

Gao Xingjian's Fiction in the Context of Chinese Intellectual and Literary History

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Gao Xingjian came to prominence in Chinese literary circles soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) with the publication of his book *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (1981 repr. 1982; *Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*)¹. Almost simultaneously his plays *Juedui xin hao* (1982; *Alarm Signal*)² and *Chezhan* (1983; *Bus Stop*)³ were staged as “experimental theatre” at the Capital Theatre in Beijing. In particular, *Bus Stop* was confronting and unfamiliar, and intriguing because it was totally different from the highly politicised plays of the previous decades, and wildly enthusiastic audiences acclaimed it as “absurdist”, “avant-garde” and “modernist”. After several performances in early 1983 *Bus Stop* was banned and Gao Xingjian became one of the first casualties of the Oppose Spiritual Pollution Campaign. He was denounced for promoting the “modernist literature” of the capitalist West, his *Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* also banned, and he was barred from publishing until the campaign ended late in that year.⁴

¹ Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House.

² Collected in *Gao Xingjian xiju ji* (Beijing: The Masses Publishing House, 1985), and translated as *Absolute Signal* by Shiao-Ling Yu in Shiao-Ling Yu ed., *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979-1989* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1996).

³ Collected in *Gao Xingjian xiju ji* (Beijing: The Masses Publishing House, 1985), and translated as *The Bus Stop* by Shiao-Ling Yu in Shiao-Ling Yu, ed., *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979-1989* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1996); also translated as *Bus Stop* by Kimberly Besio in “*Bus Stop*: A Lyrical Comedy on Life” in Haiping Yan, ed., *Theatre and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁴ Cf. the detailed discussions of Gao Xingjian’s plays contained in Henry Y. H. Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000) and Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004). See also the two major collections of critical writings on Gao Xingjian’s plays and fiction: Kwok-kan Tam, ed., *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (The Chinese University Press, 2001), and *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 14.2 (Fall, 2002).

Gao Xingjian's writings began to reappear in literary magazines in 1984, and in 1985 he was able to publish two major works, a novella *You zhi gezi jiao Hongchunr* (*A Pigeon Named Red Beak*)⁵ and *Gao Xingjian xiju ji* (*Collected Plays by Gao Xingjian*)⁶. However, when his play *Yeren* (*Wild Man*)⁷ was staged that year the actors were separately advised against performing in future plays written by him, and in 1986 his play *Bi'an* (*The Other Shore*)⁸ was banned at rehearsal. It was clear that even while exercising self-censorship in his writings he would still be harassed by the authorities.

In late 1987 Gao Xingjian travelled to Europe, and by the end of the year he had settled in Paris where, by selling his Chinese ink paintings, he was able to resume writing. Finally, at the age of forty-seven, he was able to write with the freedom he had for so long craved, and he wrote plays, fiction, and critical essays at a rate symptomatic of one obsessed. His writings are informed by his profound reflections on human history, society, and the individual, and he is outspoken in expressing his views as a public intellectual. The essays collected in *Meiyou zhuyi* (1996; *Without Isms*)⁹ contain incisive comments on 20th century China's history, literature, and aesthetics, and constitute the intellectual foundations of Gao Xingjian's creative work. His plays that examine aspects of human psychology and behaviour, while experimenting with various techniques to satisfy his creative self, involve other people: the performers, the stage personnel, and the audience. However, his monumental novels *Lingshan* (1990; *Soul Mountain*)¹⁰ and *Yige ren de shengjing* (1999; *One Man's Bible*)¹¹ are the outpourings of the self of the solitary writer, Gao Xingjian. In these novels he has 563 pages and 456 pages respectively for the full expression of his self, both as an intellectual and as a creative writer.

Labels such as "modernist", "avant-garde" and "absurdist" over-insinuate Western influences and, because they have the effect of simplifying and generalising, they tend to hijack understanding the

⁵ Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1985.

⁶ Beijing: The Masses Publishing House, 1985.

