

During a recent visit to China, Bob van der Linden read Gao Xingjiang's novels: *Soul Mountain* (1990) and *One Man's Bible* (1999). In 2000, Gao was the first Chinese ever to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Yet, few of the Chinese van der Linden met knew of Gao's existence and were surprised to hear that a Chinese had won this prestigious prize. In this essay he looks at why Gao's work is banned in a country which annually regrets the absence of Chinese among the Nobel Prize winners and, with the 2008 Olympics just months away, is so eager for international recognition as a world civilisation and power.

# Individuality, literature and censorship: *Gao Xingjiang and China*

BOB VAN DER LINDEN

Gao Xingjiang's own life story provided the inspiration for his novels and it certainly remains amazing. Born in 1940, he studied French in Beijing and subsequently became a professional French and English translator (of Samuel Beckett for example). His career as a writer began in the 1960s but he burned all his early manuscripts at the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for fear that they could be used as evidence against him and might make his life in the countryside (where he was sent for 're-education' during the 1970s) even worse. As a member of the Chinese Association of Writers, Gao visited Europe (Paris) for the first time in 1979. One year later, he became a screenwriter and playwright for the Beijing's People's Art Theatre and subsequently gained a reputation as a pioneer of absurdist drama. Gao was the first to introduce the latest developments in literary theory and practice to the Chinese public and to redefine China's literary heritage, so it was apposite to the times. His public criticism of the Chinese government, however, brought him under state scrutiny. Consequently, when he visited Europe again in 1987, he decided to live in exile in Paris. He took French citizenship and sustained himself successfully as a painter. Following the publication of his political play about the Tiananmen Square massacre, *Fugitives* (1989), the Chinese government banned his work (which ever since has been published in Hong Kong and Taiwan).

## A meditation on the human spirit

In 1983, Gao was arrested and faced being sent to a prison farm. His plans to leave Beijing for southwest China became concrete following a misdiagnosis with lung cancer. Having confronted death, this experience left him feeling reborn and he resolutely decided to live life to the full. He began a 5-month journey from Beijing to Sichuan province and from there followed the Yangtze-river to the coast. His flight became the basis for *Soul Mountain*, which equally can be read as a meditation on the human spirit confronted with societal oppression. As his English translator, Mabel Lee (University of Sydney), writes in the introduction to the book:

*Soul Mountain is a literary response to the devastation of the self of the individual by the primitive human urge for the warmth and security of an other, or others, in other words by socialized life. The existence of an other resolves the problem of loneliness but brings with it anxieties for the individual, for inherent in any relationship is, inevitably, some form of power struggle. This is the existential dilemma confronting the individual, in relationships with parents, partners, family, friends and larger collective groups. Human history abounds with cases of the individual being induced by force or ideological persuasion to submit to the power of the collective; the surrender of the self to the collective eventually becomes habit, norm convention and tradition, and this phenomenon is not unique to any one culture.*

The novel is full of melancholy for the past (stories from ancient Chinese history, visits to temples, monasteries, archaeological sites etc.) as well as for the 'authentic' and 'exotic' ('dirty' folks songs, rituals, shamans etc.), which Gao finds particularly among the ethnic minority peoples. On the whole, *Soul Mountain* deals with a world that, according to the author, was much destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and will be even more so in the near future, by, for example, the Three Gorges Dam in the Yangtze and by the ever-growing presence of the Han Chinese who today are to be found everywhere 'there is money to be made' (pp.242-3). Also revealing in this context is Gao's description of the few remaining pandas wandering through southwest China's ever shrinking forests wearing electronic transmitters.

Somewhat confusingly, the characters in Gao's novels are singular pronouns. Thus in *Soul Mountain* the authorial self is dissected into 'I', 'you', 'she' and 'he', who together make up the protagonist, while in *One Man's Bible* 'you' stands for the contemporary exiled author and 'he' for the author at the time of the Cultural Revolution. *One Man's Bible* is located in 1996 Hong Kong, where the protagonist (the author) is present for the staging of one of his plays. The narrative, addressed to his current German-Jewish lover, is a fictionalised account of the author's youth and, above all, of the Kafkaesque anxieties of the Cultural Revolution, during which Gao played the three different roles of political activist, victim and silent observer. Undeniably these experiences made him into the individual writer he is. As he puts it himself:

