

## Jefferson in Confucian Relief

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*Jiefeixun quan zhuan (A Complete Biography of Thomas Jefferson)*. By LIU ZUOCHANG. 2 vols. Ji'nan (Shandong), People's Republic of China: Qilu Publishers, 2005. 1703 pages.

In the early 1990s, I had the pleasure of spending two days in the company of the late Liu Zuochang (1921–2006), China's foremost Jefferson lover. As a graduate student at the University of Virginia, while making the transition from a good many years as a China specialist to the study of Jeffersonian America, I gave him a private tour of Monticello. Later we exchanged letters and I sent him some books. We discussed Chinese politics and whether China might some day adopt democratic institutions. Liu was not forward and fiery but reserved and scholarly in his consideration of political democracy, yet his was a generation that grew up amid a long and bloody struggle for nationhood; one can only imagine how acutely he felt Thomas Jefferson's epigrammatic statement: "I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."<sup>1</sup>

Liu translates these lines with relish in the preface to his career-crowning, two-volume 2005 Chinese-language biography of Jefferson (not available in English); in Chinese, the two characters *xin ling*, literally "heart and spirit" (sometimes translated as "soul"), stand in for "mind of man." Jefferson's words read powerfully in the naturally evocative Chinese language, addressing the tortured soul of any subjugated people. Chinese Americanists now consider Liu's biography the most significant piece of Chinese scholarship ever written on early America.

For most of the past twenty-five years, scholars inside the People's Republic of China have relied on secondary sources that are dated, at best, in their attempts to assess the history of the United States. Additionally, although for years Western scholars of traditional China have been drawing on original documents in Chinese archives and writing works that have impressed Chinese scholars, decades of intense political upheaval meant that there was only sporadic publication on any American historical topic that was not propagandistic. And there was little scholarship on early America before that which Liu Zuochang was able to do in the latter stages of his career. Early America has been the least accessible area for Chinese graduate students—and there are many—who would like to go into greater and more objective depth. Today, at two northern Chinese universities in particular, scholars are engaged in exploring the founding era in American history. Students and professors at Beijing University and Nankai University, in Tianjin, use online resources as much as possible; in the last year, a few university libraries have gained access to JSTOR. These scholars are beginning to ask deep questions, and though they are not yet producing sophisticated scholarship Liu's work represents a starting point for twenty-first-century Chinese hoping to follow his interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 23, 1800, on <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>.

Liu felt Jefferson could represent something nobler than the scientific racist and ideologue he typically suggests these days in the United States. To understand Liu's Jefferson, however, it is important to understand the context in which the Chinese author worked and lived, without which his devotion to the American Founder seems simply naive and filiopietistic. In the opening pages of the biography, Liu writes at length about his own upbringing and what drew him to the study of history. He was the son of a hardworking secondary school teacher who steadily instructed him in the lessons of the past. His father "bore no mercy" toward the evil figures in Chinese history and "could not stop talking about" the good ones. It was not enough to have principles, young Liu was made to understand; one had to live by them. And so Liu learned from his father to admire Confucian intellectuals of the past who exhibited virtuous character and stood above political contention. In general he learned to take up history and biography as a means to study moral character.

Liu attended a remarkable university in the southwestern Chinese city of Kunming during World War II, when much of the rest of his country was occupied by the Japanese. Southwest Associated University became a wartime melting pot where China's top academic institutions reestablished themselves in exile and where liberal minds briefly flourished before China's twentieth-century political future was fixed. With this background Liu eventually came to know and appreciate Jefferson.

First and foremost, Liu wants the reader of his narrative life of Jefferson to feel close to the hero, whom he introduces in highly personal terms. The frontier Virginian learned from his explorer father to love nature as well as books. Jefferson tried to go along with his friends' partying antics at the College of William and Mary but ultimately felt most comfortable with his nose in his books. He was full of bright plans and as unstoppable as the Revolution itself.