⁷ Collected in *Gao Xingjian xiju ji* (Beijing: The Masses Publishing House, 1985), and translated as *Wild Man* by Bruno Roubcek in "Wild Man: A Contemporary Chinese Spoken Drama" in *Asian Theater Journal*, 7.2 (1990).

⁸ Collected in *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong* (Taipei: Dijiao Publishing House, 1995), and translated as *The Other Shore* by Gilbert C. F. Fong in *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press of Hong Kong, 1999). See also Fong's "Introduction: Marginality, Zen, and Omnipotent Theatre", to his translation of Gao Xingjian, *Snow* in August (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003).

⁹ Hong Kong: Cosmos, 1996. (Hereafter MYZY.)

¹⁰ Taipei: Lianjing Publishing House, 1990. Translated by Mabel Lee as *Soul Mountain* (Sydney, New York & London, 2000).

¹¹ Taipei: Lianjing Publishing House, 1999. Translated by Mabel Lee as *One Man's Bible* (New York, Sydney & London, 2002).

uniqueness of Gao Xingjian's achievements. Indeed, he is well read in Chinese and Western literature, and he is fluent in Chinese and French, but the bulk of his prolific writings, and certainly all of his fiction, is written in the Chinese language. By identifying the genealogical origins of his novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* this paper will consider how Gao Xingjian has taken the novel to a new height of development both in terms of Chinese literature and world literature, and how his ongoing explorations of the self and the individual have established him as a thinker and public intellectual who addresses cutting edge issues that are of global significance.

Storytelling has its origins in the oral transmission of myths and legends. Then, as urban populations expanded, professional storytellers began to appear in local marketplaces alongside the singers, actors, musicians, jugglers, acrobats and other entertainers. Popular fiction that evolved from the anonymous multi-authored repertoires of marketplace storytellers occurs in all literary traditions. However, *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* do not share this ancestry. Instead, it is maintained here that these novels are genealogically linked with late-Ming literati autobiographies that in the early-Qing dynasty transformed into fictionalised autobiography, i.e., the autobiographical novel, a genre that Cao Xueqin took to a high point of development in the mid-18th century with his *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*).

It is common for the modern novel to contain varying amounts of autobiographical detail. However *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* are single-mindedly and unabashedly autobiographical. They are creations specifically designed to realise the author's intense autobiographical impulse by telling truthfully and fully the story of the author's own multi-dimensional self. At one level, these novels incorporate elements of Gao Xingjian's creative agility in moving across genres (plays, fiction, poetry), and using different media (language, painting, cinema): they are art created in the medium of the Chinese language. At another level, they incorporate Gao Xingjian's genius in creating a narrative technique that allows for a very rich portrayal of the self, i.e. his own self, that he is intent on exploring. And, at yet another level, and of equal importance, these two novels incorporate the bold pronouncements of Gao Xingjian's intellectual self that reveal his keen insights on human psychology and behaviour and, above all, his firm belief and uncompromising stance regarding the integrity, freedom, autonomy, and independence of the individual. This stance for the individual is reiterated in many of the essays of *Without Isms*, and is reinforced artistically and most forcefully in his play *Taowang*

(1990; *Fleeing*)¹² and in his novel *One Man's Bible*. It is in this regard that Gao Xingjian's writings demonstrate their genealogical origins in the late-Ming literati autobiographies that, driven by the autobiographical impulse of their authors, represent both the affirmation and the celebration of the self.

In traditional China biography and autobiography were the domain of the Confucian literati. Autobiography was considered a sub-genre of biography and therefore bound by the conventions of historicity and written in the classical language, both of which served to repress the observations of the subjective self. The Chan Buddhist masters were not constrained by Confucian conventions, and in the 13th century wrote the first autobiographies that were subjective narratives. In confronting their own mortality they felt driven to write accounts of their personal struggle to attain enlightenment in order to encourage the young monks. These accounts were presented as sermons and were written in the language of the marketplace story-tellers as was the custom. The erudition of the Chan monks and their clever use of language stimulated literati interest in spiritual issues and resulted in frequent exchanges between the monks and the literati, but Confucian reticence continued to prevent the literati from writing of their personal experiences. It was not until the 15th century, during the late-Ming dynasty, when Wang Yangming (1472-1528) successfully integrated Buddhist existential concerns into orthodox Confucian thinking, that the way was opened for literati articulation of the subjective perceiving self.

