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Theses of the Author Liu Zaifu in the Context of Exile Studies

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This paper deals with certain surprising theses proposed by Chinese author Liu Zaifu on the topic of exile. The literary scholar and essayist was born in 1941 and worked as director of the Literature Section of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing for many years. In 1989, during the student demonstrations on Tiananmen Square, he actively advocated a policy of dialogue between the government and the demonstrators, which meant that when the authorities ultimately chose to put down the protests by force, Liu's name was put on a government "blacklist." Since he was also threatened with repressive measures now, he took the risky step of undertaking a clandestine flight from China to the USA that same summer, which is where he has mostly lived ever since.[1]

The definition of exile I adopt here is one that regards the phenomenon as "expropriation" in the sense of rendering everything "extra-territorial" that "properly belongs" to the "home" and which has hitherto served to establish and support the identity and "substance" of the subject (Walter 1986: 38). Before dealing with Liu's own theses on the subject of exile, I would like to contextualize these ideas within exile studies from a sinological perspective. This does not appear to be a very easy thing to do. It is indeed the case that, as Guy Stern has written, "the study of exile literature [...] has emerged from [being] a neglected [...] enterprise [to become] a firmly established [...] sub-discipline of literary scholarship" (Stern 1998: 323). Both German- and English-language exile studies, however, continue to be focused largely on the theme of Jewish exile in the USA and in Europe, so a fundamental question naturally arises: What place is to be found within exile studies for the experiences of present-day Chinese exiles? I was only able to find a single contribution by an exile from China (Shi 2000) in all the yearbooks of the Society for Exile Studies that I analyzed. A second China-related contribution on the subject of exile was to be found in the almanac of a forum on Else Lasker-Schüler (Yang 1998).

The reasons for this marginalization doubtless include the following: in the world of German literary studies, the literature of exile continues to be treated as a concept associated with one specific historical epoch, with the emphasis decidedly placed on the project of finding a place within the German cultural tradition for the body of

1 For further biographical information on Liu Zaifu, see Jensen 2011.

literature that was produced in exile in the period from 1933 to 1945 (Bischoff and Komfort-Hein 2012: 241). Like Karl Holl, I would be glad to see the discipline of exile studies in the English- and German-speaking worlds develop in the direction of a greater concern, in a comparative spirit, with other situations of exile being included besides the ones imposed by the Nazi regime during the years of the Third Reich (Holl 2000: 263).

In my view, another promising path of development for the study of the topic that concerns us here might lie in the linkage of exile studies with post-colonial studies, since one of the characteristics of the latter discipline is its tendency to deconstruct the concept of the nation. In the 1960s, Ernest Gellner arrived at the insight that nationalism in no way represents the awakening of nations to a consciousness of their own identity; instead, nations are invented, he declared (Gellner 1991). For Benedict Anderson, a nation is tantamount to an imagined political community (Anderson 1996). The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha claims that a nation is an invented community which depends upon a continuing nationalist pedagogy for its existence (Bhabha 2000: 215, 217). Over the next few pages, we will see how Liu Zaifu, in turn, has critically engaged with the concept of the nation state. In the context of the language and culture of the People's Republic of China, the word *guojia* mainly stands for "nation-state" or "nation" in the sense of a specifically statal entity. The word *minzu* can also be translated as "nation," but in the PRC's context, it rather has the meaning of nationality, ethnicity, or "people;" the PRC's officially recognized minority nationalities, for example, are called *shaoshu minzu*. The term *minzuzhuyi* is frequently linked with separatist tendencies. The idea of nationalism is usually expressed in the PRC by a word meaning patriotism — literally, love of the state/love of the nation: *aiguozhuyi* (Schubert 2001). In his own discourse on matters related to exile, and the nation-state, Liu always uses the word *guojia*.

Unlike Liu's stance on the nation-state, Stephan Braese has established that, for the majority of German exiles during the period on which exile studies concentrates, the concept of a nation became a fixed category in their thinking and feeling under conditions of exile (Braese 2009: 4).

