china perspectives

"Without ism" An Ism for One Man [1]

NOËL DUTRAIT

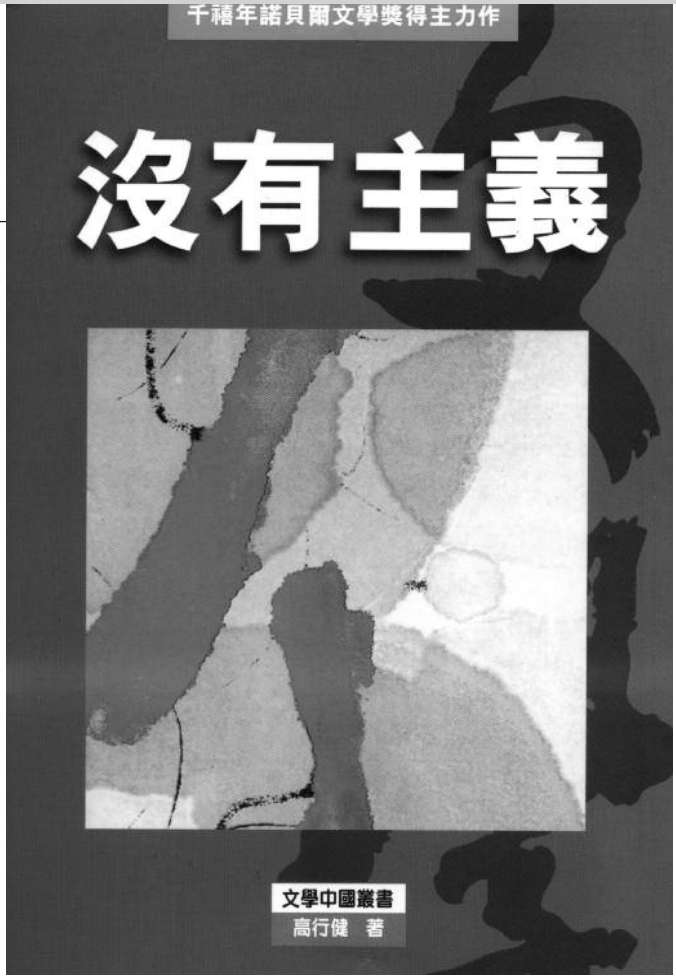
Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000 for his works begun in China in the early 1980s. After moving to France in 1987, he has also written theoretical texts proposing not a major principle or ism, but the opposite, the absence of ism and a "cold" literature, free of all political or ideological influence. He has since had to confront the inherent contradictions between being famous as well as weak and isolated, the latter condition being conducive to producing literature and art in line with his convictions. This article looks at his work through the prism of the absence of ism.

The Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gao Xingjian, "for an œuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama." The citation underlined the innovative nature of Gao's work, describing *Soul Mountain* as a "great novel" and "one of those singular literary creations that seem impossible to compare with anything but themselves." It went on to mention his second novel, *One Man's Bible*, noting that "the book involves settling the score with the terrifying insanity that is usually referred to as China's Cultural Revolution." The citation noted: "With ruthless candour the author accounts for his experiences as a political activist, victim and outside observer, one after the other. His description could have resulted in the dissident's embodiment of morality but he rejects this stance and refuses to redeem anyone else. Gao Xingjian's writing is free of any kind of complaisance, even to good will. His play *Fugitives* irritated the democracy movement just as much as those in power." [2] The Swedish Academy was thus highlighting Gao's dual approach of pursuing literary innovation and also of seeking not to promote a new utopian ideal through his works but to denounce the ravages wrought by ideologies, signalling a return to one's own self so as to safeguard people as individual beings, keeping collectivist dictatorship at bay.

