

A Review Essay for *Contemporary Marxist Aesthetics and Criticism: Interviews with Western Scholars*

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Abstract: This article presents an introduction and evaluation of a new book titled “Contemporary Marxist Aesthetics and Criticism: Interviews with Western Scholars.” The aim is to provide a critical overview of the book. Using the interviews with four prominent interviewees as an example, this article illustrates and emphasises the significance of this book within contemporary Marxist studies in China. Additionally, the article offers a positive appraisal, highlighting the book’s contribution to the dissemination of the latest development in Western Marxist research to the Chinese academia.

Keywords: Marxist aesthetics; cultural and literary criticism; western Marxist studies

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标题: 评《当代马克思主义美学及批评：西方学者访谈录》

内容摘要: 本文对新书《当代马克思主义美学及批评：西方学者访谈录》进行了全面的介绍与评价，综述了本书的主要内容。以四位重要的受访学者为例，本文特别强调该书在中国当代马克思主义研究中的重要意义，及该书通过将西方马克思主义研究的最新研究成果介绍到中国学术界所做出的积极贡献。

关键词: 马克思主义美学；文化与文学批评；西方马克思主义研究

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Since China’s reform and opening up in the late 1970s, a new wave of Marxist studies has emerged in China, coinciding with significant socio-economic transformations. As Western social sciences and humanities were rapidly introduced to post-reform China, Marxist studies experienced expansion. This growth has been sustained as China entered a new phase of socialism officially known as ‘socialism

with Chinese characteristics,' signifying China's experimentation with its unique version of socialism tailored to Chinese conditions. Amidst the growing body of Marxist academic literature, one notable book that stands out is *Contemporary Marxist Aesthetics and Criticism: Interviews with Western Scholars*, edited by Professor Jie Wang from Zhejiang University. This book provides a crucial update on the latest developments in Marxist studies in the West, making it a valuable addition to the literature on Marxist studies in general and Marxist aesthetics in particular.

Comprising twenty-two interviews conducted over a decade since 2008, this book represents a significant collection of discussions with key Western Marxist scholars and academics inclined toward Marxism. The interviews, conducted by Jie Wang and his team, reflect the long-term engagement of Jie Wang with Western Marxist scholars, serving as an important source for introducing the latest developments in Marxist aesthetics. The collection covers a broad range of topics, including aesthetics, literature, anthropology, sociology, mass media, music, politics, and gender studies, all viewed through a Marxist lens. Renowned scholars such as Terry Eagleton, John Thompson, and Tony Bennett contribute to the interviews, encompassing both classical Marxism and neo-Marxism. This breadth of scholarship highlights the enduring relevance of Marxism today in Western societies, not only as an integral component of critical theory but also as a fresh critique of the contemporary socio-economic and political conditions from a Marxist perspective.

Terry Eagleton, a prominent literary critic and cultural theorist, has engaged with Marxism extensively throughout his career. Eagleton views Marxism as a powerful analytical framework for understanding social and economic structures, particularly capitalism. He appreciates Marxism's emphasis on class struggle, historical materialism, and its critique of inequality and exploitation. In the two interviews, Eagleton introduces the latest development of Western, in particular British Marxist studies and critiques some aspects of western social conditions. He believes that a purely economic analysis is insufficient to comprehend the complexities of human experience. Eagleton advocates for a broader understanding of Marxism that incorporates more cultural dimensions. He argues that Marxism should evolve and adapt to contemporary conditions, while retaining its core commitment to social justice and the pursuit of a more equitable society. In the interview with John B. Thompson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, Thompson elaborates his work both in theoretical and practical dimensions. He has critically engaged with Marxist perspective, however he also highlights the importance in accounting for the complexities of modern culture,

particularly in the context of mass communication. Thompson proposes an interdisciplinary framework for sociological study, blending insights from cultural studies, media studies, and poststructuralism. He argues for a nuanced understanding of contemporary societies that combines class dynamics with the influences of culture, communication, and ideology, thus providing a more comprehensive analysis of social phenomena in the modern west.

