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Nobel Laureate 2000 Gao Xingjian and His Novel Soul Mountain

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Abstract: In her article, "Nobel Laureate 2000 Gao Xingjian and his Novel *Soul Mountain*," Mabel Lee introduces Gao Xingjian, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature of 2000. Lee is the translator of several of Gao's works from the Chinese into English, including the Nobel's main text of reference, *Soul Mountain* (first published in Chinese in 1990). Lee's article combines descriptions of Gao's biographical background and its relevance to his work and writing with a brief analysis of literary aspects of Gao's work based on tenets of the comparative literary and cultural studies approach. As is evident in Gao's texts, Lee explains that Gao refuses to enter political and ideological debates in or with his texts and that Gao, consequently, argues vehemently against the inroads on the individual in modern times wreaked by tyrannical politics, mob action, religious fundamentalism, and crass commercialism. For Gao the creation and production of literature represents the solitary act of the individual and thus the return to the author, in theory and practice. In the history of literature, of significance is the fact that this is the first time the Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to an author on the basis of a body of work written in the Chinese language.

Mabel LEE

Nobel Laureate 2000 Gao Xingjian and his Novel *Soul Mountain*

On 12 October 2000, the Swedish Academy announced that Gao Xingjian had won the Nobel Prize for Literature "for an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama" (Gao's Nobel Prize lecture, "The Case for Literature," is available in Chinese, English, and Swedish online in the Swedish Academy's home page at <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture.html>; the English text of Gao's lecture is translated by Mabel Lee). His novel *Soul Mountain* is described as "one of those singular literary creations that seem impossible to compare with anything but themselves." Of significance is the fact that this is the first time the Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to an author on the basis of a body of works written in the Chinese language. Of further significance is that Gao is an exile writer who now writes in two languages: He represents that underrated yet increasingly frequent writer and artist who is "in-between," that is, in-between the still reigning paradigm of national literatures and cultures, both in theory and practice. Thus, the critical evaluation and assessment of his work is a priori best performed in the comparative literary and cultural studies mode.

Writer, dramatist, critic, and artist Gao Xingjian was born in China (Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province) on 4 January 1940 during the Japanese invasion. His father was a senior employee of the Bank of China and as the bank retreated from place to place before the enemy advance the family library remained intact, traveling with bank property under armed escort. Young Gao Xingjian grew up reading his way through that sizeable collection of Chinese literature and a small number of volumes on Western literature and art. His love for the theatre also began in the early years of his life when his mother became a performer in a patriotic national salvation theatre group. It was also his mother who insisted that he kept a diary and got him into the habit of writing. This practice later grew into an addiction for linguistic expression of his rich imagination and intense curiosity about life.

While his parents were preoccupied with surviving in war-torn China and then with diligently remaking themselves into citizens of New China, established in 1950, Gao Xingjian succeeded in providing a solid literary education for himself through his own readings. At the same time he developed a passion for oil painting and it was his ambition to enroll into an art college so that he would one day be able to paint like the European masters. It was only in 1979, when he saw the works of the masters in the museums of Europe, that he realized his aspirations in oil painting were unachievable. From that point he turned to Chinese ink paintings and it has been through selling his works in this genre that he has been able to support himself after relocating to Paris in 1987. However, on completing high school he was directed to enroll at the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing where he majored in French literature. He graduated in 1962 and was assigned to work as a translator and editor for the French edition of *China Reconstructs*. It was a stroke of good fortune for Gao Xingjian's later career that he had studied at the Institute, for as more and more books were progressively banned, he was able to access books in French. His voracious reading habit saw him read his way through the shelves of books in the libraries of both the Institute and then his workplace before all books in foreign languages were banned during the course of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

As a young adult, Gao Xingjian was already a writer with an obsessive desire for self-expression. However, he was aware that what he wrote was clearly at odds with Mao Zedong's directive that literature and the arts must "serve the masses." During the Cultural Revolution when stringent measures were imposed on writers, he knew that his writings were highly problematical, that there was no possibility of his having them published. As a compulsive writer he in effect wrote for himself. He was author, reader and critic of his works and this is a stance he still resolutely adheres to in all of his writings. Even while undergoing "re-education" and living the life of a peasant in the 1970s, he continued to write but took the precaution of wrapping his manuscripts in plastic and burying them in the earth floor under the heavy water urn in his hut.

Nevertheless, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, rather than risk having to face dire consequences for his accumulated writings, he burned several kilos of manuscripts: Ten plays, short stories, poems, and essays. For him it was an ordeal to part with what he had written, moreover burning so much paper without creating smoke and hence arousing suspicions was a long process.

