


Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing

Mabel Lee  
*University of Sydney*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lee, Mabel. "Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1181>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1181)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 5 Issue 1 (March 2003) Article 4**

**Mabel Lee,**

**"Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/4>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1>>

---

**Abstract:** In her paper, "Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing," Mabel Lee explores the aesthetic dimensions of Gao Xingjian's play *Taowang* (*Fleeing* 1990), and its significance in establishing the recurring motif of "fleeing" in Gao's later writings on literature. Lee argues that the intensely emotional times during which Gao wrote *Fleeing* were comparable to those seventy years earlier confronting May Fourth writers. Urging his compatriots not to be "bystanders," Lu Xun, the most influential of May Fourth writers, had chosen to allow his creative self to suicide, as shown in the prose-poems of *Yecao* (*Wild Grass* 1927). For Gao Xingjian, however, such heroic gestures are anathema. He is prepared to be a "bystander" and he refuses adamantly to sacrifice his creative self. Although the play is undeniably an aesthetic appraisal of a specific political event, *Fleeing* is resoundingly a declaration for literature that is unburdened by politics.

---

## Mabel Lee

### Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing

Gao Xingjian (born in China in 1940) was proclaimed 2000 Nobel Laureate on the basis of his literary output spanning two decades of writing. His major publications at the time included short fiction, over a dozen plays, a book on drama, essays on literature and aesthetics, and two novels. Significantly, a substantial part of his recent works had also been published in French, Swedish, English, and Greek. However, immediately following the announcement, self-professed authorities from various parts of the world came forth to condemn the award, curiously without making reference to any of these recent works. This being the case, it is only possible to conclude that such condemnations were based on political or personal motives unrelated to assessments of Gao Xingjian's literary achievements. This study focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of the play *Taowang (Fleeing 1990)* will shed light on the controversy following the 2000 Nobel announcement, but the intention is not to explore that controversy. Nonetheless it is prefaced with the statement that such a controversy took place (see Tam, "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and the Politics of Recognition" 1-20). To be criticized for his writings was not a new experience for Gao Xingjian. In fact criticism had dogged his career from the early 1980s, as soon as he began to see his writings published. Already aged forty, he had over twenty years of serious writing practice, but nothing to show on paper, because during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) he had burned all of his manuscripts rather than have them discovered. Needless to say, presenting his manuscripts to a publisher during the Cultural Revolution would have invited disaster.

With the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China opened cautiously to outside influences in the late 1970s. After decades of isolation from global cultural developments, a vibrant literary publications industry immediately began to emerge. The fastest growth in a more adventurous type of writing occurred initially in Guangzhou because of its close location to the liberalizing influences of Hong Kong and because it was far away from the political and cultural control of Beijing; it was in Guangzhou that Gao made his debut as a writer. His *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (Preliminary Discussion on the Art of Modern Fiction) was first serialized, 1980-81, in the literary journal *Suibi yuekan*, but elicited little response. However, reprinted as a slim 129-page booklet in late 1981, it was endorsed by veteran writers Wang Meng, Liu Xinwu, Feng Jikai, and Li Tuo. Their accolades published in the following year, 1982, in influential publications such as *Xiaoshuo jie* (World of Fiction), *Dushu* (Reading) and *Shanghai wenxue* (Shanghai Literature) led to a campaign of attacks on the work, beginning in *Wenyibao* (Literature and the Arts) the organ of the Chinese Writers' Association. Describing the book as "ridiculous" and "reactionary," Feng Mu, Party Secretary of the Chinese Writer's Association, declared that it was having a bad effect on younger writers, and that some established writers were even promoting it. He warned against the threat the work posed to socialist-realist writings and the very goals and direction of literature in China (Gao, "Geri huanghua" 159).

In the same year, 1982, Gao also made his debut as a playwright with the staging of his play *Juedui xinhao* (Absolute Signal 1982) at the People's Art Theater in Beijing. *Absolute Signal* was staged as "experimental theater" ten times to packed houses, restricted to audiences from within the drama world. When public performances followed, a reviewer in the French newspaper *Cosmopolitan* stated that the play announced the birth of avant-garde theater in Beijing. Eminent veteran dramatist Cao Yu sent a congratulatory telegram and numerous theater groups from various parts of China clamored to put on performances. However, an unannounced visit to a performance by He Jingzhi, chief of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, indicated that the assessment of the play had become a political issue. Shortly after, at the beginning of 1983, He Jingzhi launched his attack on modernism and capitalist liberalism, in which *Preliminary Discussion on the Art of Modern Fiction* and its author Gao Xingjian were singled out for criticism (Gao, "Geri huanghua" 160; and Zhao

67-69).