Tony Bennett, a prominent cultural theorist and sociologist at the University of Western Sydney, has made significant contributions to the study of aesthetics. His work delves into the complex relationship between art, culture, and society. Bennett argues that aesthetics cannot be divorced from social and political contexts; it is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and ideological struggles. In the interview, Bennett reflects on his intellectual journey in relation to his engagement with Marxist perspective, but his approach to aesthetics has expanded to include more contemporary theories. He explains why these new conceptual frameworks are more productive in understanding contemporary societies. He explores how aesthetic practices, such as art, literature, and architecture, are not just expressions of individual creativity, but also products of social, economic, and political forces. Aleš Erjavec is a Slovenian cultural theorist and philosopher who serves as the president of the International Association for Aesthetics (1998-2001). Erjavec has made significant contributions to the fields of cultural studies, critical theory, and aesthetics. In the two interviews he gave in this collection, Erjavec introduces and reflects his work on the intersections of culture, politics, and aesthetics, particularly within the context of the west, but also in relation to China. He discusses how he critically engages with various theoretical frameworks, including Frankfurt School critical theory and the works of philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Erjavec's research often focuses on the relationship between art, ideology, and social change. He examines the role of art and culture in shaping political and social movements, and has written extensively on topics such as avant-garde art, modernism, and the politics of memory.

This collection of interviews holds unique pertinence and significance in several ways. Firstly, it introduces the latest developments in Marxist studies in the West, specifically Marxist reflections on key aspects of contemporary social conditions. Importantly, it demonstrates how Marxism, as a tool for social criticism, can be applied across multiple dimensions in the analysis of society. Different interpretations of classical Marxism yield distinct critiques of present social problems, applicable to various aspects of society from different perspectives within the broad Marxist traditions. These interpretations can be employed in different

contexts and address diverse issues, such as gender issues. The wide spectrum of Marxist critique presented in this collection offers readers a glimpse into the landscape of Marxist studies in the West.

Secondly, this book is a timely addition to the current Chinese book market, given its focus on Marxist studies and its critical relevance to the Chinese approach to modernity. This aspect represents the book's most significant contribution. As a socialist country with the longest-standing civilization, China is undergoing profound socio-economic transformations of an unprecedented scale and pace in human history. These transformations necessitate not only informed self-reflection but also intellectual guidance. Undoubtedly, the introduction of Marxist evaluations of Western contemporary conditions proves immensely helpful to the Chinese context. Having achieved remarkable economic growth, China now faces new challenges and problems that demand innovative solutions. Consequently, a careful examination of Western social development from a Marxist perspective becomes valuable for China, which is experiencing a historical shift from traditional to a modern way of life, driven by the rapid growth of a middle class and the successful elimination of absolute poverty.

Thirdly, as China seeks to establish its unique mode of modernity, a comparative study of Chinese and Western societies becomes essential. Although the scholars interviewed in this collection may not possess intimate knowledge of China, they are fully aware of the Chinese context. In their assessments of problems, conditions, and critiques of Western societies, these interviewees inevitably provide a critical reference point for the Chinese approach to modernity. Consequently, these interviews are instrumental in achieving the dual adaptations emphasized by the current political elites: the integration of Marxism with the concrete practice of Chinese revolution and the integration of Marxism with the best aspects of Chinese cultural traditions.

Fourthly, the innovative interview format employed in this book ensures that the introduction of Western scholarship on Marxist studies is driven by a desire to enrich Marxist literature in China. Through a dialogic mode of interaction, the interviewer shapes the interview to focus on the most pertinent and important aspects, reflecting concerns relevant to Chinese conditions and practice. The reader-friendly style of presentation makes the book a captivating read, enhancing the absorption of a significant amount of information within a relatively short period.

In conclusion, *Contemporary Marxist Aesthetics and Criticism: Interviews with Western Scholars* represents a commendable effort to bring the latest Marxist scholarship to China. It makes a significant contribution to the enrichment of

Marxist studies literature in general and Marxist aesthetics in particular. I hope that this book reaches as many readers as possible and that similar books are published in the future. I am confident that this essential collection of interviews will have an impact on Marxist studies in China.