Lecture Abstract

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) coins the term “leftist melancholy” in 1931 when he criticizes the “clowning of despair” fashioned by the left-radical intelligentsia in Germany. “The latest of two millennia of metamorphoses of melancholy,” as in his words, spotlights the embarrassed and embarrassing status of the intellectual in the 1930s Germanic context of leftist radicalism. My talk deploys the term “leftist melancholy” to inspect the affective mindscape as inflected in Qu Qiubai’s pre-execution confession “Superfluous Words” in 1934 and its echo in contemporary Taiwanese writer Liu Daren’s African experience in the context of global capitalism. In the case of Qu Qiubai, the liminal status of the intellectual in twentieth-century China involves complicity with and victimization by vying political forces. But more pertinent to the talk, it explores melancholy as a class stigma of the leftist intellectual in the high-tide of Proletarian revolution. It is interesting to observe that the leftist lineage and legacy, across the Taiwan Strait and the temporal span of half a century, echoes in Liu Daren’s African experience neither as a historical hindsight of truth nor as ideological conviction of faith. On the tropical land of Africa in the 1980s, it persists as a melancholy mood of Liu Daren while reflecting upon the post-colonial conditions of the contemporary world. What makes melancholy “leftist” and what makes leftists “melancholic” are the central issues that the talk intends to survey.

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