Under Jefferson's mental guidance, the Revolution became a sweeping, idealistic program designed to extend rights to the broadest population possible; that is, the broadest possible at the time. As secretary of State from 1790 to 1793, Jefferson was connected to the masses, more because Alexander Hamilton alienated them than because Jefferson undertook any specific activities on their behalf. Hamilton was pushing an economic policy that had the effect of driving his friends over to the side of his enemy, or (as the saying goes in Chinese) he "drove the fish from deep water and caused the sparrow to fly from the thicket" (1: 436). Describing Jefferson as a moral actor, Liu repeatedly invokes "benefit," "principle," "reasoning," and "democratic thought"; he then attributes to Hamilton—Jefferson's "natural enemy"—qualities of "resentment" and "self-satisfaction." Though Hamilton did all he could to subvert Jefferson, he was unable to stop him from uniting former Federalists "under his banner" (1: 430), enabling Jefferson to become "leader of the democratic movement."

Despite years locked in a determined struggle with Hamilton and his unrepresentative party, Jefferson remained optimistic about America's "bright future" (one of Liu's favorite turns of phrase). The 1790s were crucial in American history, writes Liu, and the Jefferson-Hamilton struggle, though "not excessively noisy, and not particularly violent, was, substantively speaking, very influential" (1: 518), exceeding in significance all other struggles in American history because it concerned the question of whether the nation would abandon

the road to democracy by “degenerating” into a government of, by, and for wealthy capitalists. Simply put, by preserving the true spirit of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson continued to point the way to a “democratic republic that was the model for the whole world” (1: 519), enabling the United States to avoid the future Hamilton had in mind: a political economy that fostered “a brutal form of individualism” (1: 519).

For Liu, Jefferson as president maintained a sensible foreign policy. Whereas John Adams had adopted a strategy alternately bellicose and yielding, Jefferson pursued “the expansion of peace, independence, and national territory” (2: 988). At the same time, the author acknowledges the hardships that Jefferson’s embargo placed on the American people. When internal division among Republicans over the embargo complicated his second term, Liu says that the president remained “as steady as Mount Tai” (2: 1169) (as symbolic of permanence to the Chinese as Gibraltar). Jefferson’s heart was in the right place; he was “strongly roused” (2: 1216) by his friends’ support amid a national crisis that his “peaceable coercion” of an aggressive Great Britain may actually have made worse. Yet Liu concludes the embargo was a success because Jefferson “preserved America’s freedom” (2: 1231).

The sum of these two volumes is a life devoted to prescribing social happiness: Liu explains his prescription for China by defining Jefferson’s for America. “The realization of a flourishing life [for the individual in society] cannot be separated from the government’s conduct and amount of government interference,” he writes. “If an individual cedes the protections of life and liberty, and wishes to enjoy happiness . . . it may be hoped for, but will remain unattainable. For this reason, government must protect the people’s life and liberty” (2: 1147–48). For his Chinese readership still struggling to reconcile the Maoist past with a Communist Party–directed present that permits economic flexibility, Liu asserts: “Studying Jefferson’s writings, one is able to realize that whenever he speaks of happiness, the happiness he refers to is invariably a spiritual quality of happiness—he always privileges that form of happiness” over the material conditions of life (2: 1248).

Liu portrays Jefferson the man—husband, father, and grandfather—as an adorer of women. He spoils his granddaughters yet also educates them well, wanting to see women happy so long as they shun all political activity. His fondness for them mirrored his geniality toward ordinary people. “Like Confucius,” Liu writes, “Jefferson exhibited a spirit of ‘kindness toward the people and a kindness to all nature.’”

As to slavery, Liu is an outright apologist. Some American scholars point out the hypocrisy of declaring “all men are created equal” while holding slaves, Liu writes, but these scholars ignore that Jefferson grew up in a slave-owning household within a slave-owning society that could not easily remedy the condition it had inherited. Perhaps Jefferson did not emancipate his slaves or urge emancipation elsewhere, yet his democratic ideology lent itself to nineteenth-century abolitionism. And this was no accident. Abraham Lincoln’s hatred for the slave system was rooted in Jefferson’s thinking. The American critics, Liu explains to his readers, “have simplified a complicated problem” (2: 1379, 1381). Jefferson, the lover of liberty, advocated freedom for blacks sufficiently that modern scholars ought to credit him for holding on to his ideals. To justify Jefferson’s slaveholding, Liu cites a book by Elbert D. Thomas (1883–1951), a liberal U.S. senator from Utah who wrote his doctoral dissertation

on politics in ancient China before publishing *Thomas Jefferson: World Citizen* in 1942.<sup>2</sup> Senator Thomas served on the committee to establish the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated on the bicentennial of Jefferson's birth in 1943.

