Abstract

The Modernist literary movement between the 1950s and the 1970s not only significantly reoriented the artistic outlook of Taiwanese writers, but also served as forum for cultural, political, and ideological debates with widespread repercussions. The potency of its legacy in the aesthetic realm is still readily observable today: in works of the internationally famed auteur directors of the Taiwan New Cinema, for instance.

Developments in cultural theories of the last two decades, however, compel us to reassess the relationship between this movement and its presumed source of influence, the Euro-American cultural modernism of the late 19th- and early 20th-century. Postmodernist discourse, for instance, generated a sizable revisionist scholarship that pointed to modernism’s complicity with the imperialist project of the West, the repressive potential of the Enlightenment rationality, and the Eurocentric bias inherent in the very notion of “modernity.” Postcolonialist theorists, on the other hand, took issue with the unexamined assumption that the non-Western world was predestined to retrace, in a linear fashion, the same trajectory modernity had traveled in the West. In the newer paradigms, therefore, artistic modernisms in the non-West are examined to a greater extent as cultural configurations of different types of (localized, “translated,” or “alternative”) modernity.

Incorporating such perspectives, my new research project intends to explore distinctive patterns of the fragmented, mediated, yet persistently recurring modernist trends in different East Asian regions throughout the last century. The proposed paper is a preliminary effort toward this goal. Building on arguments put forth in my previous studies --chiefly Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan (Duke UP, 1993) and Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law (Columbia UP, 2004)-- the paper will try to tease out elements in Taiwan’s Modernist literary movement that appear to be exemplary of the broader, pan-East Asian phenomenon.

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