The outcome was a surge of individualism that came from the awakened awareness of the self amongst the literati. However, at the same time there emerged powerful merchants who were able to purchase the limited positions available in the bureaucracy, thus leaving many literati excluded and unable to fulfil their designated Confucian role of serving the state and society. This inhospitable socio-economic and political reality prevented literati realisation of the awakened self. Their feelings of impotence, frustration, being born at the wrong time, alienation and despair mutated into an autobiographical impulse, i.e., the need to confirm and celebrate the self in writing.¹³

The autobiographies of literati such as Tang Yin (1470-1524), Xu Wei (1521-1593) and Li Zhi (1527-1602) upheld the individual and extolled the self, and their exuberant writings leads Pei-yi Wu to denote the period

¹² Collected in *Gao Xingjian xiju liuzhong*, and translated by Gregory B. Lee as *Fugitives*, in Gregory B. Lee ed., *Chinese Writing and Exile* (Chicago: Centre for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, 1993).

¹³ Cf. Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

1565-1680 “a golden age of autobiography”. The golden age of autobiography came to an abrupt end because Wang Yangming’s emphasis on the individual was blamed for the decline of the Ming dynasty. The situation was further exacerbated after the Qing conquest of China. The interpretation of the Confucian Classics by Zhu Xi (1130-1200), with its emphasis on practical issues, was installed as the basis of the state civil service examinations. Also the draconian censorship regime that was introduced caused the literati to turn away from explorations of the self and existential issues to the safety of philological enquiry and textual analysis.¹⁴

However, Martin W. Huang observes that while there was a “decline in formal autobiographical writings, there was a steady rise of autobiographical tendencies in the novel” (*Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, 1995). He adds that the mid-18th century novels *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Rulin waishi (The Scholars)* are “marked by explicit autobiographical concerns”. In his view, during the early-Qing dynasty, the late-Ming autobiographical impulse that was characterised by “self-obsession and self-celebration” was able to survive under the guise of fiction because fiction did not enjoy high esteem as a literary genre. As the hostile cultural environment of the time made it difficult for open assertion of the individual self it was necessary “to hide behind the mask of a fictional other (or others)”.¹⁵

Soul Mountain and *One Man's Bible* clearly and consistently articulate Gao Xingjian’s “self-obsession and self-celebration”. In his 2000 Nobel Lecture he tells that it was during those bleak years of the Cultural Revolution that he realised the importance of literature to humanity: when he was denied self-expression, he was able to achieve self-affirmation through writing. The intensity of Gao Xingjian’s autobiographical urge reflected in these two novels about himself stem from psychological trauma on a number of fronts. In order to obtain closure he was driven to write about himself. His mother had volunteered to work on a farm and had died from a tragic drowning, his father’s health deteriorated during his time in a labour camp and he died from lung cancer not long after being exonerated, and Gao Xingjian himself had confronted death from a wrong diagnosis of the same disease in 1983. He had witnessed cruel killings, physical and psychological suffering, as well the distortion of human behaviour induced by the fear of the individual against the collective. Above all, he was acutely aware that the perceptions of his self were being eroded by Mao Zedong’s rigorous measures to annihilate the self of the individual.

¹⁴ Cf. Martin W. Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-century Chinese Novel* (Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

However, while the intensity of his awareness of self in the context of a hostile external reality genealogically links *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* with the spirit of late-Ming literati autobiography, born into the 20th century Gao Xingjian was also exposed to the intellectual and literary developments that had taken place since late-Ming times in China, and to those that had taken place in the West.