Brought up on a diet of writings that were politically correct and that conformed to the guidelines established by the Chinese Writers' Association, Chinese youth were excited by Gao's writings. Each performance of *Absolute Signal* ended with enthusiastic discussions on literature by audiences that refused to disperse. The public support of veteran writers for Gao's bold challenge to the established guidelines for literature was critical. Unwavering support also came from Lin Zhaohua, the director, who encouraged the staging of another of Gao's plays. *Chezhan* (Bus Stop 1983) was brought to the stage in July 1983, again as "experimental theater," and this time to even more wildly excited audiences (Gao, "Geri huanghua" 162; see also Zhao 70-75; Tam, "Drama of Paradox" 43-66; Tay 67-76; Ma 77-88; Riley and Gissenwehrer 133-46). However, an unannounced visit by Feng Mu led to the immediate cessation of further performances. Presumably based on a report by Feng Mu, He Jingzhi ordered criticisms of *Bus Stop* in major publications such as *Literature and the Arts*, *Xijubao* (Drama), *Beijing ribao* (Beijing Daily), and the Guangzhou-based literary journal *Shiyue* (October) that had published the play. Gao also learned from reliable sources that He Jingzhi was talking about sending him off to Qinghai province to do some "training" on a prison farm (Gao, "Geri huanghua" 162).

He Jingzhi called *Bus Stop* "the most pernicious play" since the establishment of New China. Indeed, Gao's use of the absurd in *Bus Stop*, with people waiting for a bus that never stops, directly challenged the predictable literary models of the past decades. The absurd forced audiences to reflect on what was taking place on stage as well as what was happening in real life, and, as such, represented a clear break with established literary theory and practice in revolutionary China. All literature was required to provide clear depictions of positive or negative characters, so that audiences could emulate the positive characters, and ensure that they did not emulate negative characters. Gao's writings were applauded and defended by established writers from pre-Liberation times who, after decades of enforced silence, had suddenly found themselves rehabilitated. They knew of the value of what they had written in their youth: it too did not conform to established guidelines and this had caused them much suffering and anxiety during the Cultural Revolution. Most were in their seventies or eighties, too old to take on challenging the authorities, but they enthusiastically supported Gao Xingjian's efforts (cf. Gao, "Geri huanghua" 161-62).

After the closing of *Bus Stop*, a routine health check led to Gao's being diagnosed with lung cancer, the disease that had killed his father two years before. A further X-ray a few weeks later revealed a wrong diagnosis, but in the interim, Gao had confronted death. His escape from death made him a "reborn" human being, and he was determined to live fully as a human being, in full charge of his own thinking and perceptions, and fully expressing a physiological craving to express himself in literature. In *One Man's Bible* Gao later described this physiological need in a very concrete way: "It is just like shit; and if there's the need to, it is discharged." (Gao, *One Man's Bible* chapter 24.) He fled Beijing to protect this life for which he had just won a reprieve. His novel *Soul Mountain* tells of how, as the campaign to stamp out "spiritual pollution" raged in Beijing, in which he was singled out for criticism and banned from publishing, he had wandered on the fringes of Han-Chinese society, away from the centers of political authority. *Soul Mountain* documents in fiction what he saw and heard, and otherwise physically and psychologically experienced during his five months of wandering over 15,000 kilometres of the Chinese hinterland. Gao returned to Beijing at the end of 1983, after the campaign had ended. In the following year, 1984, the ban on his publications was lifted. When his third play *Yeren* (Wild Man) was staged in 1985, there were no public criticisms, but the actors were individually cautioned (see Zhao 80-85; Chen 89-110). His other major publications included a novella *You zhi gezi jiao Hongchunr* (A Pigeon Called Red Beak 1985) and a theoretical work *Dui yishong xiandai xiju de zuiqiu* (In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation 1987).

Gao Xingjian left China at the end of 1987. He had the feeling that it was unlikely that he would be able to stage his plays in China again: "The political authorities only allow plays that promote their propaganda, so how can there be anything artistic?" (Gao, "Geri huanghua" 163). He settled in France

and, in a sense, had fled instinctively to an environment where he thought he would have the freedom to write as directed solely by his creative self. In a little over a year, the tragic events in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 made him realize that for the writer to achieve total creative freedom required more than simply an environment where freedom of artistic expression existed. The writer needed to be in a constant state of abstract fleeing. It was in response to a request by an American theater group for a play "on China" that in late October 1989 Gao completed a two-act play *Taowang* (Fleeing 1990) (Gao, *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* vol. 4). Published in translation by Gregory B. Lee with the title *Fugitives* (in Gregory B. Lee, *Chinese Writing and Exile*), this play has been called variously *Escape* (Zhao) and *Exile* (Fong), and I have on previous occasions referred to the play as *Absconding*. However in the process of reading for this paper I have revised my translation of the title to *Fleeing*. The undisclosed American theater group arranged for the play to be translated and afterwards suggested changes, because there were no student heroes. Gao paid for the English translation and withdrew his manuscript: "In China the Communist Party couldn't get me to revise my works, and an American theater group certainly isn't going to." *Fleeing* was published in Chinese in 1990 in the first issue of the revived literary journal *Jintian* (Today), published in Stockholm at the time, and premiered in Swedish the following year at the Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern in Stockholm (Gao, "Guanyu *Taowang*" 4, 72-74).

