

# ON EXILE

BY HU PING

Some types of suffering are difficult to explain and difficult for others to understand. Exile is among them—especially the exile of those who left China after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989.

## **Lesser suffering is still suffering**

What's so hard about exile? When one considers the suffering of dissidents who remain imprisoned in China, of friends who have lost their jobs and can't make a living, of those who have seen their families destroyed and are constantly harassed by the police, of Tiananmen mothers who have no more tears left to cry, and of young men and women who were mowed down on Chang'an Avenue in the prime of their life more than 15 years ago, aren't exiles who harp on about their hardships guilty of crass self-indulgence and ego-centrism?

Consider the plight of illegal Chinese immigrants who are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars, risk their lives, suffer untold hardships, leave their homes empty-handed, and take on the most onerous and badly paid work to start a new life in a strange land. They are not exiles, but they often have to claim political persecution in order to obtain refugee status and right of abode overseas. If exile is so dreadful, why do thousands upon thousands of Chinese people present themselves as political refugees every year? Indeed, most real exiles have much better lives than these illegal immigrants. Next to these immigrants, aren't exiles who blather on about the hardships of exile mere weaklings putting on lordly airs?

Perhaps they are, but there's more to it than that. There are degrees of suffering, as well as different types; that's why the ancients divided hell into 18 levels. The first level of hell is still hell. Moreover, some types of suffering can be compared, and some cannot. In the final analysis, suffering is always borne by an individual in specific circumstances. A person who loses a leg in a car accident cannot be said not to be suffering just because somebody else lost both legs. His suffering is his, and your suffering is yours.

## **Attachment to one's native land**

I remember a Christmas Eve party held one evening by the Chinese democracy movement in a big lecture hall in the Rockefeller University graduate student union. Many political exiles and overseas Chinese students showed up. I was talking and drinking a glass of wine by a window with an acquaintance, whom I'll refer to as C.

C observed, "Some experiences can't be expressed in writing. When you write them down, you give the reader the wrong impression." He continued, "Imagine trying to write down what's happening right now: 'A group of Chinese exiles have gathered on the 39th floor of Rockefeller University, and are looking through a French window at Manhattan's bright skyline. I'm sipping red wine from a tall glass and chatting with friends.' This is an entirely accurate description, but people reading this back in China would think that we live a life of elegance and comfort. Nothing we write can ever make them understand our distress and anxiety."

Whether in China or abroad, communicating one's experience can be very difficult. A Chinese student studying in a small Midwestern town once told me how he wrote a letter to a schoolmate back in China telling him how lonely and bored he felt here in America. He felt that life had no meaning, and the only way he could escape depression was to get in his car and speed down the freeway. His schoolmate wrote back, "What are you moaning about? I would love to have a car to drive down a freeway."

The ancients discovered long ago that written language is misleading. The scholar Zhang Chao (1650–1709) wrote, "There are scenes which sound very exquisite, but are really sad and forlorn, as for instance a scene of mist and rain; there are situations which sound very poetic, but are really hard to bear, as for instance sickness and poverty; and there are sounds which seem charming when mentioned, but are really vulgar, as for instance the voices of girls selling flowers."<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese people have always had a fear of exile and a singular attachment to their native land. The Chinese expression "turning your back on the well and leaving your hometown," which is said when someone leaves his native place, immediately evokes feelings of loneliness and wretchedness. It was only a little over a hundred years ago that Chinese people were awakened from their dream by Western cannons and

found that there were countries more powerful and more civilized than China. Since then, the West has held an extraordinary fascination for a great many Chinese people. Even transliterated Western place names and terms bear a wonderful exoticism that makes fantasies run wild. The Communist regime pursued a closed-door policy for thirty years, but extremes breed reversals, and the eventual implementation of the open-door policy launched a great wave of students and legal and illegal emigrants overseas. Chinese people, who were once deeply attached to their native land, became overnight one of the most indiscriminately xenophilic people on earth. Western countries do indeed enjoy greater liberty and wealth than China, and Chinese people overseas can live comfortably enough. But when a Chinese person lives in a foreign land, loneliness and isolation follow him like a shadow. This sense of isolation is very difficult to express in writing. In ancient times, Chinese people understood how much those forced to leave their homeland suffered, but in those days, exile meant living in poverty on the fringes of a prosperous and civilized China. Because today's Chinese exiles live in the prosperous West, most people cannot understand the hardship and suffering they experience.

**A singular suffering**

Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) went into exile during World War II to escape persecution from the Nazis. After spending some time in Britain, he ended up in Brazil, where he committed suicide with his wife in 1942. By rights, exile should not

have been a great hardship for Zweig, because as a young man he had decided to become a citizen of the world and to lead a nomad existence. Zweig was born in Vienna, one of the world's cultural capitals; he began traveling at a young age, spoke several languages, counted many world famous writers among his friends, and sold his books from Cairo to Cape Town, from Shanghai to Batavia to Mexico City. Zweig's young wife accompanied him on his travels, so he couldn't have been lonely, and he was always financially well off. Moreover, in every city he visited he enjoyed boundless hospitality from international and literary celebrities. Nor was Zweig's creativity in any way diminished by exile. Far from his native land, he wrote *The Right to Heresy: Castilio against Calvin*, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography*, *Brazil: A Land of the Future*, and *The Royal Game and Other Stories*, which was published posthumously. No matter how you slice it, Stefan Zweig was émigré royalty.