Fiction, more than any other genre, provides the writer with the greatest freedom for the imagination. In the case of telling one's own story, i.e. autobiography, the masking effect of fiction can protect the anonymity of others and, importantly, can psychologically dull or deflect the direct pain of guilt, shame, humiliation, regret and recrimination when the writer is obsessed with revealing even the less noble thoughts and actions of the self. In other words, the writing of autobiographical fiction is able to alleviate, even exorcise, lingering wounds of trauma in the psyche. Above all, it was the trauma of his awakened self gradually being snuffed out that fuelled Gao Xingjian's autobiographical impulse. His sense of self and the urge for self-expression in writing had been irrepressible from childhood and by the time he started university at the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing, he was already an obsessive writer.

When Cao Xueqin wrote his *Dream of the Red Chamber* it had little prospect of publication because publishers, even in those times, were more interested in popular literature that would return profits. This meant that he had essentially written the novel for himself, but he was at least able to circulate the manuscript amongst friends. Gao Xingjian wrote *Soul Mountain* with the clear knowledge that it had no hope of being published in China so it too was a novel written for the pure gratification of his creative self. However, because it would have been too dangerous, he did not have the option of circulating the manuscript amongst friends in China. *Soul Mountain* was eventually published in Taipei in 1990, but prior to his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, less than 200 copies of the book had been sold. So, when he embarked upon writing his second novel, *One Man's Bible*, again it was for his own personal gratification.

Aggressive European and Japanese industrial capitalism began to make inroads on Chinese sovereignty from the mid-19th century, and as the partitioning of China seemed imminent the Chinese intellectual world united under the banner of saving the nation. Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a brilliant propagandist for the reform faction, appropriated fiction to the cause of politics, arguing in his essay "Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi"

(1902; *On Fiction and Control of the Masses*)¹⁶ that because fiction was read even by women and children and therefore highly influential in moulding people's thinking, it should be utilised to promote political reforms aimed at saving China. His magazine *Xin xiaoshuo* (*New Fiction*), published in Japan, was avidly read by Chinese youth who were studying there in large numbers at the time. Amongst them were Lu Xun (1881-1936), Yu Dafu (1896-1945), Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), Mao Dun (1896-1981) and Guo Moruo (1892-1978), and they had arrived in Japan at the height of a Nietzsche (1844-1900) craze in the Japanese intellectual world. A decade or so later, during the May Fourth period (1915-1921), these writers would establish the foundations of China's modern literature.¹⁷

Radicalised by their experience in Japan of rubbing shoulders with leading political refugees from China, these May Fourth writers were fired with a missionary zeal to save the country. And, intoxicated by the notion of the strong individual as epitomised in Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, they published their translations of parts of Zarathustra in the avant-garde journals that fuelled the high emotions and student demonstrations of those times. These writers were worshipped as heroes by Chinese youth and, with the exception of the enigmatic Lu Xun who was a decade older than the others, they believed that their writings could help save the nation. The classical language of China's past literature was abandoned, as China's new literature, seemingly unknown to their authors, was recruited to the modernisation of Chinese thinking. China's modern literature was written in the vernacular language and dealt with the social and political issues of contemporary life. Many of the May Fourth writers read and translated Western and Japanese authors, and were inspired to experiment with new literary techniques. However for them literature was always secondary to their concerns about the fate of the nation.¹⁸

In terms of historical time Gao Xingjian is relatively close to the May Fourth writers and, like them, he read extensively in Western literature. However he confesses to a lack of affinity with writers of that era, and throughout his writings he consistently challenges the spirit of May Fourth because, in his view, embedded within that spirit is Nietzsche's ideal of the

¹⁶ See Mabel Lee, "Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873-1929) and the Literary Revolution of Late-Ch'ing" in A. R. Davis, ed., *Search for Identity: Modern Literature and the Creative Arts in Asia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971).

¹⁷ See Mabel Lee, "Zarathustra's 'Statue': May Fourth Literature and the Appropriation of Nietzsche and Lu Xun", in David Brooks and Brian Kiernan, eds. *Running Wild: Essays, Fictions and Memoirs Presented to Michael Wilding* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture Series No. 22.

