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THE CHINESE LAUNDRYMAN: A MODEL FOR THE SOCIAL TYPE OF THE SOJOURNER – AND A LIVING TRANSCULTURAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract

Paul Chan Pang Siu's article "The Sojourner", which appeared in 1952, belongs to the classical texts in the sociology of migration. Paul Siu, the son of a Chinese laundryman and later student of sociology at the University of Chicago under Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth, attempted to investigate, using scientific means, the reality which determined his father's life, and over and above that, the lives of a whole ethnic group. Siu understands the sojourner as a special type of sociological form of stranger, deliberately setting himself apart from the then famous "marginal man" of Robert E. Park. Unlike the marginal man, the sojourner is not between the cultures. Rather, he lives with his countrymen together in a culturally homogenous colony. He is socially isolated and would like, when he has finished his job and achieved success, to return to his home country as soon as possible.

Although Siu's concept of the sojourner originates from 1952, it in fact proves to be very relevant nowadays in unexpected ways. Siu already thought about migration not from the individual perspective, but from that of the social and cultural fields. He described the migration movement as a movement within the framework of complex network structures which have their own reality, over and above national and cultural borders. In this way, he places himself right in the center of the present discussion on migration, which is concerned with the phenomena of globalization, transnationalism, and transmigration. And in addition, there are clear references in his work to the concepts of transculturality and transdifference. But the most important thing is that Siu constantly worked with precise sociological terms. From this we can still learn in our present time.

"You promised me to go abroad for only three years [...], but you have stayed there nearly thirty years now." The person complaining here is the wife of a Chinese laundryman. The wife lives in China, the man, separated from her, in the Chinatown of a large American city. The source of this text is a personal letter in Chinese collected by Paul Chan Pang Siu in 1943 and quoted by him in his article "The Sojourner", which was published in 1952.¹ The Chinese laundry is, like the Italian fruit stand, the Greek ice-cream parlor, and the Jewish clothing store, an invention by which these immigrant groups survived in a highly com-

1 SIU, 1952/53:35.

petitive urban community. The Chinese laundry was not transplanted by the migrants from their homeland; it was, according to Siu, something new, created in the struggle for existence abroad.² Primarily though, it is the expression of what makes people in China go abroad and become sojourners; they are striving to do a job, to be successful, and fighting for social status at home.³ And, as not only the anonymous letter-writer discovered, that can take a long time, often even a whole life.

1. The Sojourner: A Sociological Form of the Stranger

Paul Siu, himself son of a Chinese laundryman and later student of sociology at the University of Chicago under Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth, attempted to investigate with scientific means the social reality which determined the life of his father, and over and above that, the lives of a whole ethnic group. Siu understands the sojourner as a deviant type of the sociological form of the “stranger”.⁴ The sojourner is, as Siu writes, quoting Georg Simmel, not a wanderer; his characterization is not that of the man “who comes today and goes tomorrow but rather of the man who comes today and stays tomorrow”.⁵ And there is something particular about this stay. Psychologically, the sojourner is unwilling to organize himself as a permanent resident in the country of his sojourn.⁶ He keeps up the links with his home country and would like, when he has done his job, to go back there to his wife and his family.⁷ His specific goal is

2 SIU, 1952/53:36. Siu also refers in this connection to his unpublished monograph *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (SIU, s.a.). This unpublished monograph is finally integrated in 1953 into Siu's Ph.D. thesis “The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation” (SIU, 1953), which appeared later, in 1987, as an extended edition with the same title (SIU, 1987).

3 SIU, 1952/53:35.

4 SIU, 1952/53:34, 43. To be more precise, I should add that the term sojourner is used here not in the historical and semantic sense, but rather in a systematic one. The historical context of Sino-American migration is not the subject of this paper.