Here we see how Liu's work reflects the Jefferson that could have been known to a liberal-minded young man in war-torn China. Liu never stopped relating to the Elbert Thomas view of Jefferson that his own generation could scarcely speak of during the decades of Maoist conversion. To evaluate Liu's work on Jefferson, Western scholars must exercise sensitivity to Chinese conditions and Chinese constraints. For Professor Liu, who wished his country would eliminate some of those constraints, the meaning of Jefferson's life emerges from his understanding that "a moral society considers as crucially important the freedom of its people," acknowledging the "lack of any distinction between the moral sense and human reason" (2: 1667). The biographer was, by this measure, a pure Jeffersonian.

Liu's extensive translations of Jefferson's personal letters and public addresses appear at regular intervals in *Jiefeixun quan zhuan*. They are not only economical translations but also have literary merit when read in Chinese. This effort, perhaps as much as his biographical narration, presents twenty-first-century Chinese with the potential to proceed from a fear of state power to a level of political decency rarely experienced in their country. Liu wished to open a conversation about human dignity; Jefferson, on his best day, spoke eloquently on that subject. The main difference between Liu's approach and that of today's U.S. scholars is that his Jefferson consistently practiced what he preached.

When the Chinese transliterate Western names, adopting a Chinese sound that is close but not exact, they often invoke appealing and respectful ideographs (each character a single syllable) to achieve the desired effect. For example, in Mandarin, America is transliterated as *mei guo* (the *mei* being the stressed sound in AMER-i-ca), meaning "beautiful country"; England (*ying guo*) is "brave country." *Jie-fei-xun*—the three characters forming the three syllables of the surname Jefferson—say to the Chinese "outstanding, striking, modest." I have no way of knowing when Jefferson was first transliterated this way and no reason to believe that Liu had anything to do with it, yet his extended portrait of his personal hero clearly ratifies the choice. The long-forgotten three-term senator of Utah, China scholar, New Deal liberal, and onetime chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial commission would doubtless be on board too. Thomas, by the way, lost his Senate seat under a cloud of suspicion for having procommunist leanings. That irony should not be lost.

Here is an interesting juxtaposition: Thomas Jefferson and the Chinese then, and the Chinese and Jefferson now. Though little in Jefferson's thought suggests greater familiarity with Chinese culture than his ownership of a few general histories of China and the Mongols and his erection of chinoiserie fencing at Monticello, he imbibed some of the lore of the East. Among the philosophes to whom Jefferson enthusiastically responded, François Quesnay and Voltaire were both smitten by a certain vision of Confucian China. Seventeenth-century Jesuits had settled in the sprawling empire, learned the language, and served a succession of emperors, writing works that the mid-eighteenth-century

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<sup>2</sup> Elbert D. Thomas, *Thomas Jefferson: World Citizen* (New York, 1942).

Enlightenment came to interpret as evidence of a superior Confucian moral system. China was in vogue during Jefferson's early adulthood until Western merchants began returning with far less flattering reports of the character of the people and brutality of the government.

In China, from Mao Zedong's rise to power in 1949 until his death in 1976, the history of the United States was conveyed in general and strictly Marxist terms. The few texts that dealt with particulars highlighted southern slavery and racism, the movement from a feudal to a bourgeois consciousness, the pain and suffering of the Great Depression, and violent tendencies in society. Liu had to carefully navigate the relationship of politics to scholarship. As early as 1954, he published a 160page "Concise History of the American War for Independence." In 1979 Washington and Beijing established formal diplomatic relations. The next year, responding to a relaxation in restrictions on what Chinese scholars could venture in print, Liu published a piece praising democracy in the journal *Lishi Yanjiu* (*Historical Research*).