¹⁸ Ibid. Also, cf. Gao Xingjian, "Chidao de xiandaizhuyi yu dangjin Zhongguo wexue" (1987; Late Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature) in MYZY, and translated by Mabel Lee in Gao Xingjian, *The Case for Literature* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2006; hereafter CFL).

Superman, the strong heroic individual who would save the nation. For Gao Xingjian, the hero becomes the slave of the collective, and this is how the self of the individual is annihilated. In extreme situations the collective can kill the individual or can induce the individual to commit physical or spiritual suicide.¹⁹

Gao Xingjian declares that the writer is an insignificant person, a bystander who stands at the margins of society and solitarily observes.²⁰ Literature cannot change society. This view of literature is diametrically opposed to that of the May Fourth literary giant Lu Xun who had called upon compatriots to cease being bystanders and instead to participate in bringing about social and political change. Deeply influenced by Nietzsche and driven by his moral duty to save the nation, Lu Xun had consciously sacrificed his creative self.²¹

Accelerating Japanese encroachments on China's territorial sovereignty from the 1920s exerted enormous pressure on writers, as intellectuals, to participate in politics. The call to rally under the flag of patriotism was extremely difficult to resist, particularly for modern Chinese intellectuals whose predecessors for centuries had been conditioned to believe in Confucian morality and ethics that, as a socially privileged class, the welfare of the uneducated masses was their social responsibility. Lu Xun fully recognised the conflict between literature and politics, and articulated this in his essay "Wenyi yu zhengzhi de qitu" (1927; *On the Diverging Paths of Literature and Politics*). However, his public persona was generally ambivalent because of his reluctance to discourage younger writers from becoming involved in politics. Instead, he allowed his creative self to quietly suicide in the surreal ambiguity of his beloved *Yecao* (1927; *Wild Grass*) poems. This collection of prose poems graphically depicts the psychological trauma he experienced after he had decided to abandon creative writing.²² It is Gao Xingjian's opinion that it was a tragedy for Chinese literature that Lu Xun the politician had crushed Lu Xun the writer. Significantly, he argues that while the writer may discuss politics in literature and even to participate in politics, a writer's creative work should

¹⁹ Cf. Gao Xingjian, "Geren de shengyin" (1993), MYZY. Translated as "The Voice of the Individual" by Lena Aspfors and Torbjörn Lodén. *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6 (1995): 71-81, and by Mabel Lee in CFL.

²⁰ See Gao Xingjian, "Wo zhuzhang yizhong lengde wenxue" (1990; I Advocate Cold Literature). This title was subsequently revised to "Lengde wenxue" (Cold Literature) in CFL.

²¹ Cf. Mabel Lee, "Suicide of the Creative Self: the Case of Lu Hsün" in A. R. Davis and A. D. Stefanowska, eds. *Austrina: Essays in Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Founding of the Oriental Society of Australia* (Sydney: Oriental Society of Australia, 1982).

²² *Ibid.*

not be used as a vehicle for promoting political causes, because to do so the writer's voice is subsumed by the voice of the collective.²³

Born in 1940 into a liberal family with a considerable family library that included translations of Western literature, Gao Xingjian was a prolific reader from early childhood. His university major in French literature at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Beijing shaped and gave definition to his habit of self-expression in writing that had been encouraged by his mother from the time he was able to hold a pen. A critical reader, he took a keen interest in the techniques used in Chinese and Western fiction and he began to experiment in his own writings. However, Mao Zedong's guidelines for literary production, and even what could be read, were enforced with ever increasingly greater stringency from the 1950s. Literature was unambiguously called upon to serve politics. Without endangering his life Gao Xingjian could not submit his writings for publication, but being a compulsive writer he continued writing in secret. At the height of the Cultural Revolution he chose to burn all of his accumulated manuscripts, diaries and notes rather than risk having them used as evidence against him.