5 SIU, 1952/53:35; SIMMEL, 1921:322; SIMMEL, 1908:685; SIMMEL, 1992:764.

6 SIU, 1952/53:34, 39.

7 SIU, 1952/53:39.

to do his job in the shortest possible time,⁸ for this is, and remains, for him basically a means to an end. He may not even necessarily like his job.⁹

The sojourner is, like Robert E. Park's famous "marginal man",¹⁰ in Simmel's sense the product of a cultural frontier; he lives in a place "[where] two or more cultures are in conflict".¹¹ But, the essential characteristic of the sojourner is that he clings to the culture of his own ethnic group, in contrast to the bi-cultural complex of the marginal man. In this sense the sojourner is, as Siu remarks, following William G. Sumner, an "ethnocentrist par excellence".¹² It should be noted here that Siu originally intended to work with the concept of the marginal man, however, inspired by Everett Stonequist's critique of Park, rejected this plan. Decisive for this was Stonequist's claim that "some of the members of the subordinate or minority group are able to live within their own culture, or at least to live in them sufficiently not to be greatly disturbed by the culture of the dominant group".¹³ With this critique Stonequist gave Siu a new perspective – that of the mutual independence of the dominant culture and the minority culture – and thereby helped him out of a difficult situation. For Siu in fact regarded his efforts to analyse the material he had collected on the Chinese laundryman, using the concept of the marginal man, as simply failed.¹⁴ For Park, the immigrant is nothing more than a helpless marginal man, one who is caught between "two worlds in both of which he is more or less a stranger".¹⁵ But the Chinese laundry worker simply did not fit into this mode. Consequently, Siu had to find his own way to describe his research object, and the concept of the sojourner helped him to find this way. Siu owes the term itself to the survey *The Chinese Migrant in Hawaii* by Clarence E. Glick from 1938, which differentiates between the sojourner's attitude and the settler's.¹⁶

But when has the sojourner finished his job, or when is the sojourn terminated? In other words, when does a sojourner stop being a sojourner? The answer to this question is simultaneously the answer to the question as to which

8 SIU, 1952/53:34, 35, 39, 41.

9 SIU, 1952/53:35.

10 PARK, 1928.

11 SIU, 1952/53:34; here Siu quotes Everett Hughes.

12 SIU, 1952/53:34; SUMNER, 1906:13.

13 STONEQUIST, 1935:2.

14 SIU, 1952/53:43; SIU, 1987:4, 294; TCHEN, 1987:xxxii.

15 SIU, 1952/53:34.

16 GLICK, 1938; following this, Glick continued his studies and brought forth another monograph, GLICK, 1980.

mode of living the sojourner develops. However, and that is the real problem, this latter question cannot be clearly answered. Siu says that the feature of staying on indefinitely is indeed interesting,¹⁷ which is an enormous understatement in various senses.

As we have heard, the sojourner wants to do his job and to fight for social status at home. For him the job is tied up with all sorts of personal needs for new experience, security, prestige, etc.¹⁸ Life becomes more complex, and he soon finds himself in a dilemma as to whether to stay abroad or to return home.¹⁹ What is meant by success or failure? What are the relevant criteria for making a judgement? When can he say that he has done his job? The only thing that is certain is that, on the one hand, the sojourner becomes more and more vague and uncertain about the termination of his sojourn as time goes by. On the other hand, he makes some adjustments to his new environment and acquires an old-timer's attitude,²⁰ and thus, a sojourn of three years extends to thirty years.

This shows that in the characterization of the sojourner social and cultural aspects as well as psychological ones have to be increasingly taken into consideration. For in the course of his stay, the sojourner "make[s] changes in his life-organization, so that he is no longer the same person; in other words, he has developed a mode of living peculiar to his present situation".²¹ The sojourner does not participate in the community life of his adopted land or at least only when the corresponding activity is directly connected with matters concerning his homeland's social welfare, politics, etc. In fact, his activities tend to be limited to his own interests, that means, his job. And consequently he is usually only perceived by the public in relation to his job, as "an individual who performs a function rather than a person with a social status",²² or, yes, as a Chinese laundryman, whose activities in the community of his adopted land are first and foremost of the symbiotic kind.