Ironically, *Fleeing* was also published in China in 1991. In the aftermath of the military crackdown on students in 1989, it can only be described as a miraculous "accident" that this powerful and incisive literary indictment of the actions of the Chinese authorities was published. Endorsed by the Chinese authorities, the first print-run of 25,000 copies of *Wangming "jingying": qi ren qi shi* (On the Diaspora "Elite": Who They are and What They are Doing) went on the market in May 1991 and was reprinted within a couple of months. Its aim was to provide incriminating evidence of "reactionary writings" by "unpatriotic," "anti-Party," Chinese "elite" living abroad. The book was read eagerly in China but not with the intended effect, according to an article in the Hong Kong bi-monthly magazine *Baixing* (Zeng 6-7). The full text of *Fleeing* was reproduced, but was prefaced with a three-page diatribe by Yu Sanniu (probably a pseudonym), attacking the play for wrongly alleging that thousands of students had been killed in the square. Much space was also devoted to attacking the sexual promiscuity and moral depravity of the three characters, particularly the woman (Yu 235-37). The publication of Gao's works in China thereafter was problematical, and this certainly has been the case since Gao Xingjian was proclaimed Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2000 (Lin 122-23). In "Guanyu *Taowang*" ("About *Fleeing*" 1991), Gao states that some of his writer friends had criticized *Fleeing* for being "too political" and that it was not a "purely literary work." Gao, on this point, defends his right to discuss politics in his writings, even though he is not a political activist. However he is critical of biased writings that "tie literature to the war chariot of a particular camp." He, of course, was aware that *Fleeing* had displeased members of the Chinese democracy movement, because it was critical of the naivete of the student movement. However, he states that in writing the play his intention was not to denounce only this particular massacre, and that he had clearly stated in the stage instructions: "This is not a socialist-realist play" (Gao, "Guanyu *Taowang*" 4, 72-73).

As a writer Gao saw literary truth as his only criterion, truth as he perceived it and not truth as perceived by others, no matter how noble the cause. In those times of high emotions, he knew that to write a play that failed to portray the students as heroes that, moreover, was critical of the student movement would be seen as a betrayal of the Chinese democracy movement. In *Fleeing* Gao placed his commitment to literary truth above politics and, in the process of writing the play, his past reflections on literature versus politics and on the individual versus the collective began to coalesce. Gao occasionally made veiled comments on these issues in *Soul Mountain*, as for example when the protagonist suddenly encounters large numbers of toads: "They are like a flock of headless tiny people with arms outstretched to the hoary sky, calling out in despair: Give my head back!" (*Soul Mountain* chapter 68). *Soul Mountain* was still in manuscript form when the Tiananmen events of 4 June 1989

occurred. These events galvanized him to bring the work to a conclusion. He submitted it for publication in September 1989, immediately before he embarked upon the writing of *Fleeing*. However, after the publication of *Fleeing*, there is evidence of a marked change in his writings, and he began to articulate his thinking on various aspects of what it meant to be a writer. In the process of writing *Fleeing* Gao had decided that as a writer, he was a frail individual and that his writings were simply observations of human behavior. He had no illusions about changing the world through his writings.

Seventy or so years earlier, during the May Fourth period, Lu Xun (1881-1936) who played a leading role in the founding of China's modern literature at that time faced a similar choice. Those highly emotional times following the end of World War I and the Paris Peace Conference coincided with the first wave of Nietzsche fever in China, and young intellectuals, including writers, saw themselves in the role of Nietzsche's superman. Through their writings and political activism, they saw themselves as the saviors of the nation (see Galik 51-64; Lee "On Nietzsche and Chinese Literature"). China's youth rallied to Lu Xun's call to cease being bystanders and to participate in bringing about the social and cultural reforms necessary to save the nation. While a student in Japan, in 1903, Lu Xun had inscribed a pledge on a photograph: "I offer my blood to the Yellow Emperor." He kept to that pledge, and knew that to cease to be a bystander meant the sacrifice of his creative self. He had experienced ecstasy and personal fulfillment while writing the powerful short stories that were later collected in *Nahan* (Outcry 1922) and *Panghuang* (Hesitation 1926), and he knew that he would suffer agony because of his decision to abandon creative writing. His prose poems collected in *Yecao* (Wild Grass 1927), indicate the extent both of his passion for his creative writings and his anguish at the imminent prospect of allowing his creative self to suicide (see Lee "Suicide of the Creative Self" and "Solace for the Corpse"). He would be like Christ refusing myrrh to deaden his pain at the Crucifixion in the poem "Fuchou II" (Revenge II, 20 December 1924), and like the corpse that had ripped out its heart to see what it would taste like in the poem "Mujiewen" ("The Epitaph" 27 June 1925).