From the late 1970s, by exercising self-censorship, Gao Xingjian was able to see some of his writings published, although he was constantly harassed by the authorities. It was for self-consolation that in 1982 he began writing *Soul Mountain*, and since relocating to France at the end of 1987 he has been able to write with impunity from the Chinese authorities. Gao argues that pronouns are the most basic names required for the characters of fiction, and he has demonstrated that the use of pronouns rather than characters with names allows him to write the autobiographical fiction that he was driven to write. Some of his experiments in narrative technique were first carried out in his short stories and then transposed to the pages of his novel *Soul Mountain* so that at times the indelible traces of certain short stories can be vaguely sensed in the novel.²⁴

Gao Xingjian encountered a serious problem when it came to writing narrative prose in the Chinese language. At times dialogue and soliloquy are used in *Soul Mountain*, but Gao Xingjian needed a narrative prose that would both sustain the long novel he had in mind and satisfy his acute sensibility to the Chinese language. For him writing begins with a search for the music of language and he strives in all of his works to write in a

²³ See Gao Xingjian, "The Voice of the Individual, and also Mabel Lee, "On Nietzsche and Modern 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).

²⁴ Cf. the short stories collected in Gao Xingjian, *Gei wo laoye mai yugan* (Taipei: Lianhe Literature Publishing House, 1987, enlarged edition 2001), author-selected stories translated by Mabel Lee as *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (New York, Sydney, London: HarperCollins, 2004).

language that will stand the test of being read out aloud. In his essay "Xiandai Hanyu yu wenxue xiezu" (1996; *The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation*)²⁵, he describes the problem of the language used in modern Chinese writings, as well as the rigorous methods he adopted in order to overcome this problem.

In his analysis, the grammar of Western languages had been imported into the Chinese language through the vast quantities of "direct" translations of Western writings in the early decades of the twentieth century at the very time China's modern literature came into being. This had resulted in the Europeanization of the written language, and divested it of its musicality. While the May Fourth writers were able to neutralise foreign sentence patterns in their writings because of their training in the classical language, this has not been the case for later generations of writers. Referring to the huge linguistic differences between Chinese and Western languages he declares that in his writings he follows one basic principle: "It is I speaking the language and not the language speaking me." He is intent on finding a language that will allow him to articulate his perceptions and thoughts with greater accuracy and to prevent the language from manipulating him. To do this he turns to the spoken language of everyday life to rediscover the language. At a practical level this involves listening intently to what he writes and discarding sentences if he fails to hear music in them, and, importantly, making first drafts by speaking into a tape recorder.

He observes that any language with sound has to be actualised in a flow of linear time, as in the case of music, and it is this that ultimately limits linguistic expression. Yet people's perceptions and subconscious are simultaneously multi-directional. While music and drama can be polyphonic, it is impossible for literary composition to transcend a linear flow, and if language resorts to description, explanation and analysis, then the process of perceptions is interrupted. Art in language, he maintains, must recognise what it can, or cannot, do in order to be taken to its full potential. In tracing psychological activities, he dispenses with the static language of description, explanation and analysis, and relates only his perceptions. Furthermore, he says, if the writer can create certain language contexts, the meaning beyond the words can create a tension that forms a mood, an atmosphere, or a psychological space, so that despite being linear it is possible for language to provide a certain psychological space.

The inherent nature of language, he argues, makes it unsuitable for description: it is not a plastic art and is incapable of reproducing images. The basic units of language are words, and words themselves are

²⁵ See MYZY and CFL.

abstractions of concepts, it is only through prompting or suggestion that language can evoke associations. For example, faces and scenery defy accurate description, rather than visual images what are presented are only impressions.

In seeking an appropriate language for what he was driven to write, Gao Xingjian gained insights by closely examining the language of pre-modern Chinese writings. He notes that classical Chinese poetry and lyrics do not differentiate tense, and what are presented can be considered as psychological states that actually transcend both time and space. He seeks clarity in the Chinese language, and to achieve this, he eliminates adjectives and attributives where possible, and separates into short sentences any indispensable components from the principle clause. In compound sentences he tries to do away with conjunctions so that the relationship between clauses are hidden. He discards non-essential elements such as adverbial and verbal suffixes and he makes every character perform its full function. If a monosyllabic verb can carry out the same function as a disyllabic or polysyllabic verb he will choose the monosyllabic verb.