What applies to the sojourner, applies to his countrymen in general. On the basis of common interests and cultural heritage the sojourner tends to associate with people of his own ethnic group, and it comes to the formation of a cultural colony.²³ In the case of the biculturally oriented marginal man, that would be

17 Siu, 1952/53:36.

18 Siu, 1952/53:35.

19 Siu, 1952/53:35.

20 Siu, 1952/53:35.

21 Siu, 1952/53:36.

22 Siu, 1952/53:36.

23 Siu, 1952/53:36.

impossible. “The formation of the cultural colony”, as Siu writes, “reveals symbiotic segregation, on the one hand, and social isolation, on the other hand. Whether the sojourner lives with or apart from the people of his own ethnic group, as long as his social life ties up with all sorts of activities in the [ethnic] colony there is a tendency for forming in-group relationships. The desire to live together becomes not only social need but also a natural thing.”²⁴ The culturally homogenous colony is the place to establish or to re-establish some sort of primary-group relationships in the matrix of homeland culture, and it is therefore nothing more than the continuous effort to create a home away from home.²⁵ In this way it is possible to maintain the homeland’s cultural heritage abroad, from family life to one’s own cuisine.²⁶

However, one thing does not change for the culturally homogenous colony, and particularly for those who live in it: Inward homogeneity goes hand in hand with outward social isolation. For the sojourner, the result is a unique dialectic, which directly determines his existence. The social isolation is responsible for the social status of the sojourner, or plainly speaking, for the fact that the sojourner has no social status in the country of his sojourn. This again stands in complete contrast to the expectations which confront the sojourner in his home country. Indeed, it is the sentiments and attitudes of the members of his primary group in the home country that make his trip meaningful. The trip is supposed to show that he is a person to be admired, to be appreciated, to be proud of, and to be envied.²⁷ Only very unwillingly, therefore, would the sojourner return without being successful, without some sort of security and without a sense of accomplishment. To be successful means that he must concentrate on, even limit himself to, his job, in other words: to an existence as the carrier of a function, without social status. Finally, he finds himself in an anomalous situation with reference to his homeland and the country of his sojourn.²⁸ His links with the home country consist of a series of trips involving a constant dialectic movement between being a stranger and becoming a stranger. For this reason, the sojourner is also – Siu quotes Simmel further – a “man who comes today and stays tomorrow, the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going”.²⁹

24 SIU, 1952/53:36.

25 SIU, 1952/53:37.

26 SIU, 1952/53:37.

27 SIU, 1952/53:39; see also 35.

28 SIU, 1952/53:41.

29 SIU, 1952/53:43; SIMMEL, 1921:322; SIMMEL, 1908:685; SIMMEL, 1992:764.

2. The Concept of the Sojourner Today: Transnationalism and Transmigration

It is time here to recall that the year in which the article by Paul Siu was published was 1952. With the sojourner, Siu coined a new concept of the “stranger”, apart from the well-known terms of the “trader” from George Simmel, the “hobo” from Nels Anderson, the “tramp” from Nels Anderson und Robert E. Park, the “marginal man” from Robert E. Park, as well as the “stranger” and the “homecomer” from Alfred Schütz.³⁰ And this concept of the sojourner was afterwards to become a leading term in migration research in the 1960s and 1970s. But how important is this concept today? Is it still relevant?

Now, as is the case with rhetorical questions of this kind, the first answer is usually negative, followed by the second, truly competent answer resulting in even greater agreement! Regarding the concept of the sojourner, this point has, however, not yet been reached. But it can be seen that there is a great deal more to this concept (i.e. the concept as Siu used it) than has so far been uncovered.

In fact, the time when research on the sojourner (*Gastarbeiterforschung*) was identical with the sociology of migration belongs to the past; the sojourner: that was the central topic of the sociology of migration in the 1970s. One thing needs to be mentioned here though: If, in retrospect, research on the sojourner is credited with having created awareness of the problems of assimilation and integration, even of having introduced them into sociology of migration debates,³¹ then it must be emphasized that for Siu assimilation played a central role in the characterization of the sojourner.³² However, with regard to assimilation or social isolation, Siu draws conclusions that are very different from those of later research in this field.