Whereas in the poems of *Wild Grass* Lu Xun ambivalently announces his decision to renounce creative writing, in the play *Fleeing* Gao Xingjian unequivocally declares his resolve to remain a bystander, but as a critical observer and a creative writer. In choosing the title for the play, Gao Xingjian articulates his stance as a writer: he stands apart from the will of the collective. The notion of "fleeing" enabled Gao to explain with increasing clarity and conviction what in the past had been instinctive actions to preserve his integrity as an individual and as a writer. After the publication of the play, fleeing became a recurring motif in Gao's subsequent writings, and lies at the heart of what he has coined "cold literature" and "without isms" to describe the type of literature he writes. *Soul Mountain* shows how important physically fleeing Beijing was for Gao's survival after the closing of his play *Bus Stop* by the authorities. His second novel *One Man's Bible*, however, reveals numerous acts of physical and psychological fleeing without which he would have been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

In formulating his thinking on fleeing, Gao Xingjian uses as his starting point the thesis presented in *Eloge de la fuite* (In Praise of Fleeing) by Henri Laborite (1914-1995). Laborite's thesis is that once protest becomes organized, the protester is reduced to being a follower of the organization, and the only escape is to flee. Gao broadens the scope of Laborite's thesis, and posits that human life is continual fleeing, either from political oppression or from other people and, furthermore, of fleeing from one's self. "When the self is awakened, it is this self that cannot be escaped. This is the tragedy of modern human beings." Gao argues that there are external pressures such as political oppression, social customs, fashions and the will of others, but that the misfortunes of humankind also derive from the self. The self is not God. It cannot be suppressed but there is no need to worship it. The individual cannot escape his self and this is mankind's fate. This truth, he maintains, is central to classical Greek tragedies and to Shakespeare's tragedies, and it was for this reason that he had written *Fleeing* as pure tragedy (Gao, "Guanyu Taowang" 4, 72-73). Indeed, the stage instructions for *Fleeing* explain that from ancient times mankind's survival has been the same unending tragedy and that his play

*Fleeing* aspires to portray the dilemma of modern mankind as a classical tragedy. "The performance should embody both the declamatory tone of classical Greek tragedy and the ritualistic solemnity of Oriental classical drama? This is a political, philosophical, and psychological play and should not be construed as a social-realist play simply reflecting a single contemporary political event" (Gao, "Guanyu yanchu *Taowang* de ruogan shuoming yu jianyi" 4, 70).

Gao's strategy of presenting *Fleeing* on stage in the form of a classical tragedy is aimed at inducing a psychological distance that will allow members of the audience to dissociate themselves from the emotional trauma of the specific events of June 4. This would then allow for critical thinking and reflection on those events as well as reinforce the fact that the specific tragedy under scrutiny is not unique in human existence. At the same time, this strategy allows him, as the playwright, to achieve adequate emotional distance to write about the harrowing events of that specific event that at the surface level, is ostensibly the theme of the play. The setting of *Fleeing* is unmistakably Beijing, 4 June 1989, after the tanks have rolled into Tiananmen Square. However, the play only indicates the time as from early morning until just after daybreak, and the setting as some derelict city building resembling a dilapidated warehouse. The events in the square are related in graphic comments contained in the dialogues between the three characters: Youth (aged about twenty), Young Woman (aged about twenty-two or twenty-three), and Middle-aged Man (aged over forty years). The play is matter-of-factly critical of the slaying of "thousands" in the square, but it is equally matter-of-factly critical of the political naivete of the student movement.

Outraged by the events in Tiananmen Square, Gao had voiced his protest in media interviews such as those presented in the Italian daily *La Stampa* and on Channel 5 on French Television. In these he announced his resignation from the Chinese Communist Party, two years before he was expelled from the Party and his apartment in Beijing confiscated (Gao, "Guanyu yanchu *Taowang* de ruogan shuoming yu jianyi" 4, 70). However, he knew that considerable resolve was required to write *Fleeing* as a detached observer in those highly emotional times. He was also aware of the wrath and derision that he would incur amongst sympathizers of the student cause, and this is demonstrated in the play. Middle-aged Man, sympathizes with the student cause, but suggests that a massacre should have been foreseen and that the students should not have been led to the slaughter. Some contingency retreat plans should have been arranged. Young Man responds by angrily taunting him: if he had foreseen that a massacre would take place, why hadn't he come forward to do something about it (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 27).