The option to go into exile removed Liu Zaifu from what had once been an influential political position in academia and acquainted him with what it means to occupy a position of "marginalization." In an essay in German — *Der Marginalismus ist ein Humanismus* ("Marginalism is a Humanism") — the philosopher Heinz Robert Schlette adapted a well-known formulation by Jean-Paul Sartre so as to give the term "marginalism" a positive connotation. A certain distance from the dehumanized "center," Schlette argues, is often a precondition to be able to express criticism and think independently. The refusal to allow oneself to become a part of the "center's" recording and upholding of its own identity and tradition is, he claims, what alone makes a "view from outside" possible (Schlette 1991). Eva Hausbacher has put forward the thesis that the transitory spaces between cultures and nations

which come to be formed as a result of globalization and migration are in the process of becoming the new focal points of aesthetic innovation (Hausbacher 2008: 51). The German author Hilde Domin, who lived in exile herself from 1939 to 1954 and who began working as a writer during this period abroad, working in the language of her native country, considered the poetic dicta of refugees to be of special poetic force, precisely because these people possess experience in and of the "exterior," while at the same time being dicta which equip and prepare the refugees to set out on their "way back" — back to the heart of the life also led by those who have been persecuted and pursued the subject of their writing, namely, their language (Domin 1968: 194).

It seems to me that the author Liu Zaifu has also pondered questions of exile and existence in exile in a particularly remarkable way and has set out on some new paths of intellectual investigation and speculation — also in the sense that was pointed out by Edward Said, who ascribes a "plurality of vision" and a position of "delocalization" to the exiled individual which is "uprooted" vis-à-vis all positions that are "set and solid": "Exile for the intellectual […] is constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others" (Said 2000).[2] The cultural theorist Elisabeth Bronfen has also suggested that a certain "originality of [an exile's] gaze" can develop out of the situation of being "cut off," which is typically the situation that individuals experience while in exile (Bronfen 1993: 176).

The literary theorist Nico Israel sees the concept of "exile" as being situated midway between two contradictory meanings. On the one hand, its derivation from the Latin *exilium* signifies banishment to a foreign location by an institutional act of force. On the other hand, the same concept, which may also be derived from the Latin *ex salire*, additionally contains the meaning of "leap out," i.e., the denotation of "remov[ing] oneself to another place by an act of one's own will" (Israel 2000: 1). I believe it is possible to see Liu Zaifu as having moved from *exilium* to *ex salire* in the course of his own exile; his original and creative dictum of "sending the state into exile" testifies to an inner autonomy and capacity for action.

In his first book of essays to appear after 1989, Liu declared that, by nature, he was inclined toward freedom and that he had been fleeing dictatorship all his life. At the same time, he continued, freedom frightened him, and this fear of freedom expressed itself as a fear of solitude. It was a condition that he had also observed in many of his friends in exile, not just in himself, he noted: a tendency to flee the state of being alone and the state of being free (Liu 1994a). He also wrote the following words in 1989:

2 Interestingly, Jewish authors such as Joseph Roth have often tended to see migration, wandering, and homelessness as a constant element or aspect of human life per se. Roth writes of such wandering as something "appropriate to Jews, and to all others besides. Lest we forget that nothing in this world endures, not even a home" (Roth 2001: 123).

> When I began my life as a vagabond, it was as if I had had the ground torn away from under my feet [...]. It is clear to me that I felt this way because I had become a man without a home. For me, the things that make up my home are veritable necessities of life: its forests, its steppes [...] the goodness of my mother, relatives, friends, and last but not least even my enemies [...]. My books, composed in Chinese characters [...], these too are signs pointing back to my home. (Liu 1994b)[3]

Elisabeth Bronfen describes the experience of exile in terms which are intrinsically related to the word that designates the concept of "home" in her native German: *Heimat*. The experience of exile, she writes, is a process in which the place once experienced as one's *Heimat* becomes *un-heimlich* through being split into "those who still belong there" and "the expelled" (*unheimlich* is a word that has been the object of much philosophical speculation, most famously perhaps in the eponymous essay by Sigmund Freud, and that evokes a whole group of meanings, ranging from the simple and literal "not from one's own home" to the broader and more metaphorical sense of "uncanny"). Bronfen suggests that the exiled individual, split off from his or her *Heimat*, becomes something "uncanny" him- or herself (Bronfen 1993: 171). Theodor Adorno also famously described the emigrant intellectual as leading a "damaged life." Adorno, who spent many years in exile from his native Germany himself, wrote in his *Minima Moralia* that "the language [of the emigrant intellectual] is a dispossessed one, and there has thereby been dug away from underneath him that historical dimension from which his powers of understanding and insight had drawn their strength" (Adorno 2001: 41). The texts published by Liu since 1989 repeatedly manifest an effort analogous to the one implied here: the attempt to penetrate by thought, and to distance oneself from, the historical dimension of a China permeated and formed by the intellectual legacy of socialism; a process of permeation and formation in which Liu himself had taken part and, partially at least, affirmed up until 1989.

