

2000 NOBEL LAUREATE GAO XINGJIAN AND HIS NOTION OF COLD LITERATURE

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On 12 October 2000 the Swedish Academy announced that Gao Xingjian had won the Nobel Prize for Literature for a body of writings that ‘opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama’. This was the first time the prize had been given for a body of writings in the Chinese language. Significantly, it was an affirmation of the potential of the Chinese language to meet the challenges of contemporary literature in the world context. At the time of the announcement, a substantial part of Gao’s major works (plays, short stories and two novels) had also been published in French, Swedish and English translations.

Gao’s reputation as one of the leaders of the avant-garde movement in literature was established in China in the early 1980s, soon after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution. The anti-culture movement known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) arrested all individual creative activity and isolated China from literary developments in the rest of the world; all writers and artists were recruited to create works of propaganda to serve the political interests of the Chinese Communist Party.

From 1980 to 1987 Gao Xingjian published critical and theoretical writings on literature, particularly narrative technique and theatre, as well as introductory works on modern European writers. In addition, his experimental plays *Absolute Signal* (staged 1982), *Bus Stop* (staged 1983) and *Wild Man* (staged 1985) were performed to packed houses. The reprinting of Gao’s *Preliminary Explorations in the Art of Modern Fiction* in 1982 saw it banned for promoting the Modernism of decadent bourgeois capitalist Western literature, and in the following year *Bus Stop* was closed down after a few performances. As the author, Gao fled Beijing to escape having to write self-criticisms and the possibility of being sent to one of the notorious prison

farms of Qinghai province. He was able to return after five months when the political situation had relaxed. His play *Wild Man* was not subjected to public criticism by the authorities but the actors had been taken aside and cautioned.

Around the time *Bus Stop* was closed down Gao was diagnosed with lung cancer, the disease that had killed his father a few years earlier. A wrong diagnosis was subsequently confirmed but this brush with death had made him uncompromising in his determination to live fully as a human being, with the freedom to feel, think, imagine, and to express his individual self. And he was resolved to seek self-fulfilment as a creative writer. When the chance arose, he left China to pursue this right to be fully human. In 1987 he left his homeland for Germany and after a few months settled in Paris where he has since lived. His publications found new sites in Taipei and Hong Kong and his plays were relocated to stages in France, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Romania, Italy, USA, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Japan, Australia and the Ivory Coast. To date he has published a total of eighteen plays, some of which he first wrote in French.

In 1992 Gao was honoured with the award of Chevalier and in 1997 he became a French citizen. It was therefore as a French citizen that Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize. The Chinese authorities have publicly expressed anger at Gao's winning the Nobel Prize – calling it a 'political' decision. The French Ministry however has congratulated Gao for having 'enriched French literature'. Commenting on the French response, the eminent literary historian Liu Zaifu noted that French literature was the creation of literary geniuses such as Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Baudelaire, Proust, Camus: Liu jubilantly declared Gao's win as 'a victory for literature in the Chinese language'.

It was in Chinese that Gao delivered his Nobel Lecture at the Swedish Academy on 7 December 2000. The title he gave it was 'The Case for Literature', and summarised a number of his essays on literature written during the 1990s, and in which he coins the term 'cold literature' to denote the sort of literature he believed in. By the time Gao had completed reading his Nobel Lecture, it was available on the Swedish Academy web site in the Chinese original and in French, Swedish and English translation. The

English version is now in print in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Yearbook 2000* (Brucoli Clark Layman Inc, Columbia SC, 2001), *World Literature Today*, 75. 1 (Winter, 2001) and *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 116. 3 (May 2001).

In presenting the Nobel Lecture, Gao Xingjian was aware that he was addressing a world audience. Born in China in 1940, Gao was informed by a lifetime of voracious reading in Chinese and French literature, and other Western writings (via Chinese or French translations), as well as by his own critical thinking about literature and narrative technique. His thirst for the creative expression of a self that had been richly endowed with artistic sensibilities is driven by an intense curiosity about the human psyche and behaviour. For Gao Xingjian the basic prerequisite for literature is freedom of artistic expression.

Literature is the solitary act of the individual and this has always been so.