While sympathizing with the students, Gao knew he could not distort the truth by portraying them as heroes. Moreover, he was aware of how heroic sentiments were capable of distorting the individual's perception of the self, even causing the individual to lose control of it. To be a hero was anathema to Gao Xingjian, he would not follow in the footsteps of Lu Xun who, for patriotic reasons, had sacrificed literature in order to devote himself to polemical writings. Lu Xun was indeed an enigmatic personality, for he too was acutely aware of the psychological consequences of being upheld as a hero. In a letter published 1 October 1927, he wrote that he found it profoundly disturbing to be called a "fighter" and a "revolutionary" after a lecture at Sun Yat-sen University. It made him think about Qiu Jin (?1879-1907), the young revolutionary from his hometown in Shaoxing who had been "clapped to death." Clapping had induced her to sacrifice her life for the revolutionary cause and he asked: "Does this mean then that I too must die in battle?" (Lu, "Tongxin" 3, 433). By this time Lu Xun had already allowed his creative self to suicide, and he was at least half of a martyr, for he had, like Qiu Jin, allowed his creative self to be "clapped" to death. As a public persona, a hero, he found that he could not publicly acknowledge the suicide of his creative self. However, to live a half-atrophied physical existence was excruciating, and to assuage his pain Lu Xun returned to writing classical poetry as well as throwing himself into the work of translating Russian and Japanese writings. When he died of lung cancer in 1936 he was translating Gogol's *Dead Souls* (see Lee, "On Nietzsche and Chinese Literature").

In the context of the student democracy movement that culminated in the tragedy of 4 June 1989, Gao Xingjian faced a similar choice. Gao chose to be politically incorrect. His choice was resoundingly for literature. He was a writer, a bystander, an observer, and in his own words, a frail individual. He was emphatically not a hero. He was the antithesis of Lu Xun who had with two volumes of short stories founded China's modern literature in the May Fourth era. Because Lu Xun had chosen politics above literature, he had encouraged a generation of young writers to see themselves as heroes and they willingly followed his example of self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation and then later the Party that they believed would create a future ideal society. In *Soul Mountain* (chapter 71) Gao writes that as a student he had been inspired by the heroism of self-sacrifice and would recite that line of Lu Xun's poem: "I offer my blood to the Yellow Emperor." However, by the time he began writing *Soul Mountain* in 1982, he had serious doubts about this. Noting that Yellow Emperor could stand for homeland, the race or one's ancestors, he argues that his head is his own, why did it have to be chopped off for the Yellow Emperor?

In the play *Fleeing*, against a backdrop of rumbling tanks and machine-gun fire Young Man and Young Woman escape into an old warehouse. After catching her breath, Young Woman suddenly realizes that she is covered in blood. Her initial reaction is that she has been shot, is about to die, and she becomes hysterical. Young Man tells her to calm down and that it is only on her skirt, that it is someone else's blood. Aghast, Young Woman recalls: "I saw her, the girl running beside me, she was clutching her stomach and had just opened her mouth to call out but she fell to her knees before any sound came out. Blood was oozing out between her fingers...." Young Man responds: "The tanks were right behind you, crushing all the roadblocks, garbage bins, bicycles and tents." Filled with terror Young Woman throws her arms around Young Man to affirm that she is still alive, and hugs him even tighter as another burst of gunfire is heard. It is then that she exclaims that he has been wounded in the head. It turns out to be a piece of someone else's brains: "He was just a step ahead of me. I heard a plop, and the back of his head exploded" (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 6-7).

With these snatches of dialogue at the opening of the play, Gao has stated unambiguously that there were killings in the square. For the reader/audience, the setting is reinforced by instant mental associations with images that had saturated daily TV news around the world for more than two months. To wallow in the tragedy, is not the intent of *Fleeing*. As Gao notes in his suggestions for the staging of the play, *Fleeing* seeks to explore the never-ending tragedy of human existence that dates from ancient times to the present (Gao, "Guanyu yanchu *Taowang* de ruogan shuoming yu jianyi" 4, 70). Under scrutiny in the play is the human psyche and human behavior in the context of extreme terror and confrontation with death. The righteous indignation of Young Man's heroic declarations is neutralized by the cold cynicism in the lucid comments of Middle-aged Man. Young Woman, who is older than Young Man, represents a middle position in the discussion of the events. However, *Fleeing* is devoid of emotional fervor, despite the gravity of situation as the three characters face imminent death or long-term incarceration within an hour or so, when searches would presumably begin at daybreak.