You would think that no one was better suited the life of an exile, but you'd be wrong. Stefan Zweig turned out to be acutely unsuited to the life of an exile. This came as an enormous surprise even to him. He once wrote that he had spent almost half a century trying, and failing, to become a citizen of the world in his heart. He recalled that on the day his exile began, something broke inside him; he felt as though he was no longer completely himself, and that he had become disconnected from the person he used to be. Zweig wrote that exile causes a feeling of losing balance, and that when a person is uprooted he becomes increasingly less steady and sure of him-



Exiled dissident Liu Binyan, honored in a foreign land. Photo courtesy of *Beijing Spring*

self. The only way to grasp this truth, wrote Zweig emphatically, is to experience it personally.

To be sure, one of the reasons Stefan Zweig was unable to adapt to exile was that he gave up all hope for the future. That was the main reason why he took his own life. As he wrote in his suicide note, “The world of my native tongue has perished for me, and Europe, my spiritual home, is destroying itself.” Zweig was probably also right when he said that from an early age he had been too self-absorbed and too sensitive, and the great convulsions of his age were profoundly upsetting to him. At any rate, Zweig’s experience ought to tell us that exile is much harder than people generally assume, and the suffering it causes is difficult to understand for those who haven’t experienced it themselves.

### **A tree that hasn’t been transplanted doesn’t feel its roots**

What makes exile painful above all else is losing the place to which you belong.

A popular saying goes, “A mansion of gold or silver is not as good as one’s own doghouse.” Clearly, what matters is not the shabbiness or luxuriousness of a home, but whether it is one’s own. This popular saying expresses that a sense of belonging is more important than opulence or penury.

The German poet and philosopher Jonathan Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) wrote powerfully about the sense of belonging. He believed that just as people need food and drink, a sense of security and freedom of movement, they also need to belong to a particular community. Those who don’t belong to a community often feel defenseless, isolated, insignificant and dejected. To Herder, homesickness was the noblest form of suffering. It is human nature to want to have a place to go home to, and where you feel you are among your own kind. Herder wasn’t talking about race and blood, but rather about homeland, language, a shared historical memory and customs. Isolation is not the result of being alone, but rather of being surrounded by people who don’t understand what you say. Real understanding, which is effortless and almost instinctive, only exists among members of the same society. Herder did not believe in cosmopolitanism. He believed that unless people belong to a particular culture, they are incapable of growth. He argued that even when people revolt against their own culture and transform it, they still belong to an unbroken cultural tradition. New currents emerge, but in the final analysis people evolve from their own cultural wellspring. If the cultural wellspring dries up—for example, if people find themselves living in a foreign culture, feel no affinity with those around them and have no opportunity to speak their own language, it can bring about severe cultural dehydration.

Why is it so difficult for people who have not experienced exile themselves to understand the pain it brings? Because the society to which we belong and in which we grow up is like the air we breathe; we are ordinarily not even aware of its existence, or of what it means to us. Only by leaving your home do you become homesick. Only by living among others do you recognize your own identity. Only by living in a foreign land do you actually realize that you are Chinese. A tree that hasn’t been transplanted doesn’t feel its roots.

### **Is exile in freedom a punishment?**

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski<sup>2</sup> once said that Russia’s vast territory gave it a unique system of internal exile. Political exiles suffered the dual affliction of being banished from their homes while remaining prisoners of the Tsarist tyranny. Does such a system of internal exile exist in “New China”? Yes: it’s called being “sent down” (*xiaofang*) to the countryside. The dual affliction of internal exile is patently obvious, but the hardships of exile in a foreign country are less so. When a fish thrashes about on a beach, we know that the beach is the problem, not the fish. But when a saltwater fish flails helplessly in a fresh-water lake, the fish is seen as the problem, not the lake.

Banishment is clearly a terrible form of punishment, but it’s less clear whether banishing dissidents to the West can be considered a punishment. Isn’t banishing an advocate of Western-style liberal democracy to the liberal-democratic West tantamount to putting a fish in the open sea? How is that a punishment? The reason it’s a punishment is that what Chinese dissidents want is to achieve liberal democracy in their own country. By banishing them to a foreign land, the government not only forbids them from living in their own country but also prevents them from fighting for their ideals.