The current discussion in the area of migration concerns the phenomena of globalization, transnationalism, and transmigration. International migrational processes are no longer regarded as isolated events, but as border-crossing movements of people *in a context and as part* of global movements, that is: the flow of finance, of goods, the dispersion of information technology, of cultural symbols and patterns of interpretation, etc.³³ Globalization processes run on

30 MERZ-BENZ/WAGNER, 2002; esp. MERZ-BENZ/WAGNER, 2002a:13.

31 PRIES, 2001:55.

32 SIU, 1952/53:53; PARK/BURGESS, 1921:735.

33 SASSEN, 1988; 1998:Section I.

different levels and at varying speeds, but are intertwined,³⁴ and the migrational processes are also contained within these. The decisive factor here is: international migration no longer appears primarily to be a result of globalization but, rather, increasingly as one of its motors and forms.³⁵

The terms transnationalism and transmigration describe the consequences for the reality of the event of migration itself: migration no longer represents a change between two places (region of origin and sojourn, home country and host country) with varying frequency. Migration finds expression rather in the construction of social fields and networks over and above the nation-state borders.³⁶ It comes to the formation of pluri-local communities, which are more than the extension of regional structures or even family structures. In fact, they embody their own reality and have their own symbolic system and social practices. The life courses of migrants are genuine elements of these communities, whereby it is simultaneously clear that migration can, and should, no longer be thought of from the individual perspective. One of the central prerequisites of “classical” sojourner (*Gastarbeiter*) research is therefore no longer valid. One example of how such transnational communities not only determine the reality of the migration event, but even that of a person’s identity as a member of an individual culture, is the Chinese migration and transnational business activity in the 1990s. A large part of the Chinese migrants work in family businesses or as small entrepreneurs in the framework of complex network structures which consist of familial or so-called *guanxi* particularist relations. The latter represent what one could call a “habitus”, a kind of disposition to loyalty through a common origin, which determines the behaviour of migrants over and above the social fields and national borders.³⁷ The phenomena of transnationalism and transmigration, associated with the “hypermodernity” of late capitalism, are a challenge even for conventional, long-standing ideas about Chinese culture and identity. To be “Chinese”, according to Donald Nonini und Aihwa Ong, is not a personal characteristic, nor is it a question of taking on specific “Chinese” values or norms. “‘Chineseness’ [...] instead can be understood only in terms of the multiplicity of ways in which ‘being Chinese’ is an inscribed relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities.”³⁸ Something special follows from this for the understanding of

34 BÜHL, 2005:esp. 18; BECK, 1997:28.

35 HELD et al., 1999:ch. 6; PARNREITER, 1999.

36 GLICK SCHILLER et al., 1992; BASCH et al., 1997:ch. 2.

37 ONG/NONINI, 1997.

38 NONINI/ONG, 1997:4.

culture: culture does not represent an homogenous life form, bound to a geographical region. It is neither ethnic-based, nor determined by nation-state borders and their respective limitations. Culture is much more a concept for special connections and transitions in the framework of globalization processes.

3. The Sojourner as a Living Transcultural Phenomenon

What does this all have to do with Siu? What is the (full) meaning, up to now unnoticed, of his concept of the sojourner, a meaning that can only be uncovered by the current discussion on migration?