The dramatic impact achieved by the clinical presentation of tragic events in *Fleeing* is intensified by comic dialogue. For example, when Middle-aged Man also enters the warehouse and lights a cigarette, Young Man challenges him and asks what he is doing, the response is: "Getting out of the wind to have a cigarette." To this Young Man warns: "Smoking is banned in here." Middle-aged Man's response to this is: "The soldiers have set the city on fire, there's smoke everywhere on the streets, and you're worried by this bit of fire? You're wasting your time doing this shift, why don't you join me for a smoke?" (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 9). In the dark, Middle-aged Man's lighting cigarettes is unsettling for Young Man and Young Woman who have begun fondling one another in the dark. Meanwhile, Middle-aged Man is worried that in the hour or so left before daybreak there won't be time to smoke all the cigarettes in the pack and he starts counting them. He finally works out that he will have to smoke one cigarette every five minutes (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 18-19). Feeling tense, Young Woman asks Middle-



aged Man for a cigarette, but he warns her it is not one of those trendy menthol cigarettes women pretend to smoke, and asks if she has ever tried pot. She asks if he has instead. He tells her he has tried everything, but that he has never counted cigarettes one at a time like this (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 21-22). The three characters are in a predicament: they are staring at imminent death. Gao Xingjian portrays the extent of their terror, not at a linguistic level but at a primal psychological level. Sexual lust is depicted as a primal physiological response to extreme terror and fear of death: it is a manifestation of lust for life and has nothing to do with sexual promiscuity or moral depravity. Because of emotional trauma and terror, Young Woman instinctively seeks the warmth and protection of Young Man's body, and he is both heroic and responsive to her needs. With each burst of machine gun fire they begin hugging one another tighter. They are interrupted by the arrival of Middle-aged Man. Following his entry on the scene, there is much political and philosophical discussion about politics, the happenings in the square, as well as about life. The three characters also talk about their lives and aspirations. It is as if life is about to end for each of them.

As it draws close to daybreak, when searches would begin in earnest, Young Man decides to make a run for it outside, and suggests that the other two follow. However, as soon as Young Man is outside, a single rifle shot resounds and then there is silence. Young Woman starts screaming hysterically and Middle-aged Man puts his hand over her mouth to prevent her screams from being heard. She struggles to get to the door to go outside, but Middle-aged Man grabs her and takes her in his arms. She demands that he let go and as soon as he releases her, she starts hitting him and blaming him for not having stopped Young Man. He does not stop her, and eventually she throws herself upon him, sobbing uncontrollably. He strokes her hair, and tells her that the soldiers would be coming soon. She becomes hysterical again. He slaps her, tells her to find somewhere to hide, and to keep quiet: in that way they might not find her. He tells her he will have a smoke and wait for them to come. She takes his hand and tells him not to smoke because she is afraid of light, afraid of everything. In the darkness, he takes her into his arms and kisses her. Their lust for one another is awakened, but he gently tells her to go and hide. She refuses, she wants it to be like that. He says she is being silly and protests that he can't make love while rifles are pointing at him. Nevertheless, he succumbs to her frenzied kisses, her chiding him for holding back, and her urging him to hurry up because the soldiers could turn up any instant (Gao, *Taowang* 4, 48-49). This is not gratuitous sex, but sex as a psychological response to terror and confrontation with death that Gao Xingjian is describing. He is examining sex as an affirmation of life, and he bases this on lived, or imagined, experiences during the Cultural Revolution. His autobiographical novel *One Man's Bible* tells of similar behavior in situations of extreme fear and terror. It tells of his fear, sense of utter powerlessness and his cowardice that led to his masturbating and writing in secret to remind himself that he was still alive, while living in what he describes as hell. However, his equating of sex to an affirmation of life, a lust for life, in situations of extreme terror is best portrayed in his depictions of women. Three instances are mentioned below.

Soon after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the school student Xiao Xiao came to him, offering herself. At the time he did not know that she was soon to be sent to the countryside. She had come to him out of fear, but because she was so young and fearing she was still a virgin, he did not dare to enjoy himself fully with her. It is many years later, when he bumps into her that he learns she was raped soon after she arrived in the countryside, and that she had been raped many times afterwards (Gao, *One Man's Bible* chapters 28 and 55). On one of his trips down south, as shooting starts between Red Guard factions in the town, he flees for his life and is joined by a young woman. They eventually find an inn but have to share a bed in a small room under the stairs. Suddenly there is a night search and people are shouting and running up and down the stairs. They cling to one another in terror as screaming and then a heavy thud is heard on the floor above. After the searchers leave, he and the woman in bed engage in carnal lust. This woman, Qian, later becomes his wife in the remote mountain village to which he had fled to escape being publicly denounced and arrested for