When the Cultural Revolution ended and China emerged from decades of isolation, there was a general liberalization in all areas of cultural life, albeit with intermittent cycles of repression. Gao Xingjian's unique literary background saw his immediate rise to prominence as a leader of the avant-garde movement in literature. From 1980 to 1987, he published short stories, novellas, plays, and critical essays, including *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* (1981), a novella *A Pigeon Called Red Beak* (1985), *Collected Plays of Gao Xingjian* (1985), and *In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation* (1987). In the same period, his translations of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jacques Prévert as well as numerous introductory essays on modern Western writers were also published. These works established Gao Xingjian's literary credentials amongst writers, academics, and ordinary thinking people in China.

While circumspect and exercising considerable self-censorship, Gao Xingjian's writings nevertheless brought him under the scrutiny of the authorities. His writings clearly promoted freedom of expression, not just for the writer but also for the readers and the characters in fiction, and in the case of his plays for the audience and the actors. His single-minded pursuit of these goals for the individual was a fierce reaction to the insidious yet gross distortions of human thinking and behavior he had witnessed, and was himself complicit, during the Cultural Revolution. *A Preliminary Discussion on the Art of Modern Fiction* (1980, 1981, 1982), written in a gentle and suggestive, largely academic tone, effectively challenged the literary traditions established by Mao Zedong that had been in force and institutionally entrenched over several decades. Despite Gao Xingjian's exercise of self-censorship, the book was banned after the 1982 edition. By that time the work had been avidly read by many and continued to be passed surreptitiously amongst members of literary and art circles.

The staging of Gao Xingjian's play *Absolute Signal* at the People's Art Theatre in Beijing in 1982 signaled the beginning of the experimental theatre movement. But it was his bold departure from New China's established traditions and practices in his *Bus Stop* that created wild and enthusiastic acclaim when it was staged in 1983. The ambiguity and absence of any clear messages challenged the audience to think for themselves and this in itself was seditious. The authorities were decidedly unimpressed and banned further performances of this "most pernicious play since the establishment of the People's Republic of China." It was rumored that as the author he would be sent to a prison farm in Qinghai Province. He did not wait to be sent and taking an advance royalty for a proposed novel, he headed for the remote forests of Sichuan Province in south-west China.

While he was singled out for attack as campaigns against the spiritual pollution of the decadent West raged in Beijing, Gao Xingjian wandered for five months in the Chinese hinterland until the more liberal faction regained power in Beijing. To avoid detection by the authorities, he traveled on the margins of conventional society observing diverse human responses to socialized existence and to the natural environment and reflecting on the rationale for various human traditions and practices. That journey covering 15,000 kilometers (from Beijing to Sichuan and then following the Yangtze from its source down to the coast) provides the physical setting for his epic novel *Soul Mountain*. Superimposed on that setting is the artistic portrayal of his psychological experiences (thoughts, emotions, perceptions, insights, and memories) during this period. *Soul Mountain*, although autobiographical fiction, reveals more of the author Gao Xingjian than would be possible to document in any meticulous and rigorous biographical account.

Around the time *Bus Stop* was banned, Gao Xingjian had been wrongly diagnosed with lung cancer, the disease that had recently killed his father. Although a further X-ray later confirmed that a wrong diagnosis had been made he had confronted death for two weeks while waiting for that final X-ray. Then having won his reprieve from death he was as if a "reborn" human being, a fundamentalist human being. He was determined to take full control of his own faculties for thinking, feeling and action, and it was with great determination that he committed his life to

artistic creation. This is the background to his writing of *Soul Mountain*. He had begun to formulate ideas for the novel in 1982, made copious notes during his five-month journey in 1983, and took the completed manuscript with him when he left China in 1987. By September 1989 he had finalized his revisions and in 1990, the novel was published by Lianjing Publishing House in Taipei.

Gao Xingjian's creative and critical writings during the 1980s are of historical significance. In the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian was the first to introduce to the Chinese literary and academic world the developments that had taken place in world literary theory and practice, and to re-introduce and to re-assess China's rich literary heritage in the light of modern times. It should be borne in mind that Mao Zedong's guidelines for literature established in Yan'an in 1942 had been progressively enforced in China, reaching its heights during the "anti-culture" movement known as the Cultural Revolution. In Mao's program for the arts and literature, both Chinese and Western literary traditions were negated and literature and the arts were to serve the masses. Significantly, this meant that the individual as author, reader, and fictional characters was divested of psychological, intellectual, and physical autonomy.