Twelve years after the beginning of his life in exile, however, Liu Zaifu's attitude toward this condition had already changed significantly. In an interview with the magazine *Tangent*, the author reflects on various stances that might be taken toward exile and the fact of having been exiled (Liu 2001). One, he suggests, is that of the poet Qu Yuan (343?–290 BC); Qu perceived himself as someone who had been banished by his native country (*bei guojia suo fangzhu*), and his work is an expression of his sorrow and lamenting about this fact. Actually, many literati in premodern China who dared to confront the rulers with critical standpoints were exiled to distant places (see Waley-Cohen 1991). Another possible stance, according to Liu, is that of self-banishment (*ziwo fangzhu*). This was a stance adopted by the author Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967). Zhou sought out a sphere of his own where he could exert his influence, far away from society and the government. Liu Zaifu, however, favors the cultivation of a third type of relation between himself and the

3 Thomas Mann also describes how he suffered from "an asthma of the heart" in the first few years of his exile (see Mann 1974: 955 and Sprecher 2010).

nation-state, namely, "sending the state into exile" (*fangzhu guojia*). What this means to Liu is maintaining some distance from the government of his native country. The starting point for this attitude is the subject who considers the state as a counterpart with whom he can deal freely. A profound literary viewpoint, Liu argues, stands in no relation to the viewpoints of states. It is his intention to replace the language that had long been prescribed by the Chinese state with the language of literature, for he will no longer allow himself to be controlled by the will of a collective, a society, or a state.

We can note a difference here between Liu Zaifu and another Chinese author whom the journalist Shi Ming quotes in his contribution on the theme of exile, albeit without naming him. This writer — described only as a friend of Shi Ming's originally from Beijing — is cited as remarking the following in a conversation with the latter:

> In my view, since our exile has in any case taken away from us any possibility of seeing our geographical home again with our own eyes, why should we exiles also accept a ban on our dreams of a better China? [...] And indeed, even if it turned out that our idealistic vision of our home was only self-delusion, these fantasies will at least have served to make life easier for us away from this home, in exile. (Shi 2000: 204)

Liu Zaifu displays a more sober and realistic attitude in this respect. Liu has recognized that his going into exile necessarily implies that his native country is no longer available to him as a frame of reference. For this reason, he refrains from sketching out any "idealized vision" of the Chinese nation state.

Liu's ideas display close affinities with lines of thought developed by the French author and Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian, with whom Liu is on friendly terms and with whose scholarly views he has often engaged. It is Gao Xingjian's declared position that an author bears responsibility only toward the language he uses, not toward his mother country or nation (Gao and Yang 2001: 91).

As I see it, it is important that when we consider these positions adopted by Liu Zaifu and Gao Xingjian, we also consider them against the backdrop of developments occurring in the 1980s and 1990s in the People's Republic of China. Schubert notes how the period since 1978 has been characterized by a crisis in national identity (Schubert 2002: 125). The 1980s were marked by a feverish debate on the proper nature of culture, in which Liu Zaifu also played an important role with his calls for greater subjectivity in literature and aesthetics. At that time, many intellectuals were speaking out in favor of greater democratization and liberalization in Chinese society. The 1989 demonstrations on Tiananmen Square, which Liu Zaifu supported, were only the climax of a growing mood of rebellion and renewal that had gradually been building up over the last decade. In 1990s China, however, after the events of 1989, nationalism was no longer an attitude that the state was able to dictate and prescribe to the people, Schubert argues. In this respect, the Chinese state was forfeiting its "power to define truth" more and more (Schubert 2002: 381). Indeed, large sections of China's intellectual elite opted to conform to the "strong

state" line defended by the government and to support the authorities' efforts to centralize and reinforce their powers. Since such an attitude — as Schubert argues — actually amounted to support of the one-party rule practiced by the Chinese Communist Party, it became very difficult to draw a clear line between patriotism and mere political opportunism (Schubert 2002: 149).