Gao Xingjian's explorations in language led him to an important realisation. As tenses are not clearly distinguished in Chinese, the past, present, future, memories or imagination, feelings and reflections, reality or possibility or fantasy, do not have morphological indicators and all constitute the direct speech of this instant. Informed by this realisation his creative works, including his lengthy novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*, read like they are happening right now and succeed in transcending the limitations of time and space.²⁶

Soul Mountain is structured around Gao Xingjian's seven-month journey to remote areas of the Chinese hinterland following the banning of *Bus Stop*. When he learned from reliable sources that he was to be sent to one of the notorious prison farms in Qinghai province, he did not wait to be sent and promptly fled Beijing. He travelled to the source of the Yangtze River then followed it down to the sea, cutting himself off from having to negotiate the intrusive politics endemic in the national capital. What he observed of non-Han Chinese culture as well as marginalised Chinese subcultures provided him with abundant material for his ponderings on human life, society, history and culture, and he tells of these in the voice of the first person male narrator, "I". However, "I" experiences loneliness and the need for someone with whom to share his thoughts and to alleviate his loneliness. To this end, he ingeniously creates the character "You", who being the reflection of "I" has identical intellect, concerns, tastes, and is

²⁶ Ibid.

therefore a perfect travelling companion. Like "I", "You" also experiences loneliness, and "She" is created.

When "I" and "You" become too alike, "You" is made to turn his back on "I", and becomes the character "He". Gao Xingjian's technique of using the pronouns "You" and "He" provides him with the space for objectivity in probing the psychology of the narrator "I", alias the author Gao Xingjian, who is intent on telling the story of his self. The subjective perspectives of the pronouns "I", "You" and "He" form a composite autobiography that encompasses multiple dimensions of the narrating self of the author.

Through the characters "You" and "She" male-female relationships are explored. "You" is a male perceiving subject, and there is no attempt to introduce a female perspective into the narrative. He does not see this as his responsibility because in this novel he is totally preoccupied with gratifying his autobiographical impulse. "She" always remains a shadowy character, a mere foil for exposing the self of the author. Soon after the appearance of "She", "You" is pleased to find that his primeval instinct of lust for women has returned and, moreover, that he is still able to attract and seduce the opposite sex. The implication here is that "You" had for whatever reason, been sexually impotent. "You" satisfies his re-awakened lust with "She", and this is portrayed in images that are sensuous, tactile, and kinaesthetically rhythmic.

"You" appreciates the comfort and orgasmic pleasure he can derive from the female body, but refuses to be seduced by a relationship with any person that will mean relinquishing the freedom and independence of his self. The male sex drive, male potency, is used as a symbol of celebration of the male self in this autobiographical novel, and this symbol would be taken to extremes in *One Man's Bible*.

The process of writing *Soul Mountain* may be said to have gratified the aesthetic sensibilities of Gao Xingjian's creative self as a writer and provided him with both the language and techniques he sought for continuing with his autobiographical writings. His autobiographical impulse remained as strong as ever and demanded the gratification of his intellectual self. He would do this in his novel *One Man's Bible* that he wrote over the three-year period from 1996 to 1998. It was following the violent repression of students in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 by the Chinese authorities that Gao Xingjian wrote the play *Fleeing* in response to a request by an unnamed American theatre. When the theatre suggested changes because there were no student heroes he withdrew the manuscript.²⁷ The play explores the dynamics of the individual against the

²⁷ See Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu *Taowang*" in MYZY and CFL.

collective, regardless of how noble the cause (e.g. democracy), and defines the general thrust his intellectual preoccupations had taken. For the individual to preserve the integrity, independence and autonomy of the self it is essential to flee the collective. The motif of fleeing thereafter becomes a recurring motif in the series of essays that he subsequently published as a collection in *Without Isms* and in his novel *One Man's Bible* that he began to write at the same time.