To an outsider, foreign exile may appear to a life of ease and comfort. In fact, every experience of foreign exile is unique, and differs from person to person. For some people, exile brings all sorts of alternatives that were unavailable in their homeland; for most, exile is the lesser of evils; but for yet others, living in exile brings more misery than remaining in their own country. Without a doubt, internal exile involves varying degrees of suffering, but when you know that you’re suffering for your ideals, and when others know it too, your pain becomes meaningful. In foreign exile you’re also suffering for your ideals, but others think you’re living in the lap of luxury. Not only do you fail to gain greater respect for your suffering, but whatever respect you enjoyed in the past is frittered away. In internal exile, your banishment from the civilized center to the uncivilized periphery is unknown to the world, but you can gain some pride from persevering through the abuse and brutality you suffer, and you have the satisfaction of standing tall, like a stork among chickens or a tiger on the plain. In foreign exile you find yourself living in a place even more central and civilized than China, a birthplace of liberty. Most people imagine (as you probably also imagined at first) that here you should be as happy as a fish in water, that your talents will flower and that you will finally be able to display your abilities to the fullest. But if you are given this great opportunity and fail to achieve great things and remain unknown to the world, you are likely to feel insignificant, lose your self-respect and become depressed. Joseph Brodsky said that exile teaches humility; Stefan Zweig said that it made you lose your self-confidence. Were they saying the same thing?

### **More than homesickness**

Immigrants, refugees and even modern-day nomads all suffer from homesickness, but the pain of exile is deeper, more complex and more full of contradictions.

The main difference between exiles, immigrants, refugees and modern-day nomads is psychological, not semantic. Exiles are not immigrants, because they always regard their country of residence as a place to which they have been forced to move on a temporary basis. Nor are exiles nomads, because they are neither homeless nor rejecters of their homeland. They would like nothing more than to go home, but they are unable to do so. This is true even of those in self-imposed exile. They have not made exile a principle, but rather refuse to return home out of adherence to a higher principle.

Exiles are refugees, but not refugees pure and simple. Refugees leave their homeland to escape persecution, and their problems are over once they reach the free world. But what makes an exile an exile is his abiding concern for the fate of his country. The exile fervently hopes to contribute all he can to his homeland's political and cultural development. Although he leaves his homeland to escape political persecution, he remains committed to it heart and soul. His homeland is what gives meaning to his life. Although exile is an escape from persecution, it also tears his soul in two.

Because the main difference between an exile and an immigrant, a nomad or an ordinary refugee is psychological, a psychological adjustment can turn an exile into an immigrant, a nomad or a refugee. In fact, a small minority of exiles do experience this transformation (and who can blame them?). But once an exile becomes an immigrant, refugee or nomad, no longer identifies himself as an exile and no longer fights for the cause he pursued in the past, hasn't he turned back on his original aspiration and negated himself?

### **Suffering for your ideals**

Such is the peculiar predicament of the exile. Like other Chinese people overseas, a Chinese writer in exile faces all sorts of difficult challenges, including racial discrimination, adjusting to a strange culture and different customs, and finding a way to make a living. Because exiles are forced into their present situations, regardless of whether it's self-imposed or a means of escaping political persecution, they tend to be less prepared than other people to live abroad. For example, they often lack language skills or the means to earn a living. Therefore, the readjustment to life abroad is often much more difficult for exiled writers. Moreover, an exiled writer who wants to continue practicing his craft must stay true to his roots and experience. He must constantly strive to keep in close touch with what is happening in his homeland and he must continuously hone his craft and native language. Put another way, he

must make a great effort to adjust to his new environment and at the same time he must make a great effort not to adjust to it. To the exiled writer, too much integration is as crippling as too little integration. If he gets the balance wrong, he can become neither fish nor fowl and accomplish nothing: unintegrated with the West but cut off from the East, incompetent in the foreign language and unable to write his own language as well as he once could. He risks sacrificing the everyday pleasures of family life while having no accomplishments to show for it.

Exiled political activists face the same problems, but more acutely than exiled writers. Literature transcends time and space, but political activism is bound to a specific time and place. Staging a demonstration against the tyranny of the Chinese Communist government in Times Square means something altogether different from staging a similar demonstration in Tiananmen Square. In Times Square demonstrators face no danger and no terror, and their impact is therefore greatly diminished. Courage is the most important characteristic of many democracy activists. Living in a free country, they have no way of demonstrating their courage. True, being imprisoned in China is a greater hardship than living in exile. Many exiles reach their new country of residence spoiling for a fight and eager to get to work, but before long, they discover that there are severe limitations to what they can do. Although they are still committed to their cause, it is very difficult for them to find a suitable outlet for their skills in their host country. That's why some exiles quietly choose to return to their homeland (perhaps under some verbal undertaking). Still, many exiles quietly hold fast, not to achieve great things (for they are fully aware of their limitations), but because they are determined to be true to their ideals. Many Chinese exiles have made an extraordinary contribution to China's culture and liberal democracy. In my opinion, it is in the silent resilience of these exiles that we can best understand the tribulations, the gravity, the sanctity and the dignity of exile.

Translated by Paul Frank

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1. Translated by Lin Yutang in *The Importance of Living*, 1936.
2. Born in Radom, Poland in 1927, Kolakowski now lives in Oxford, England. In November 2003 he was awarded the Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement in the humanities and social sciences.