These developments in China have certainly also influenced Liu's und Gao's thinking on these questions. "What is lost must be looked for in exile," as Paolo Bartoloni states, reporting a remark made by Italo Calvino in *Hermit in Paris* (Bartoloni 2008: 96). In my opinion, one might interpret and apply this idea as follows: Liu Zaifu sends the Chinese state into exile. It is there that the lost humanity and legitimacy of politics need to be sought. Liu's understanding of the state seems to show similarities to Zhang Junmai's thinking (1886–1969) in this respect, a man who, as Thomas Fröhlich writes, had perceived the state as an organism with its own will, self-awareness, and a mind of its own (Fröhlich 2000: 171).

Liu himself has departed, no longer sees himself as bearing any responsibility here, and refuses to be instrumentalized. According to Liu's way of looking at things, the Chinese state is sorely in need of a condition of exile, since — to borrow another image of Bartoloni's — "life that has no sense of exile" is "a life blissfully content in its sense of groundedness, purposefulness, and productivity devoid of […] thinking and memory" (Fröhlich 2000: 115). Liu himself managed to free himself of an "exilic mentality," which is described by Hsiau A-chin as a "lasting mental tendency wherein one feels disturbed because of a sense of loss, uprootedness, and nostalgia, which is typical of the experience of persons who are forced to leave their countries […] especially for political reasons" (Hsiau 2010: 6).

In 2005, Liu Zaifu and Gao Xingjian conducted a series of discussions in Paris about literature (Liu and Gao 2011). In one of these discussions, which was entitled *Fangxia zhengzhi huayu* ("Put Aside the Language of Politics"), Liu Zaifu recalls that Gao Xingjian had advised him back in 1989 to liberate himself from the shadows of politics as quickly as possible and turn to spiritual and intellectual creativity instead. In the conversation from 2005, Gao even describes exile as an opportunity to achieve freedom for intellectual and spiritual creation and to escape the stranglehold of politics.[4]

Liu and Gao agree that the voice of an author must be an authentic one. Totalitarian governments have threatened to annihilate authors who have refused to recognize their legitimacy. In such a context, the two writers concur, it is impossible for any authentic literature to emerge. All too often in Chinese literature, they point out, the central issue has been the flourishing or decline of the state as a collective — and

4 The poet Yang Lian has also spoken of how "the taste of exile" consists in "tasting the word 'freedom' right down to its deepest depths" (Yang 1998: 237).

not the "to be or not to be" of the human individual. This, they argue, is why it is important to separate literary language from political language.

The literary theorist Wolfgang Klein has expressed a similar view:

> Literature differs from other forms of human expression and understanding through speech and writing (i.e., in daily life, in the specialized sciences, in philosophy, and precisely in society and politics) in that it does not entirely commit itself to the "given" and to the logic of the "given," but rather maintains a certain distance and attempts a certain expansion […]. [It] creates its own contexts and connections, proceeds by other laws than those of utility and personal interest […]. It differs, in short, in being autonomous. It is neither reducible to society nor derivable from this latter. (Klein 1999: 148)

Whoever wants to preserve their independence of thought, Liu Zaifu argues, must maintain some distance between themselves and the centers of power and must not function as a "public intellectual." Because whoever acts as such forfeits his or her individuality, which is essentially what characterizes an author. Preserving individuality is not easy. It is, in Liu's words, a matter of voluntarily taking up a marginal position (*gan ju bianyuan diwei*). Positioning oneself in this way inevitably leads to personal solitude and isolation as well.

Liu Zaifu declares that he has renounced the task of awakening and admonishing the "conscience of society." He also describes himself as still seeking an answer to the question of just what relation a writer should have to the social world around him. It could well be that the reason why Liu Zaifu displays a special commitment and fidelity to the literary genre of the essay is because essayistic discourse facilitates the linkage of individual thought with the order of the social world to a special degree. This is the case inasmuch as, in the essay, the individual subject tends to manifest him- or herself in two forms at the same time: as the investigating subject, but also as the subject being investigated, i.e., the model of "reflection" (Müller-Funk 1995: 63).

Gao Xingjian has already found an answer to the question of what relation an author should have to society, which he feels is personally valid in his own case. He has written that the only function an author can properly and essentially fulfill is that of bearing witness to the difficult position in which human beings find themselves merely by virtue of their existential situation. Liu Zaifu, on the other hand, still sees social criticism as one of the characteristic tasks of the literatus. It is not just to society, however, but also to himself that an author must learn to apply a cool, analytical gaze, Liu argues. The 20th century has wearied the human race, he continues. It has been an age of error and absurdity. The objective today is to escape the old methods of violent overthrow, revolution, and systematic extermination and to re-attain a state of clear awareness and dignity. Liu Zaifu published a renowned book together with Li Zehou in 1997, which had the title *Farewell to Revolution* (*Gaobie geming*) and expressed this idea (Liu and Li 1997).