his activities as a leading member of a rebel group of the Red Guards at his Beijing workplace. The marriage effectively ends the following day, after she reads what he has been writing. In a violent attack of hysteria, Qian accuses him of being a counter-revolutionary, and throwing the chamber pot at him covers him in urine. She departs soon afterwards. After this violent episode with Qian and her threat to expose him as a counter-revolutionary, he resolutely suppresses his sexual urges. In his loneliness and state of repressed sexuality, he writes in secret to gratify his lust for life (Gao, *One Man's Bible* chapters 30 and 42). Secretary Lu helps him to secure work as a teacher in the school in the town, where the student Sun Huirong has a crush on him. On graduating, Sun is sent to work as a peasant in a production brigade. One night she comes to him, clearly offering herself to him: again it was because of fear. However, afraid of jeopardizing his job, he quickly pushes her out of his room. Some months later, he learns that Sun was pregnant after having been raped by Hunchback Zhao the party secretary of her work brigade. He reads the testimonies from the court case. She had either been raped by Hunchback Zhao, as she claimed, or had slept with him in order to gain enough merit points to get a permit to work in town, as Hunchback claimed (Gao, *One Man's Bible* chapter 50).

As mentioned above, Gao states in "About *Fleeing*" that the play is not limited to this one incident of fleeing. The issue of the individual (or writer) regarding himself as a hero, means the bloating of the self, to perceive oneself as Nietzsche's superman. In regarding oneself as a hero one will willingly sacrifice one's own will for the will of the masses or for a cause. The individual would no longer be acting on his own behalf, but would be obliged to fulfill the role of hero or savior. Middle-aged Man's argument is by far the most forceful, for this is of course Gao Xingjian arguing his case, politically incorrect though it might have been in those times of high emotions. Young Man sees himself as a hero for the cause of democracy and the nation, but Middle-aged Man is cynical and an effective foil for Young Man. Middle-aged Man is the persona of the author Gao Xingjian.

Gao's novel *One Man's Bible* tells that during the Cultural Revolution, he had responded to his heroic sentiments and ended up being pushed into a leadership role in the rebel faction of the Red Guards at his workplace. When the Army Control Commission took charge he was forced first to use his ingenuity to flee to the May Seventh Cadre School, and then to a remote mountain village to live out his life as a peasant, or else face certain arrest. When he joined the rebel faction he had felt that he was carrying out a "sacred duty." He was standing up for old colleagues and cadres who had been hauled out for criticism by the orthodox Red Guards, but he soon discovered that he too was being manipulated by politics (Gao, *One Man's Bible* chapters 13 and 19). By the use of the absurd in chapter 20, Gao demonstrates how easily the individual can be manipulated once he loses control of the self. Persuaded by the joker that he might be able to move the rock, he foolishly stands on the rock and becomes totally disoriented, and is manipulated by the joker egging him on. Gao Xingjian's strongest indictment of the individual being forced to submit to the will of the collective is found in Chapter 58. Everyone is running to welcome the good times that are ahead. The setting is startlingly reminiscent of the setting of his play *Fleeing*. He decides that the good times will always be ahead and he decides to hurry away before the good times actually came.

In the process of writing the play *Fleeing*, at a time of intense emotions both for himself and for his readers/audiences, Gao Xingjian established fleeing as a defining aspect of his future writings. His thinking on fleeing is enunciated with great clarity in the essays collected in *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without Isms 1996) such as "Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wenxue" ("I Advocate a Cold Literature" 30 July 1990) and "Bali suibi" ("Jottings in Paris" 15 November 1990) collected in *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without Isms 15 November 1993). This thinking was also reiterated in his Nobel Lecture (2000) and Nobel Centenary Lecture (2001). However, it was in his novel *One Man's Bible* that Gao Xingjian had the space for a full literary exploration of the notion of fleeing for both the individual and for the writer.

