Chinese Studies Colloquium

April 15, 2016, Friday, 3pm-4:30pm, SC 108

Necessary Fictions: Crowds in Modern Chinese Thought

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The advent of the crowd is one of the most dramatic stories in the making of the modern world. Modern discourses on crowds in Europe and North America have received increasing critical attention in recent years, but the Chinese side of this global story is still missing. My study offers a locally specific perspective on the emergence of the crowd (gunzhang) as a problematic icon in the Chinese cultural landscape within a transnational context of theoretical discourses. It details the processes through which imagining crowds became nothing less than a source of legitimation for intellectuals from both the Left and the Right in China’s crisis-ridden transition from dynastic empire to nation-state. Rather than treating the crowd as a socio-political given, I call attention to the ways in which writers, philosophers, psychologists, and political theorists searched for and often invented vocabularies, explanations, and modes of representation in order to render the crowd knowable and practicable. In particular, my talk focuses on how the intersection of crowd, self, and revolution took shape within the dissemination of a psychological mode of conceiving and managing normality and pathology, which crossed different forms of cultural production, animated competing narratives, and determined normative programs of mobilization and manipulation in an emerging age of mass politics.

Tie Xiao is Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Literature at Indiana University. His research interests include modern Chinese literature, intellectual history, and visual culture. His book manuscript Revolutionary Waves: Imagining Crowds in Modern China, 1900-1950 is currently under review. He is also a writer and translator.

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