A similarity in attitude and experience can be noted between the thoughts of Liu Zaifu and those of the German exile Hans Sahl, who was forced to flee to the USA by Nazi persecution. Sahl too was careful not to involve himself in politics during his exile. He has left us an ironic description of some fellow German exiles who took the path he renounced:

> There they sat, bunched up together in the smoky little room, with the American flag on the podium and the works of the authors banned in their homeland set out by the entrance — the fools and the prophets, the scholars and interpreters of their own respective "holy scripture," persecuted, hunted, chased across half the globe, but still zealously pursuing their missions of interpretation and protest, each one of them a defeated general, seeking to prove that his strategy alone had been the right one. (Sahl 1991: 25)

In Sahl's view, exile had become a way of life, a "kind of passive resistance against the world." He also recognized solitude and loneliness as decisive characteristics of his state of exile. These were characteristics that he did not reject, however, but rather felt to be necessary to his life (Wollbold 1999: 127).

In his own work *On Creativity*, Gao Xingjian also speaks of a "necessary loneliness" (*biyao de gudu*) (Gao 2008). For him, the feeling of loneliness is a kind of aesthetic experience by means of which he perceives the external world and his own self. Clear knowledge is only possible when one takes a step back from other people and things, he writes. Tolerance, Gao goes on to argue, only emerges if a certain distance and latitude of unoccupied space is maintained between human beings in their contact with one another.

Another Chinese poet in exile, Bei Ling, passes a more negative judgment on the experience of loneliness. He writes:

> In exile, one is confronted over and over again with the full meaning of loneliness; one's whole situation is accurately summed up by all those adjectives associated with solitude and being alone: isolated, orphaned, forgotten […], leading a shadow existence […], a lone wolf, a lost one […]. (Bei 2012: 192)

Elisabeth Bronfen has sketched out a "three-part model of identification for the subject in exile" comprising "the capacity to re-conquer paradise through one's imagination; the capacity to alter and transform the meaning of a place which is not a paradise so as to make it into one; or the capacity to hold out in that constantly precarious, 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) 'in-between' condition that is exile" (Bronfen 1993: 183).

In my view Liu Zaifu's manner of dealing with the state of exile cannot be classified in terms of any of these three capacities. The idea of "paradise" is, after all, one that owes a great deal to specifically occidental Christian conceptions. Liu has spoken in an essay of how he felt the appeal of the doctrines taught by Buddhism, particularly during the years he spent in exile. Gautama the Buddha developed a language which is a great help to all those who find themselves confronted with the theme and problem of "taking leave," Liu points out. It is a matter of "letting go" — of oneself

as well as others (Liu 2002). In one of his conversations with Gao Xingjian, Liu also cites one of the great historical innovators of the Buddhist tradition, Huineng (638–713 AD), who displayed a strong spirit of independence vis-à-vis any attempt by political powers and authorities to gain influence over him. Likewise, it is reported of Huineng that the Empress Wu Zetian summoned him to an audience with her not just once but twice, and that he refused to go and see her at her court on both occasions (Liu and Gao 2011: 295).

In an encyclopedia article of his, Lionel M. Jensen has described Liu Zaifu as a "frustrated utopian […] whose valorizing of the subject is now passé" (Jensen 2011). I find Jensen's article to be very insightful in many respects, but I cannot agree with this particular characterization of Liu Zaifu. In my view, Liu Zaifu does not aspire to establish any "paradise on earth." Nor does he any longer perceive and experience his marginalized position as — in Bronfen's phrase — "uncanny" (*unheimlich*). Instead, he now seeks to attain an equanimity and equilibrium between individual freedom and a certain concern and solicitude for the wider social world. With his dictum of "sending the state into exile," he ultimately succeeds in completing a transformation of his own person, turning from the condition of being a passive, suffering victim into that of an active subject capable of effective action. This change of character is a turn toward new horizons. At the end of Liu's tenth volume of essays, we read the following: "There now begins my third life. In my first life, I was a citizen of China. In my second life, I was an exile. Now, in my third, I am a citizen of the world" (Liu 2010: 351).

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