#### Works Cited

- Chen, Xiaomei. "Wild Man Between Two Cultures." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 89-110.
- Davis, A.R, and A.D. Stefanowska, eds. *Austrina: Essays in Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Oriental Society of Australia*. Sydney: Oriental Society of Australia, 1982.
- Fong, Gilbert. "Introduction." *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 1999.
- Galik, Marian. "Nietzsche's Reception in China (1902-2000)." *Archiv orientální: Quarterly Journal of African and Asian Studies* 70 (2002): 51-64.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* (Six Plays by Gao Xingjian). Taipei: Dijiao chubanshe, 1995. 7 vols.
- Gao, Xingjian. "Geri huanghua" (Stale Chrysanthemums). *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without Isms). Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1996. 158-66.
- Gao, Xingjian. "Guanyu Taowang" (About Fleeing). *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* (Six Plays by Gao Xingjian). Taipei: Dijiao chubanshe, 1995. Vol. 4, 72-74.
- Gao, Xingjian. "Guanyu yanchu Taowang de ruogan shuoming yu jianyi," (Some Explanations and Suggestions for the Performance of Fleeing). *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* (Six Plays by Gao Xingjian). Taipei: Dijiao chubanshe, 1995. Vol. 4, 70-71.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without Isms). Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1996.
- Gao, Xingjian. *One Man's Bible*. Trans. Mabel Lee. New York, Sydney, London: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Soul Mountain*. Trans. Mabel Lee. Sydney, New York, London: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Taowang* (Fleeing). *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* (Six Plays by Gao Xingjian). Taipei: Dijiao chubanshe, 1995. Vol. 4, 1-68.
- Lee, Gregory B., ed. *Chinese Writing and Exile*. Chicago: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, 1993.
- Lee, Mabel. "On Nietzsche and Chinese Literature: From Lu Xun (1881-1936) to Gao Xingjian (b. 1940)." *Literature and Aesthetics: The Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics* (November 2002): 23-43.
- Lee, Mabel. "Solace for the Corpse with Its Heart Gouged Out: Lu Xun's Use of the Poetic Form." *Papers on Far Eastern History* 26 (1982): 145-73.
- Lee, Mabel. "Suicide of the Creative Self: The Case of Lu Xun." *Austrina: Essays in Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Oriental Society of Australia*. Ed. A.R. Davis and A.D. Stefanowska. Sydney: Oriental Society of Australia, 1982. 140-67.
- Lin, Manshu, ed. *Jiedu Gao Xingjian* (How to Read Gao Xingjian). Hong Kong: Mingbao chubanshe youxian gongsi, 2000.
- Lu, Xun. *Lu Xun quanji* (Collected Works of Lu Xun). Shanghai: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1973. 16 vols.
- Lu, Xun. *Yecao* (Wild Grass). *Lu Xun quanji* (Collected Works of Lu Xun). Shanghai: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1973. Vol. 1, 463-538.
- Lu, Xun. "Tongxin" (Letter). *Er yi ji*. Vol. 3. *Lu Xun quanji* (Collected Works of Lu Xun). Shanghai: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1973.
- Ma, Sen. "The Theater of the Absurd in China: Gao Xingjian's *The Bus Stop*." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 77-88.
- Riley, Jo, and Michael Gissenwehrer. "The Myth of Gao Xingjian." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 133-46.
- Tam, Kwok-kan. "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and the Politics of Recognition." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 1-20.
- Tam, Kwok-kan. "Drama of Paradox: Waiting as Form and Motif in *The Bus Stop* and *Waiting for Godot*." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 43-66.
- Tam, Kwok-kan, ed. *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001.
- Tay, William. "Avant-Garde Theater in Post-Mao China: *The Bus Stop* by Gao Xingjian." *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*. Ed. Kwok-kan Tam. Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 2001. 67-76.
- Yu, Sanniu. "Xinkou cihuang zhi zuo" ("A Book of Irresponsible Prattle"). *On the Diaspora "Elite": Who They Are and What They Are Doing*. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1991. 235-37.
- Zeng, Huiyan. "Dalu qishu Wangming 'Jingying' de chuban" ("Publication of the Astonishing Book *On the Diaspora 'Elite'* in China." *Baixing* 244 (1991): 6-7.
- Zhao, Henry Y.H. *Towards a Modern Zen Theater: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theater Experimentalism*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000.

Author's profile: Mabel Lee taught Chinese studies 1966-2000 at the University of Sydney, where she now retains an honorary position in the School of European, Asian, and Middle Eastern Languages and Studies. Her research and publications focus on twentieth-century Chinese literature and history, but in recent years she has also turned to introducing contemporary Chinese writings to the English-speaking world through translation. Among other translations into English from Chinese, her translation of Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* brought Lee international recognition as did her translation in 2002 of Gao's second novel, *One Man's Bible*. Lee's translation of Gao's collection of short stories *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* is scheduled for publication in Winter 2004. In 2001 she was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Prize for Translation and the PEN Medallion. Lee co-edits two University of Sydney series: the *East Asian Series* and the *World Literature Series*, and she is managing director of Wild Peony Press. Her involvement in publishing has been to promote understanding of the peoples of Asia in the English-speaking world. She has served on the Board of the Sydney Writers' Festival, the Management Committee of the NSW Writers Center, and the Literature Program Committee of

AsiaLink. She is a life member of PEN International (Sydney Center) and is editorial advisor for the journal *Southerly: The Journal of the English Association*. Lee also serves on the advisory board of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* and published in 2.3 (2000) "Nobel Laureate 2000 Gao Xingjian and his Novel *Soul Mountain*". E-mail: <[mabel.lee@arts.usyd.edu.au](mailto:mabel.lee@arts.usyd.edu.au)>.