When Gao Xingjian began to construct the theoretical framework of *Soul Mountain*, he had envisioned that it would be a long novel that would incorporate his years of pondering on fiction as a modern genre. Although he was forced to burn his own writings during the Cultural Revolution, this did not deter him from continuing to think about literary creation. For him fiction is storytelling, a product of reality and the imagination, and he is intent on telling his story and the stories of others in a compelling way in the context of present times. *Soul Mountain* is a complex exploration in narrative techniques and narrative language that fuses the artistic sensibilities of an author who is playwright, artist, and master storyteller, and an author who has a deep knowledge of both Chinese and Western literature. The most distinguishing feature of the novel is that the characters are unnamed. The characters of the novel are the pronouns: "I," "you," "she," and "he." Plural forms of pronouns are not employed, as for Gao Xingjian having another person representing the thinking and emotions of the individual self is anathema. The narrator "I" experiences loneliness on his journey and creates "you" so that he will have someone to talk with. "You" being the reflection of "I" also experiences loneliness and creates "she." The chapters with "you" and "she" explore the author's psychological self and primitive instincts. The pronouns all tell stories about themselves, their friends and listen to the stories of the many people they encounter on the journey to Lingshan or Soul Mountain. When in 1987 the opportunity arose for Gao Xingjian to travel to Germany on a DAAD writer's fellowship, he resolved not to return to China and he took with him his most precious belonging, the manuscript of the novel. In 1988 he applied for permanent residence in France and in 1998 became a French citizen.

Since settling in France, little of Gao Xingjian's works have been published in China, the last being the reprinting of his play *Absconding*, set in Beijing in the early hours of 4 June 1989. Gao had been commissioned by an American theatre company to write the play but when changes were requested so that the students would be portrayed as heroic figures, he withdrew the play. The play was subsequently published in the overseas Chinese literary journal *Today* in early 1990, then reprinted in China to substantiate criticisms of this "pornographic work by a writer who was not in Beijing at the time." Although as an individual Gao Xingjian had readily denounced the Chinese authorities for the events of 4 June in the French media, he refused to compromise his integrity as a writer. His stance angered both sides of politics.

But literature and not politics is Gao Xingjian's primary commitment in life and he acknowledges that he lacks the expertise for politics. His Chinese publications since relocating to Paris in 1987 can only be described as prolific, but his publishers have been in Taipei and Hong Kong. His collection of short stories *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* was published by Lianhe Literary Publishing House (Taipei, 1988) and both *Soul Mountain* and a second novel *One Man's Bible* (1999) were published by Lianjing in Taipei. From 1982 to 1999 his plays have been performed in thirty-two theatres in countries ranging from China to the Ivory Coast (see Fong 267-68) and in recent years he has directed and undertaken the choreography for his plays. In 1995 his plays *The Other Shore* (written in Beijing, 1987), *Netherworld* (first draft in Beijing 1987; final draft in Paris 1991*), Story of the Classic of Mountains and Seas* (written in Paris, 1989-1993),

Absconding (written in Paris 1989), *Between Life and Death* (1993), and *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (Paris, 1992) were published in Chinese as a collection by Dijiao Publishing House in Taipei under the title *Six Plays by Gao Xingjian*. In 1996 his collected critical essays that cogently outline his ideas on artistic creation were published under the title *Without Isms* (Cosmos, Hong Kong).

In *Soul Mountain* Gao Xingjian recalls that as a student he would recite a line of classical poetry written by the great modern Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936): "I offer my blood to the Yellow Emperor." This line of poetry written in 1902 had been appropriated by party ideologues to inspire the masses to self-sacrifice for the people and the nation. During his writing of *Soul Mountain* Gao Xingjian notes that regrettably for Chinese literature Lu Xun had chosen the path of politics instead of literature. Lu Xun was painfully aware of the implications of his choice and he documents his ordeal in a series of prose-poems which were later published as a collection called *Wild Grass* in 1927. He knew that this choice would leave him like a corpse with his heart gouged out and reverted to writing classical Chinese poems to ease his agony. More than half a century later, no less of a cultural critic than Lu Xun and having experienced the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian argues vehemently against the inroads on the individual in modern times wreaked by tyrannical politics, mob action, religious fundamentalism, and crass commercialism. For both Lu Xun and Gao Xingjian literary creation is the solitary act of the individual.

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Author's profile: Mabel Lee works in Chinese studies and comparative literature. A member of the faculty of the University of Sydney 1966-2000, Lee is now an honorary associate professor of Chinese Studies. She has published widely books and articles in Chinese and comparative literature. For a review article of her recent work, see Xiaoyi Zhou, "East and West Comparative Literature and Culture: A Review Article of New Work by Lee and Collected Volumes by Lee and Syrokomla-Stefanowska" in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.3 (2000). As a translator, she has brought the novel *Soul Mountain* by Nobel Laureate 2000 Gao Xingjian to English readers (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000). Her present article is based on Gao Xingjian's writings and on her conversations with Gao Xingjian over the past ten years. She visited Gao Xingjian in Paris soon after the Chinese publication of the novel in late 1990 and soon thereafter Lee began to translate Gao's work and to analyse Gao's texts in literary and cultural studies. Lee is co-editor of the University of Sydney East Asian and World Literature series and she serves on the advisory board of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. E-mail: <mabel.lee@arts.usyd.edu.au>.