

Talking with Gao Xingjian in Brussels

By Trevor Carolan

(Translation, Perrine Angly)¹

In 2000, Gao Xingjian, author of the acclaimed *Soul Mountain*, became the first Chinese writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. It was a stormy accolade. During the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution, Gao spent five years in a Maoist political re-education camp, and in 1989 was received in France as a political refugee. The implications of awarding the Nobel laureateship to a Chinese exile living in Paris were a clear rebuke to China's ambitions toward international cultural legitimacy, a demonstration of global misgivings at Beijing's failure to come to terms with its totalitarian view of human rights after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

Gao took it all in stride. Born at Ganzhou in eastern Jiangxi province in 1940, he was raised in a family sympathetic to Western idea. His father, a banking official, enjoyed classical Chinese ink-brush painting, and his Christian-educated mother worked with local theatre productions. As Gao remarked during his Nobel Acceptance Speech, his mother also encouraged him as an 8-year old in a daily writing practice. As a result, from boyhood Gao showed an interest in a variety of expressive forms, and literature, painting and theatre have been essential components of his work as a mature artist.

Gao specialized in French at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Upon graduating in 1962, he began translating works of French into Chinese, including plays by Beckett and Ionesco. His own later writing for the Theatre of Popular Art in Beijing, which produced a series of his performance works during the 1980s, shows the influence of the European absurdist perspectives he absorbed during his early period; they would also bring him severe chastisement by communist party officials.

With advent of the Cultural Revolution, Gao joined the Red Guards in their work of rocking the pillars of Chinese civilization from 1966-76. Ideological purity proved to be a shape-shifting creature in those times, however, and he served a five year term of re-

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish a range of diverse, critical and dissenting views.

education through manual labour after being sent “down to the country”, a period he describes in *One Man’s Bible*, the work of autobiographical fiction which followed *Soul Mountain*. To avoid further degrees of persecution, like numberless others at one point he burned important personal effects including his early manuscripts, for as he related to the Nobel Committee, “to write even in secret was to risk one’s life.”

When new political winds followed the demise of the Gang of Four, Gao was permitted to travel outside China and in 1979 visited cultural centres in France and Italy. On his return to Beijing, he wrote prolifically. His works included plays and performance works, short stories, essays, as well as books on modernism in fiction, theatre and the arts. It did not take long for censors and critics alike to note anti-state undertones in his writing.

1982 brought trauma. He was mistakenly diagnosed with lung cancer, a disease, he has observed, that killed his father. A year later, faithful to the old Stalinist-Maoist canard that art should serve Socialist Realism, party authorities accused him of spreading “spiritual pollution” through his work. His reaction was the archetypal East Asian artist’s response to official censure: he left town and hit the road, wandering for 10 months along the course of the mighty Yantze River. En route he wrote down his observations and reflections, making notes and sketches of his open-ended journey—the material from which he would eventually carpenter *Soul Mountain*.

Soul Mountain is composed of 81 chapters, equal to those of Lao Tzu’s brief epistles in the *Tao Te Ching*, China’s 2,400 year old Taoist compendium of life, morals and survival strategies. Richard Eder, one of the more compassionate reviewers in U.S. popular media, commented in the *New York Times* how the novel is

*an often bewildering and considerably uneven congeries of forms: vignettes, travel writing, ethnographic jottings, daydreams, nightmares, recollections, conversations, lists of dynasties and archaeological artefacts, erotic encounters, legends, current history, folklore, political, social and ecological commentary, philosophical epigrams, vivid poetical evocation and much else.*²

In brief, Gao’s style is to give shape to the flotsam and jetsam of a life spent on the bubble of a chaotic watercourse, to the Tao of disintegration with moments of reflection, small glimpses of joy amid the chaos.

² Richard Eder, “A Dreamlike Chinese Journey Haunted by Past and Present”. *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 2000.

Meantime, the blues fell like rain on Gao. In 1986 his play *The Other Shore* was banned outright and productions of his other works were prohibited. Then, with the bloody repression of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June, 1989 he renounced his Communist Party membership and sought political asylum in France. He was accorded full citizenship in 1998.

In exile near Paris and writing in both French and Chinese, he supported himself chiefly by painting. Working with the traditional Chinese medium of ink and rice paper, his personal style has been to update the technique by mounting the paper on canvas and other surfaces as a support. The immediacy of the eclectic Chinese process admits no correction. With no revolution in materials since the days of Ma Yuen, it is the existential subject terrain that makes Gao's work unique. Emblematic of the Chinese proverb 'Every poem a painting, every picture a poem,' his paintings address solitary figures before a nameless landscape, brooding compositions that juxtapose half-tones of light and dark. They are compelling works: he has exhibited in France, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, in New York and Taiwan.