In his Nobel Lecture, Gao quoted from an article he had written in 1990 in Paris, entitled "Cold Literature." He defined it thus: "Cold literature is literature that will flee in order 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." [3]

In 1993, in Paris, Gao wrote an article entitled "Meiyou zhuyi," or "Without Ism." [4] This essay was inevitably reminiscent of the famous dispute between Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi at the beginning of the 20th century regarding *zhuyi* or "isms" and *wenti*, or "questions," as well as of Sun Yat-sen's *sanmin zhuyi*, or "Three principles of the people." Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu believed that "isms" – communism, Marxism, socialism – were solutions that could "save the nation." Hu Shi on the other hand preferred to underscore "concrete problems" (*wenti*), which he recommended addressing one by one. [5] A few years earlier, in 1905, Sun Yat-sen had published in Tokyo his theory of "Three principles of the people:" nationalism, democracy and people's well being. Writing after the demise of ideologies in the late 1980s, Gao Xingjian clearly states in "Without ism" that he has had enough of these "principles" whose destructive effects he had personally experienced. Gao held the status of a political refugee in France from 1989 until 1998, at which date he obtained French citizenship. After settling permanently in France following the events of

1. This article is a revised and expanded version of an earlier draft that appeared in Chinese – translated by Guo Yingzhou – entitled "Gao Xingjian de 'meiyou zhuyi': yigerende zhuyi" in *Xianggang xiju xuekan,* n° 8, p. 53-59.
2. Press Release, 12 October 2000, The Swedish Academy: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/press.html
3. The text of Gao's Nobel Lecture: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html. See also "Cold Literature" in *The Case For Literature*, translated by Mabel Lee, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007, p. 78-81.
4. The article began as a talk at a conference in Taiwan in 1993 organized by *Lianhebao* entitled "Chinese literature in the past 40 years." It was then included in a collection also entitled *Meiyou zhuyi*, published in Hong Kong in 1996 by Cosmos books with a preface by the author. After he won the Nobel Prize, Lianjing of Taiwan reissued the collection in 2001, adding Gao's Nobel Lecture delivered in Stockholm in 2000. French and English translations appeared in 2004 and 2007 respectively: *Le Témoignage de la littérature*, translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, Paris, Seuil, 2004 and *The Case for Literature*, translated by Mabel Lee, *op. cit.*
5. Lucien Bianco, "Seigneurs de la guerre et révolution nationaliste (1913-1927)" (Warlords and nationalist revolution), in *La Chine au XXe siècle, d'une révolution à l'autre 1895-1949* (China in the 20th century, one revolution to another), Marie-Claire Bergère, Lucien Bianco and Jürgen Domes (eds) Paris, Fayard, 1989, p. 146.



The cover of a post-Nobel reprint of Gao's 1996 collection *Meiyou zhuyi*, published by Cosmos Books, Hong Kong.

Tiananmen Square of June 1989, he took no part in any collective action to further China's evolution toward democracy, unlike most writers and artists who had fled China. [6] In public appearances, he has confined himself to speaking about his art, his conception of Chinese civilisation and the Chinese language, which according to him has been ruined by official jargon. Unlike many other writers facing a similar predicament, he says exile in the West has thrown up new possibilities for creativity.

However, Gao has also often stressed that while the weight of politics is lighter in Western democratic countries, the laws of capitalist profit throttle creativity. In "The Writer's Position," he says: "If a writer does not heed market pressures [...], if he ignores fashion and does not pander to readers' tastes, he will find it difficult to survive. The pressure exerted on such serious literary creation by globalization is only increasing. Worse yet, even under democratic systems, politics interferes in literature. If a writer, belonging neither to the left nor to the right, hopes that his words will be spread by the media, I fear he will meet with much difficulty. In the West, although writers enjoy freedom of speech and of creation, independent and free forums of expression unencumbered by politics remain limited." [7] Neither "prophet," nor "saviour" nor "fighter," the writer should return to his status of "frail individual raising his own voice, this true voice of the individual free of falsehood. Regardless of whether this voice can make itself heard outside, one may at least speak to oneself, and I myself feel this need to hear my own voice. This inner need is the first stimulation when one writes: expressing what one feels, based on the real feelings and experience of a fully alive human being." [8]

The only political stance Gao adopted after the June 1989 events consisted of a statement on a French television channel that he would not be returning to his country until the dictatorial system there changed. And he has held fast to that vow. Often approached to sign petitions or offer his opinions on human rights violations in China, the situation in Tibet or Taiwan, or the holding of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Gao has for the most part kept silent. He has chosen to remain "on the margins," [9] in order to preserve his independence of spirit, seeking refuge in solitude and to devote himself to his art in various forms: fiction and drama writing, directing his works on stage, painting, film...

