An Exile of Self-Disinheritance: Revisiting Qu Qiubai

In his last words before his execution by the Chinese nationalist troops, Qu Qiubai (1889–1935) confessed that for him to have crossed the threshold of Marxism from his earlier life as an aspiring literati is *Li shi de wu hui* (A historical mishap). By “mishap” he probably referred to the twists and turns inflicted upon his personal growth which he was neither prepared for before nor tempted to disavow afterwards. These remarks appeared in Qu’s *Duoyu de hua* (My superfluous words) which capped his lifelong avocation of writing—an extraordinary literary output arguably paralleling that of Lu Xun.¹ Although offering few traces of his being “confessional” or “remorseful,” Qu’s essay indexes the ups and downs en route his personal journey for three decades prior to his fatal capture by GMD (the Nationalist) troops in Fujian in 1935. Replete with self-mocking sarcasm, it sheds ample light on aspects of Qu’s writings where his political thinking, philosophical probing and literary impulses would diverge as well as intersect. As a result, his soul-searching narrative was peppered with latent cues and clues, and we are left with the benefits for connecting the dots and detecting a trajectory of Qu’s intellectual growth, which features meandering rites of passage through the terrains of his journalistic stints, political enterprising, labor activism and ideological upstarts and downfall. In a heavily politicized society such as China where personal confessions (especially when made to one’s ideological foes) come automatically under a hurtful and debasing curse; that Qu’s “Confession” can still be publicized as a Leftist, honorable literary work is no mere accident. It bespeaks not so much the CCP’s occasional effort to relax its censor of “dishonorable literature” as the touching appeal of the author’s untainted honesty on the eve of his execution. Perhaps it is for that reason that Qu’s essay, after its ban during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), has rekindled the interests of critics, publishers as well as scholars in China since the 1980s.

The subsequent decades saw surging tides of more pointed and insightful reflections and critique on Qu’s writing and Qu scholarship, and they have helped us reclaim fresh grounds to make a still stronger case about the vitalist

¹ Qu Qiubai, “Duo yu de hua” 多余的话 (My superfluous words) in Zhou Hongxin, *Qu Qiubai shi ge qian shi* 瞿秋白诗歌浅释 (A Preliminary Interpretation of Qu Qiubai’s Poetry), Guangxi People’s Press, 1981.
thinking as an alternative mode of modernism as well as Qu’s singular contribution to it. At the heart of this renewed inquiry is, I believe, the need to decide whether Qu’s misshaped life can be seen as a character anomaly—to be solely attributed to the peculiar traits of his own disposition, psyche and even personality at large—or whether his tenuous growth and premature demise is a reflection of certain intellectual traits emblematic of a paradoxical stand taken by many progressive intellectuals at the time. In his suggestive reading of Zhang Taiyan’s appropriation of the Buddhist non-self for his critique of the modern nation-state, Wang Hui tries to fathom the enigmatic depths of Lu Xun (once a student of Zhang Taiyan) and reveals that the vigor of Lu Xun’s critical sensibility stems largely from a psyche typically fractured between Zai (being present at) and Bu shu yu (not belonging to) the rise of modernist selfhood.\(^2\)

What makes Lu Xun’s views so enigmatic yet so penetrating is, according to Wang, his ability to embed his critique within a critique, i.e., his uncanny discernment of the pitfalls of modern individualism even while he was promoting it in opposition to the Confucian ethics. It is to that end that Wang drew particular attention to the fact that there existed this so-called “liaison class”—those educated elites whose mind was straddled across both forms of social consciousness, i.e., the traditional and the modern—proved equally ambiguous and combative in their pursuit of modernity. And their lives professed a doubly complex measure that can only be best delineated by the paradoxical plight of Lu Xun and the like-minded characters featured in his short stories. In revealing their paradoxical stand, Wang notes,

> Even more unfortunate is the fact that even though Lu Xun “does not belong to any of the civilizations or societies, be it traditional Chinese or modern Western, he cannot shake off the inherent ties with either of the two. He therefore is both anti-tradition and remains rooted in the traditional; he promotes the values of the West, but remains vigilant against her menacing intent.”\(^3\)


\(^3\) Wang, *Self-selected Works*, 160. Translation is by me.