Once literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party, or the voice of a class or group, it can be employed as an all-engulfing tool of propaganda. However such literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature, and becomes a substitute for power and profit.

In 1982 when Gao Xingjian began writing his novel *Lingshan* (1990; *Soul Mountain*, 2000), he was his own reader and critic. In China, it was futile and even dangerous for him to consider offering the manuscript for publication, but he was driven by an inner need to write the work for his own personal fulfilment. The extreme repression of the individual in China during the Cultural Revolution had given Gao Xingjian unique insights into the substance and intrinsic value of literature. For him, in the worst times of the Cultural Revolution, writing – even in secret – was his salvation, providing him with solace by affirming his human consciousness. Speaking to the world with the authority of Nobel Laureate 2000, he argued for a form of writing akin to Chinese recluse writings of the past. It was common practice for scholars to isolate themselves from time to time on remote mountains far

from family concerns, social and political restraints. However, more often, writers would simply ‘recluse’ themselves in a metaphorical sense. There is the extreme example of the writer Xu Wei of the Ming dynasty who is mentioned in Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain*. Xu Wei attempted suicide three times, pretended he was mad and finally killed his wife, and consequently spent many years in prison. Xu Wei, however, wrote perceptively on the corrosive effect of politics on literature and the absurd outcome of politicians acting as the arbiters of literary worth. He also derided those of his contemporaries who slavishly followed trends and fashions and produced works that lacked originality and filled the literary world with ‘poets’ but no ‘poetry’.

Gao Xingjian points out that during Mao’s dictatorship, fleeing to monasteries on far away mountains was not an option for the writer, the monasteries were ravaged during the Cultural Revolution. Even writing in secret meant risking one’s life, and to maintain one’s intellectual autonomy one could only talk to oneself, and with utmost secrecy. He states that it was only in this period ‘when it was utterly impossible for literature’ that he ‘came to comprehend why it was so essential: literature allows a person to preserve a human consciousness.’

In Gao Xingjian’s second novel, *Yige ren de shengjing* (1999; *One Man’s Bible*, 2002), Gao tells how he had been sent to work in the countryside to work as a peasant, as had most intellectuals, to reform his thinking through hard labour as a peasant. A compulsive writer, he was intent on preserving his human consciousness and continued to write through those years of the Cultural Revolution when surveillance and reporting on others to win political credit points had become widespread practice. To evade detection required elaborate planning. He prepared his bamboo broom handle by knocking out the membranes at the joints and he wrote on thin letter paper: if disturbed, he stuffed what he was writing into the hollow broom handle. When the pages accumulated, he put them into a large earthenware jar with a layer of lime on the bottom, then tied a piece of plastic over the top. He kept the jar in a hole he had dug in the earth floor of the hut he lived in, and moved a heavy vat of water over the hole. Gao wrote short stories, plays, essays, poems, and a novella during the five years he worked in the countryside. Nevertheless,

at the height of the Cultural Revolution he burnt all that he had written. The burning of several kilos of manuscripts in a potbelly stove without creating smoke that would arouse suspicion of the neighbours required much care, and this was an anxious and painful process.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong and China gradually began to open up to the rest of the world. Writers were nervous after a decade of relentless intimidation and persecution. By exercising rigorous self-censorship, Gao Xingjian's short stories, theoretical works on narrative fiction and plays began to appear in publications and on the stage, but it was a highly stressful process when he found himself constantly the target of attack by the authorities. It was at this very time that he began to write *Soul Mountain* to dispel his inner loneliness of the time. He took the manuscript of *Soul Mountain* with him when he left Beijing in 1987 and completed his final revisions in 1989, after the events of 4 June 1989, when he felt that a chapter of his life had ended. It was at this point that he decided that he could not return to China.