In post-Mao China, Liu was the lone Jefferson biographer. His first effort, a 1990 *Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (in Chinese), is comparatively short and uses far fewer sources than *Jiefeixun quan zhuan*: it is primarily a distillation of Dumas Malone's six-volume *Jefferson and His Time*, Merrill D. Peterson's *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*, and Claude Bowers's hagiographic writings from the 1920s and 1930s. Liu's two big volumes, published the year before his death, draw on a much wider range of secondary sources. Still, in his use of others' scholarship, Liu seems not to distinguish between significant research and aimless speculation, instead mining a given work for any praise of Jefferson in its pages. He even manages to tease acceptable commentary about his subject from Conor Cruise O'Brien's diatribe *The Long Affair*, the enduring reputation of which lies in its unsubtle comparison of Jefferson to Pol Pot, the Cambodian practitioner of genocide.<sup>3</sup>

Liu himself is unsubtle. He uses terms that American-trained historians would wince at today because they forfeit any critical pose. "Among Americans of his generation, Jefferson was a singular man of greatness" (1: 7), he exudes. "In multiple ways, he stood at the forefront of his time and manifested the uncommon character of a luminary" (1: 7). From early in his career, according to Liu, Jefferson revealed his capacity to think and act beyond his colleagues. When the Second Continental Congress disbanded and the delegates returned to their home states in 1776, only the heroic Jefferson kept the larger, transformative mission in mind: "At a time when others were satisfied in carrying out the struggle for independence, Jefferson single-handedly pushed through democratic reform in Virginia. He hoped to adopt Virginia's democratic reform as a means to spur on nationwide democratic reform. His hopes were entirely realized: the other states, brought along by Virginia, all implemented democratic reform" (1: 8).

Quite possibly, in his rendering of Jefferson's life and significance, Liu was telling his fellow Chinese that democratic reform—crushed after the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square in Beijing—should not be abandoned and certainly not forgotten. Who would be

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<sup>3</sup> Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston, 1948–81); Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York, 1970); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785–1800* (Chicago, 1996).

China's Jefferson, keeping the ball rolling and reinstituting reform? The 1980s witnessed on-again, off-again efforts to change the heavy-handed system; though teachers and the press paid lip service to Marxism-Leninism, a melancholy recognition of the impotence of its orthodoxy surfaced. Astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, who toured China's universities, launched a debate on openness, confidently calling on students to seize their democratic rights.

The door to unfettered academic expression edged open, but each time it did, the government weighed in again, decrying bourgeois liberalization as a subversive influence. For example, according to the "Center" (as the government is known), the seemingly healthy idea of multiple political parties offered only the illusion of representation while introducing decadence (or spiritual pollution) and a dangerous individualism. Individualism demolished social cohesion, which could only be sustained by the Communist Party. Western ideas of freedom would destroy China's pride in its cultural heritage: everyone was meant to recall that when Europe was in the Dark Ages, China was advancing science and creating literature.

In his big biography, Liu undercuts all such counterintuitive Party logic. He has offered his fellow Chinese a historical template on which to model any movement in the direction of democracy. That template shows how Jefferson vehemently opposed tyranny and despotism and his high regard for inalienable rights: the *sine qua non* of democratic reform. Liu particularly emphasizes the falsehood contained in the spiritual pollution defense of Chinese conservatism. He relies on *jingshen* (spirit) as the motivating factor in Jefferson's prescription for political democracy; there is no more ennobling phrase in Liu's text than *liguo jingshen*, or the spirit underlying the founding of a nation (sometimes used interchangeably with *geming jingshen*, or revolutionary spirit). Jefferson's genius lay in his recognition of a pervasive national spirit.

For Liu there is no danger in adopting a foreign model because *jingshen* is a universal spirit that does not have to be seen as derivative; it will not diminish China, even if it is called Jeffersonian rather than something rooted in Chinese tradition. Liu sees good in the Confucian ethic that prescribes soul-searching to achieve nobility of spirit in a time of pettiness and crass ambition. He also sees good in the Jeffersonian ethic that bespeaks a Western-style humanism in a time of moral ambiguity.

Sensitive to the implications of pairing democracy and individualism, the latter a trickier concept for Chinese (who tend to accept the government's association of individualism with moral decay), Liu distinguishes between Jefferson's democratic principles and his view of "pure individualism." There is, on the one hand, freedom of speech and freedom of thought—a positive measure of individual rights—and, on the other hand, Jefferson's forthright opposition to *sun ren li ji* (harming others so as to benefit oneself). This Jeffersonian principle is a Confucian one as well, which serves Liu's purpose of universalizing Jefferson. It is worth adding that throughout Chinese history, the Confucians were men bound to texts, defined in the public mind by their intense interest in book learning and devotion to their private libraries. That description fits Jefferson too.