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Identity and Difference in Cross-Cultural Understanding: Translation as Political Philosophy in Benjamin, Lu Xun, Schmitt, and Francois Julien

Thursday 12 July 3.30pm – 5.00pm

Speakers

Professor Xudong Zhang

New York University / Peking University

Location

Seminar Room 3.02

Sir Roland Wilson Building #120,
McCoy Circuit, Acton ACT 2601

Seminar is followed by light refreshments

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This seminar is free and open to the public.

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This paper explores the politico-philosophical assumptions and implications in what lies at the center of cross-cultural understanding: translation. By examining the theory and practice of Walter Benjamin and Lu Xun, I seek to show that the search for the universal is always poised to subvert and undermine the particular and the local by subtly or radically transforming the symbolic order by which the imaginary is structured. By adding the more conceptually rigorous arguments of Schmitt, I introduce the friend-enemy distinction and the collective will to sovereignty into the open-ended quest for an ever-expanding horizon of experiences, expressions, and processes and mechanisms of meaning-formation that characterizes Goethe's notion of "World Literature" and what has become the contemporary disciplinary of comparative literature and culture. I argue that a political intensity pertaining to the "sudden grouping of human beings" (Schmitt), despite its ontological and fatalistic penchant, is a necessary, even desirable presence in our liberal and postmodern embrace of Other and difference, as it affords and informs a more realistic analysis of the concrete situation in our daily readings and interpretations operating at the levels of perception, figuration, style, and form. Finally, with discussions of Takeuchi Yoshimi, a leading Lu Xun scholar and cultural theorist writing in inter-War and post-War Japan; and of Francois Julien, a contemporary French comparative philosopher specializing in Greek and Chinese philosophies, I seek to show that the fascination with the Other (sometimes at the risk of "going native") is always motivated, driven and inspired by the search for a more productive self-identity by grasping its inner contradictions, anxieties and promises as this identity, as a combination of identity and difference, takes shape in a constant pursuit of self-preservation and self-negation.

Xudong Zhang is Professor of Comparative Literature and East Asian Studies at NYU, and founding director of the International Center for Critical Theory (a consortium of Peking University, New York University, University of Tokyo and Eastern China Normal University). He is also Director of China House NYU. He has published widely on critical theory and transcultural comparisons of Chinese and European modernities.

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