First, we should mention that Siu also thought about migration from the social field. He records the typical motives of the migrants, such as having success, or struggling for social status at home, but he understands the individual almost without exception as being determined by his job, as the carrier of a function. The migrant is a person only to the people of his own ethnic group or to a social circle related to his job.³⁹ Or, one could say, only beyond his existence as a migrant is the migrant a person. But the crucial point is that the function which the migrant fulfils is also embodied by a particular, effectively social, institution: the Chinese laundry. It is the epitome of the life style of Chinese migrants and it stands for a whole social field. Siu writes: "Chinatown in Chicago, for instance, originated in 1872 in a lone laundry shop located between Clark and Madison Streets. Several decades later it grew to be the third largest Chinese colony in this country."⁴⁰

Furthermore it should be noted that although Siu understands migration in principle as a change between two places (as is the rule in research on the sojourner) he already describes the migratory movement itself as a movement within the framework of complex network structures. Of course, he does not, or only to a small degree, elaborate on these concepts; however, the life stories which he uses in his article leave no room for doubt in this respect. The distribution of jobs to migrants in the country of sojourn is dealt with through family structures, and the same structures come into play when it comes to the investment of savings or the perception of social duties in the home country. Without question the list of such examples could be continued.⁴¹

39 Siu, 1952/53:36.

40 Siu, 1952/53:37.

41 Siu, 1952/53:40.

Now we come to a crucial point: it is well known that the sojourner, like other types of the “stranger”, is a product of a cultural frontier. He lives in a culturally homogenous colony, he clings to the culture of his own ethnic group, and is at the same time isolated from the culture of the country of sojourn.⁴² This description is, however, incomplete, one could also say: insufficient, as in fact we are dealing here with a true paradox: despite isolation, Chinese culture is nevertheless present in the form of this culturally homogenous colony in the culture of the adopted country, America. Chinatown in Chicago, to name just one case, developed in, and with, the city of Chicago as a whole. In this respect, the symbiotic segregation, which is connected with the creation of culturally homogenous colonies, is an integrative factor. That Chinese culture maintains its presence in this way is primarily due to the migrational networks; they bring the migrants into the cultural colonies in the first place.

This paradoxical fact, finally, relates very well to the phenomenon of globalization as a current topic in sociology of migration. Again Siu himself performed the preparatory work, through – in diplomatic terms – an overinterpretation of Simmel’s concept of the stranger, for Siu understands the sojourner, that is, the sojourner as a type of stranger, from the beginning mainly from a cultural viewpoint. However, in Simmel’s characterization of the stranger, the term culture is not even mentioned. Responsible for the cultural side of the sojourner is the influence of Hughes, Park, Burgess, and Sumner. But the scientific spirit often follows its own ways, and so we do, in fact, see in Siu’s work signs of a new phenomenon in the guise of a classical conceptualization. He also sets some very precise accents.

As we now know, Siu’s concept of the sojourner already contains considerable meaning which we today understand as migration or transmigration, and this meaning is additionally linked with the concepts of transculturality and even transdifference. Transculturality and transdifference are, however, the key terms in the current discussion about the relationship between culture and globalization.⁴³ They describe the reality of culture in two ways. We have already heard of the first way above: culture does not represent a homogenous life form bound to a geographical region. It is neither ethno-based, nor determined by nation-state borders and their respective limitations. Rather, culture is a concept for special connections and transitions within the framework of globalization processes. But there is also a second way: despite the fact that every culture encompasses

42 SIU, 1952/53:38.

43 MERZ-BENZ/WAGNER, 2005; WELSCH, 2005; ALLOLIO-NÄCKE et al., 2005.

parts of other cultures, despite all the transitions and connections, the cultural differences remain. The culturally homogenous colonies of Chinese migrants are present in the adopted country and bound into social life through symbiotic segregation; nevertheless, they are and remain isolated. This unchanged presence of cultural differences in all cultural transitions is called transdifference. In principle, Siu described this already, and he did it by means of sociological conceptualization. We can learn from this, particularly in our present time.

Let us return to the Chinese laundryman: he wanted to go abroad for three years; in fact he stayed for thirty years. He kept the links with home alive, but he adapted his way of life to that of the country of sojourn. He made the transition to the foreign culture, but the difference remained, and increasingly new differences opened up in his relationship with the culture of his homeland, due to the unusual dialectic of being pulled back and forth. A conflicting, even paradoxical, reality – but a reality.

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