The foundation of Gao Xingjian's aesthetics is firmly based on the portrayal of truth by a male perceiving subject who is the author himself. In writing *One Man's Bible* he is cognisant of the ego interference factor. He, too, had personally suffered during the Cultural Revolution, but he did not want to allow his ego to take control of the writing, so that he would be portrayed as a victim. He is adamant in his refusal to distort subjective truth in order to exonerate himself from complicity in perpetrating the gross human tragedies of that decade when Mao Zedong's pronouncements were considered sacrosanct and imposed upon a population that had been rendered docile and obedient through fear and punishment, and through their desire to serve the nation and the Chinese people.²⁸

In *One Man's Bible* Gao Xingjian provides a psychological space for objective scrutiny of his self of the present and of the past, again by using pronouns. "You" is the narrating self of the present who is prevailed upon by Margarethe to talk about his life during the Cultural Revolution. At first "You" is reluctant to revisit those past memories but once started, it is if floodgates have opened as "You" tells the story of "He". Despite the pain of recalling those times, and writing truthfully about them, Gao Xingjian knows that this is his only path to self-redemption, the only way to free himself from the grip of his intense autobiographical drive.

The sexual potency of "You" is symbolic of Gao Xingjian's celebration of the self, his male self, as he gratifies his autobiographical impulse from the vantage point of the present. This contrasts starkly with the experiences of "He" when the self was repressed during the Cultural Revolution. Sex is a basic human drive, and it would seem that Gao Xingjian had chosen this as a metaphor for several levels of human interaction. The sexual impotence of "You" hinted at in *Soul Mountain* is to some extent explained in *One Man's Bible*, and the sexual potency of "You" of the present is self-affirming, celebratory, and symbolic of Gao Xingjian's freedom as a French citizen to write *One Man's Bible* and thus exorcising the demon within that demanded he write the story of his self. The youthful "He" of those abnormal times is initiated into a life-affirming and exciting, but illicit, sexual relationship with the promiscuous Lin. The

²⁸ See Gao Xingjian, "The Voice of the Individual", in MYZY and CFL.

fictionalised representations of women who had meant a great deal to "He", and that linger in the memory of "You", resurface as Gao Xingjian tries to relate his inner mind of those times. For example, on their first meeting, abject terror induces He and Qian to engage in sex to comfort one another. This speaks much for human behaviour when there is uncertainty of life or confrontation with death. "He" also mentions on one occasion of resorting to masturbation: the subtext is that it was too difficult and dangerous for him to have a sexual relationship at that time. So fearing adverse repercussions, "He" refuses to offer the sexual comfort sought by Xiao Xiao and later, Sun Huirong who turn to him when they are desperate and traumatised by their confrontation with a future of systemic sexual abuse in the workplace to which they had been assigned. Both women in fact become helpless victims of continual raping.

The violation of the female body is a powerful image used by Gao Xingjian that reinforces the extent of the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. The rape of the female body simultaneously symbolises the violation of the self of the author, and that of the Chinese population by the wanton megalomaniacal politics of Mao Zedong.

Rape is projected onto the consciousness of "You" through Margarethe who reveals that when she was thirteen an artist had raped her. She confesses that while fearful of the man, she could not help herself from continuing to visit him. It was only when she encountered the school friend who had accompanied her on her first visits to the artist and saw herself reflected in the other girl's eyes that she realised he was also raping the girl and stopped going again. Margarethe is Jewish, and for her the Holocaust and the continued persecution of the Jews is constantly at the forefront of her mind. Her presence in *One Man's Bible* and her being raped as an innocent child, juxtaposed on the story of "He" is a powerful indictment of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution.

The novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* played a major role in Gao Xingjian's winning the Nobel Prize in 2000. This was the first time in a century that the Prize had been awarded to a body of writings in the Chinese language, and has established Gao Xingjian's position of primary importance in the history of world literature, Chinese literature, and Chinese fiction.

¹ This paper was presented at the International Symposium on Gao Xingjian held in conjunction with the launch of the "Gao Xingjian Experience" exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum in 2005.