*You absolutely refuse to be a sacrifice, refuse to be a plaything or a sacrificial object for others, refuse to seek compassion from others, refuse to repent, refuse to go mad and trample everyone else to death. You look upon the world with a mind that is the epitome of ordinariness, and in exactly the same way you look at yourself. Nothing inspires fear, amazement, disappointment, or wild expectation, hence, you avoid frustration. If you want to enjoy being upset, you get upset, then revert to this supremely ordinary, smiling, and contented you (p. 198).*



## The fate of the writer in exile

For Gao Xingjiang literature can only be the voice of the solitary individual writing in exile, away from the harsh daily political reality:

His sense of writing in exile came particularly to the fore when, in his earlier mentioned play *Fugitives*, he chose to portray the 1989 student protest movement (which led to the Tiananmen Square massacre) as naïve rather than heroic. This naturally led to criticism from the students but at least he remained true to his commitment to literary truth above politics and showed no illusions about changing the world through his writings. All the same, I wonder if Gao (like the well-known intellectual and political activist Edward Said) does not confuse his living and writing in exile with 'the actual state of every critical humanist in opposition to the professional expert who serves power while pretending detachment' (Linden 2007). As he also wrote himself in relation to this:

*When writing is not a livelihood or when one is so engrossed in writing that one forgets why one is writing and for whom one is writing it becomes a necessity and one will write compulsively and give birth to literature. It is this non-utilitarian aspect of literature that is fundamental to literature. That the writing of literature has become a profession is an ugly outcome of the division of labour in modern society and a very bitter fruit for the writer (Xingjian 2000).*

In his Nobel Lecture, *The Case for Literature*, Gao emphasises that despite being an atheist, he always has had 'reverence for the unknowable' (Xingjian 2000). Literature has a spiritual value for him and, accordingly, the search for the 'soul mountain' is a metaphor for all spiritual striving. Though, unlike Tan Twan Eng in his brilliant debut *The Gift of Rain* (Eng 2007), Gao's novels do not have predestination, as opposed to free will, as a major theme, there certainly exhibit a sense of fate. This is, in part, because his detached writing style, with pronouns functioning as characters, reflects his notion of the individual in exile. Alternately, in Eng's novel the theme of predestination (i.e. the spiritual East!) together with the 'exotic' setting of colonial Malaya intentionally gather to the Western market. In contrast, Gao's mourning for the 'authentic' (in denunciation of progress and practicality) and overall spirituality (if not acceptance of fate) in *Soul Mountain* seem more in line with the current Romantic but 'imperial gaze' among the (mostly young) Han Chinese towards the country's ethnic minority peoples than with a conscious commercial choice.

#### Lost in translation?

Towards the end of *Soul Mountain*, Gao Xingjian writes:

Because of his use of pronouns as characters, numerous details from Chinese history and culture, philosophical 'excursions' etc., Gao's novels (and especially *Soul Mountain*) are not easy to read. One also wonders how much got lost in the no doubt excellent translations by Mabel Lee and to what extent these novels should be read in Chinese to be fully appreciated. Be that as it may, in English one can already sense the uniqueness of Gao's autobiographical fiction. Hopefully his novels will soon be available in China, for any world civilisation should at least allow a niche for a creative individual in search of new developments in language.

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"This is not a novel!"

"Then what is it?" he asks.

"A novel must have a complete story."

*He says he has told many stories, some with endings and others without.*

*"They're all fragments without any consequence, the author doesn't know how to organize connected episodes."*

[...]

*"No matter how you tell a story, there must be a protagonist. In a long work of fiction there must be several important characters, but this work of yours...?"*

*"But surely the I, you, she and he in the book are characters?" he asks.*

*"These are just different pronouns to change the point of view of the narrative. This can't replace the portrayal of characters. These pronouns of yours, even if they are characters, don't have clear images they're hardly described at all."*

*He says he isn't painting portraits (p. 452-3).*

*The so-called writer is nothing more than someone speaking or writing and whether 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 other's needs. When the authorities need to manufacture a few enemies to divert people's attention, writers become sacrifices and worse still writers who have been duped actually think it is a great honour to be sacrificed (Xingjian 2000).*