In bestowing the Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy attributed it to Gao's "œuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama." His writing, they added, "is born anew from the struggle of the individual to survive the history of the masses. He is a perspicacious sceptic who makes no claim to be able to explain the world. He asserts that he has found freedom only in writing."³

At the invitation of French artist Perrine Angly, I spoke with Gao Xingjian at the Jeanne Bastien Gallery on rue de la Madeleine in the central arts district of Brussels. From time to time, Mme. Bastien brought purchasers of Gao's work to meet him. Gao sat in an easy-chair beneath an epigraph from his *The Aesthetic of the Artist*, painted in black on the wall behind him. It read:

*L'image artistique, aussi simples qu'elles soient ses
propres formes, est supérieure aux mots
[The artistic image, simple though it may be,
its own forms, always surpasses words.]*

³ Nobel Acceptance Speech, © The Nobel Foundation, Stockholm, 2000.

In person, Gao is soft-spoken, alert, without airs. He speaks French comfortably, without any apparent need to fill up the room with his personality. I am grateful to Ms. Angly for her assistance with translation.

Interview with Gao Xingjian:

TC (Trevor Carolan): *Gao-san, your works on display here possess a deep meditative quality. Do you meditate yourself?*

GXJ (Gao Xingjian): Work, music...these are my meditations.

TC: *You paint indoors and I understand that you listen to music while you work. What sounds do you enjoy?*

GXJ: I choose music for the work I'm involved with. It can take up to a year to complete a painting, so there are different layers. Usually I prepare to listen to certain music in advance for a work that I'm engaged with. It could be Philip Glass or Steve Reich, Górecki...

TC: *The minimalists. What is there about their approach that appeals to you? An ambiance?*

GXJ: It's the *tension*, the impulse. Sometimes, yes, it's an atmosphere. There's a repetitive quality in playing it over and over even when the structure isn't readily apparent. At other times it can be baroque, Bach.

TC: *Glenn Gould in Canada loved Bach, The Goldberg Variations. Do you know his work?*

GXJ: Hmmm. There's Vivaldi, others. Some contemporaries. It depends.

TC: *You write and paint, and you've been involved with the theatre. There's an old tradition in Chinese art going back to the Tang especially, artists and scholars like Wang Wei, who practised as both poet and painter. Not to mention their work as administrators.*

GXJ: Great artists, yes. They were also aristocrats. There were such artists and writers who took their part in the government. Then there were those who weren't in government who went to a remote place, away from the world. They worked quietly, Taoists perhaps. When I was a boy my father enjoyed traditional-style painting and my mother took part in the theatre, so I had some art background before I became a translator after I graduated from university. I did some teaching when I was younger, but painting and writing have been my main activities since then. I also have an interest in the cinema and have produced several films. It's a discipline that I've enjoyed.

TC: *On the surface your current paintings appear to bear a strong lineage to traditional Chinese paintings...*

GXJ: Well, brush, ink, paper, yes. I'm using various types of ink though, some Chinese. The subject matter may be more personal.

TC: *Your works for the exhibition here have a very searching quality. How about your recent writing?*

GXJ: Lately I've been writing poetry.

TC: *Living in France, are you still mindful of certain Chinese elements when you work-- "impression resonance", things of that nature?*

GXJ: The arts are beyond nationalism, cartels. Universal, really. It doesn't matter where you come from. I've said this about literature; that it shouldn't be about commerce or politics, but about the individual.

TC: *So for you, meaningful art then—it's a kind of essence?*

GXJ: It's against classification. Good art talks to everyone. For some, maybe there is *Tao*. With good art - Belgian art, wherever one is - it doesn't matter. So one doesn't need to separate Chilean art and Chinese art.

TC: *Fair enough. Do you have any thoughts about some of the minimalist or conceptual art out there these days?*

GXJ: I have my reservations.

TC: *What is your sense of how language and painting work as forms of expression? Are there similarities? Contradictions?*

GXJ: I find language and painting are completely different ways to express the idea of consciousness. You have two different ways to express consciousness.

TC: *We hear a lot in the media about the “new China”. What’s your sense of how things are developing there? Are you hopeful?*

GXJ: Yes, I have hope. Everyday life is better now, but the censor is still operative. For example, I don’t feel that I’ll be able to exhibit my work there, or have my books sold there during my lifetime. I remain *persona non grata*.

TC: *In Beijing nowadays there are trendy restaurants and bars decorated in what’s imagined to be the “style” of the Cultural Revolution. The image they sell is a kind of rustic peasant chic. You’ve your own experience in that cauldron. Any thoughts about this?*

GXJ: Ridiculous...

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