On the Early Marxist Concept of Philosophy (1930s–1950s)

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What is the early Marxist conception of philosophy in China? To answer this question, this paper delves into pre-1949 roots and the 1950s when the basics for academic philosophy in the PRC were established. Initially, Marxist philosophy in China followed the Soviet model. After the establishment of the PRC, Republican creative philosophy ended and former, mostly Western trained professional philosophers such as Feng Youlan and Jin Yuelin were reduced to carrying out philosophical research that complied with the new ideological demands. In the 1950s, academic philosophy occupied itself with correct viewpoints (lichang 立場), attitudes (guandian 觀點) and methods (fangfa 方法) in research. The object becomes the history of past philosophies. The question, ‘What is philosophy?’ has to be rephrased, ‘Which philosophy is worthwhile for research?’

This study is restricted to academic philosophy as attached to academic institutions, which became the single mode to work in the field in the newly established PRC. The study is divided into three sections. In the first, the early definition of philosophy in the Marxist framework will be analysed. The sources used are the textbooks by Ai Siqi and Hou Wailu 侯外廬, who represent the two schools in pre-1949 Marxist philosophy that influenced developments in the 1950s: the Yan’an and the Chongqing school. Two versions of Ai Siqi’s

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2 According to the son of Liang Shuming, Liang Peikuan 梁培寬, his father was one exception as he was a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference but did not belong to any work unit and hence, lived in very modest circumstances. Wang and Shuqin, eds., Renwen kexue, forthcoming. The interviews also form part of my project Institutionalising the Humanities in the PRC.

3 See my article: Schulz Zinda, ‘Marxist Views on Traditional Chinese Philosophy pre-1949’, pp. 311-345. The two years of controversy between Ren Zhuoxuan 任卓宣, better known as Ye Qing 葉青 (1896-1990) and Ai Siqi will not be taken into account since the former went to Taiwan. They were manifested in the two volumes Xin zhexue lunzhanji (The Controversies of the New Philosophy), 1936 and Weifazhan xin zhexue er zhan (Struggles in the Development of the New Philosophy), 1937. See: Brière, Fifty Years of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 34-35.
textbook will be taken into account, as they illustrate a shift in attitude towards philosophy from pre-1949 to post-1949.

Secondly, I will analyse the texts of the Hu Shi criticism campaign in 1954-1955, which were critical in establishing standards for future research in the humanities in the PRC, including academic philosophy. In this respect, it was a top-down campaign. Only the articles regarding philosophy written by establishment intellectuals such as Ai Siqi, He Sijing and Li Da are considered, as they set the official guidelines. Their prescriptive character can be identified through their writing style and the normative nature of their texts.4

The third section of this paper concerns the question of how the definition of philosophy – or, rather, correct philosophy – was applied and adapted to the research of Chinese heritage. A debate that took place in 1957 in the comparatively liberal atmosphere of the Hundred Flower Movement is crucial in newly evaluating the Chinese heritage from a wider, Marxist definition of philosophy and its history. The study will also hint at German Democratic Republic (GDR) streamlining in comparison to the Hu Shi criticism campaign and to discussions in the Soviet Union, to tentatively identify characteristics in the PRC discourse on philosophy.

Early Textbooks on Marxist Philosophy

After the establishment of the Renmin chubanshe in 1921, its director and leader of the propaganda department in the Central Committee, Li Da, initiated 29 Marxist canon titles to be translated into Chinese, 14 by Marx/Engels.5 The

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4 These members correspond to the first group of three Huang Ping identified in his study on writing style variations of intellectuals during the thought reform. The intellectuals who belong to the system (tizhi zhishi fenzi 體制知識分子) held important positions in the political system and emphasised the importance of the campaign. They published well-known articles in Renmin ribao 人民日報 (RMRB), Guangming ribao 光明日報 (GMRB) and Xuexi 學習. The others are intellectuals in the middle (zhongjian zhishi fenzi 中間知識分子), who were prominent public figures or left wing leaders of the Democratic Party who called on intellectuals to participate, and intellectuals who do not belong to the system (fei tizhi zhishi fenzi 非體制知識分子). Huang, ‘You mudide xingdong yu wei yubeide jieguo’ , p. 410ff. The articles by Guo Moruo and Wang Ruoshui will not be considered as they are prescriptive regarding the process and aim of the campaign as well as the method of criticism, rather than in the definitions of academic philosophy. Wang, ‘Qingchu Hu Shi de fandong zhexue yidu’ , pp. 67-76. Guo Moruo drew attention to this article: Guo, ‘Sandian jianyi’ , pp. 7-19 (originally published in RMRB 1954.12.9.).

5 Die Werke von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels in China, p. 18.