In *Soul Mountain*, there are only oblique references to the Cultural Revolution, for the work was largely written in China. His experiences of those years continued to weigh heavily on his consciousness but he had tried to obliterate the painful memories he had left behind in China. His belief in the notion of 'cold literature' made it impossible for him to deal with those times in his writings until 1997, when he resolved to embark upon the writing of *One Man's Bible* (published two years later in 1999). How would he achieve the detachment he demanded of himself for 'cold literature' that he had proposed in his theoretical writings? In *Soul Mountain* he had already experimented successfully with pronouns as composite elements of the protagonist, the writer himself in autobiographical fiction. In *One Man's Bible* he would use the same technique. Again it would be 'cold literature' so that he, the writer as critic, would gain the reward of aesthetic fulfilment in the process of writing. 'You' is the writer of the present relating the story of 'him' of thirty years ago. This use of pronouns provides Gao Xingjian, as the author, adequate distance for objectively and critically scrutinising himself: his psyche, motives and behaviour during that period of

social dysfunction that engulfed China for a decade and extending into more recent times, the Tiananmen events of 1989.

In Hong Kong on the eve of the return of the island to China, 'you' encounters a Jewish woman he had met briefly in Beijing a decade or so earlier. In between episodes of passionate lovemaking, she encourages him to talk about those times and he begins to ponder the fact that the Chinese, including himself, have repressed their memories of the Cultural Revolution, whereas the Jews are anxious to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. Rape and prostitution are emblematic and pervade this novel, and reinforce Gao's contention that the Chinese people had themselves perpetrated the untold sufferings of the Cultural Revolution. He argues that in accounts of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese population as a whole is portrayed as victim and thus individuals are exonerated of their complicity as perpetrators of the wanton human cruelty of those times. By unscrupulously recounting his own experiences of those times in fiction, Gao argues that fear of not being one of the masses (and the terrible consequences) had cowed individuals to obey the masters who controlled the masses.

In China since the beginning of the twentieth century individuals had willingly sacrificed themselves for patriotic reasons. From the beginning of China's modern literature, the mentality of self-sacrifice for the nation had been enshrined in writings. Widely acknowledged as China's greatest writer of the time, Lu Xun (1881-1936) through his powerful writings urged his countrymen not to be onlookers, but to actively participate in bringing about social and political reforms. He himself abandoned writing creatively so that he could devote himself to writing social and political criticism. As Lu Xun made this conscious decision to abandon literature, he wrote a series of prose poems collected under the title *Yecao* (Wild Grass, 1927). The poet is described in various metaphors: a corpse that had ripped out his own heart and eaten it, the son of man whose pain would be even more excruciating than that of the Son of God at the crucifixion, and someone who has been buried alive.

Gao states categorically that he does not have the talent for politics and that his commitment is to solely literature. He rejects

Lu Xun's path as one he should take. He admits that he is simply a frail person standing in the margins of society as an onlooker, an observer. Gao's notion of 'cold literature' articulates a strong religiosity in its attitude towards literature. He notes that his notion of literature has existed throughout the ages and in all cultures, it is not something he has invented but he feels the need to remind people of it in the age of crass consumerism of the present. The following provides some indication of the extent of Gao's notion of literature, of which 'cold literature' is central (excerpted from his Nobel Lecture).

Literature is not concerned with politics but is purely a matter of the individual. It is the gratification of the intellect together with an observation, a review, of what has been experienced, reminiscences and feelings or the portrayal of a state of mind.

The so-called writer is nothing more than someone speaking or writing, whether or not he is listened to or read is for others to choose. The writer is not a hero acting on orders from the people, nor is he worthy of worship as an idol, and certainly he is not a criminal or enemy of the people. He is at times victimised along with his writings simply because of the needs of others' needs. When the authorities need to manufacture a few enemies to divert attention, writers become sacrifices, and worse still writers who have been duped actually think it is a great honour to be sacrificed....

Literature remains an indispensable form of human activity in which both the reader and the writer are engaged of their own volition. Hence literature has no duty to the masses.

This sort of literature that has recovered its innate character can be called cold literature. It exists simply because humankind seeks a purely spiritual activity beyond the gratification of material desires. This sort of literature of course did not come into being today. However, whereas in the past it mainly had to fight oppressive political forces and social customs, today it has to do battle with the subversive commercial values of consumerist society. For it to exist depends on the willingness to endure the loneliness.... Cold

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

literature is literature that will flee to survive; it is literature that refuses to be strangled by society in its quest for spiritual salvation. If a race cannot accommodate this sort of non-utilitarian literature, it is not merely a misfortune for the writer but a tragedy for the race.