influenced the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics, so much so that it is indeed possible to speak of Chinese culture with socialist characteristics. But let me begin by reconsidering the role of tradition. Perhaps we can put it this way: the very sense that tradition is unchanging, that it connects with ancient realities, is predicated on the fact that tradition constantly changes and reshapes itself. A tradition would not be a tradition if it did not undergo constant reinterpretation and adjustment with each era and each generation. Yet, each reinterpretation is predicated on the idea of recovering the tradition, which is then so often understood to be unchanging. A truly dialectical relationship with the tradition!

In cultures with written texts, such reinterpretation takes place by rereading the texts and finding new dimensions to them that are relevant for the times. Part of my training was with the ancient texts of Israel and Christianity, in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Latin. The process of reinterpretation already takes place while the texts are being formed, let alone during the 3000 years or so afterwards. So also does China have a written or scriptural tradition, in which the various classics form the basis for constant reengagement and reinterpretation. However, with oral cultures the role of tradition is somewhat different. Each generation and each era retells the main stories, adding new angles and new perspectives and even new stories. Usually, these cultures are much older and they have engaged with written material later and in a rather different way. Australian indigenous culture is one of the oldest in the world, with a continuous tradition that goes back some 50,000 years. In light of this situation, Marxism has become a textual or scriptural tradition. I do not mean that the texts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao (and many others) have become "sacred" texts. Rather, I mean that the way the tradition in its many forms moves forwards is through a constant process of reinterpretation in a way that seeks to gain insights from those texts.

ZANG Fengyu: This is actually a hermeneutic issue. When we reinterpret

philosophical texts, we always committed to go back to the historical context of them. But these efforts of reduction actually infiltrated many contemporary academic ideas. I have a point of view that it should realize the intrinsic fusion between textual interpretation and contemporary scanning, because the conclusions of textual interpretations are usually applied to contemporary society. Of course, it doesn't mean too much to consider issue outside the text when we interpret texts, while it means textual interpretation is not ideological vacuum. People who live in a modern society concern the reality of philosophical texts is natural, this constant reinterpretation indeed continue the tradition. In this sense, all history is ancient history; all history is also contemporary history.

Roland Boer: Yes, I agree, it is a complex hermeneutical issue, both within Marxism and between Marxism and Chinese traditional culture? I have encountered a few people in China who argue that the Cultural Revolution broke the connection with traditional culture in many ways. They assume that Taiwan, for example, has greater connection with that traditional culture. This is an understandable position. Yet, when people from the mainland visit Taiwan, they are often struck by the way it is very Japanese or Americanised. Indeed, Taiwan and Japan have been thoroughly influenced by American cultural saturation for seventy years and this has transformed the tradition – especially the Confucian tradition – in its own way. On the mainland, the path has been somewhat different, with Marxism playing a central role.

In the end Marxism's relationship with traditions that have gone before follows a dialectic of old and new. A revolution is in many respects predicated on the sense of a clear break with the past. All that has gone before must be cast aside and a new beginning must be made. Many communists have taken this approach to the past. However, many communists have also argued that one cannot avoid building the new on the basis of the old. This requires a dialectical engagement with the past, with the tradition, transforming what is best in that tradition in light of new circumstances. Lenin and a good number of the Bolsheviks realized this after the October revolution. My sense is that in Chinese Marxism, this approach – of a dialectical engagement with the tradition – has also developed in relation to Chinese culture.