However, being without isms does not mean being reduced to silence, nor does it equate to the absence of opinion or thought. [10] Gao has never ceased to pursue his reflections on art and literature in various essays, from the famous *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (Preliminary investigations into the techniques of modern fiction), published in 1981, [11] to the five lectures recently published in Taiwan, Singapore

6. *Dégel de l'intelligence en Chine 1976-1989* (Thawing of the intellect in China 1976-1989), Gallimard, 2004, is a collection of interviews Cheng Yingxiang conducted with 14 intellectuals who played a major role in the thaw which accompanied the adoption of the so called reform and opening policy. Most of the 14 – writers, scientists, journalists, poets or theoreticians – had to go into exile after the 1989 events. Their accounts are valuable in order to understand how this new intelligentsia tried to advise and influence the politicians so as to steer reforms towards greater freedom of expression in the world of arts and letters and greater democracy in social and political life. It is striking that the book's index contains a mere two references to Gao, indicating that during this period, he took no part in the debate on political and economic reforms – unlike Fang Lizhi, Yan Jiaqi or Liu Binyan – but restricted himself to issues of fiction and drama.
7. Gao Xingjian, "Zuojia de weizhi" in *Lun chuangzuo* (On Creation), Hong Kong, Mingpao Monthly/Singapore, Xinjiapo qingnian shuju, 2008; also published by Lianjing, Taiwan, p. 31.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.
9. In 2004, when the Salon du livre in Paris focused on Chinese language works, Gao was not included among writers invited, no doubt in order to avoid upsetting the authorities in China. This upset many French personalities. But during a press conference organised by the publishing house, Éditions du Seuil, Gao calmly said he had no intention of visiting the Salon to sign books, remarking smilingly that his health prevented it. Once again, he was refusing to play along with the media maelstrom.
10. In his Nobel Lecture, Gao vehemently denounced the current regime in China: "Countless writers were shot, imprisoned, exiled or punished with hard labour in the course of the past one hundred years. This was more extreme than in any imperial dynastic period of China's history. Nobel Lecture: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html."
11. The interest sparked by this essay was illustrated by a letter in 1982 by the writer Feng Jicai to the critic and fellow writer Li Tuo, saying: "I hurried to tell you that I've just been reading a booklet by Gao Xingjian which had on me the effect a glass of fine wine would have. […] When very few people have ventured into the garden of the 'modern novel' as of now, it may be said that a magnificent kite had suddenly unfurled itself in a barren sky." Quoted in Noël Dutrait, *Petit précis à l'usage de l'amateur de littérature chinoise contemporaine, (Brief guidebook for amateurs of contemporary Chinese literature)*, Arles, Philippe Picquier, 2006, p. 43. The writer Zhang Xinxin said about the essay that, "it had to be studied carefully, a bit like a manual of practical exercises, because it contained numerous novel examples on ways of writing". (Quoted in Cheng Yingxiang, *Dégel de l'intelligence en Chine 1976-1989, op. cit.*, p. 156.)

and Hong Kong under the title *Lun chuangzuo* (On Creation), in a collection with approximately 50 other essays. [12] In the interim were texts such as "Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wenxue" (I favour a cold literature) written in 1990, [13] the lectures delivered at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm in 2000 and 2001, [14] as well as *Pour une autre esthétique* (For another aesthetic), first published in French in 2001, then in a fuller Chinese version with the title "Ling yizhong meixue." [15] In early 2010, a series of conversations between Gao Xingjian and Gilbert C.F. Fong appeared in Taiwan. They focused on theatre, revealing his ideas on the dramatic arts. [16] In these writings, Gao aims to "speak without reaching a conclusion," as though he were speaking to himself, but without being indifferent to events in the world at large.

This, however, raises the question whether a new theory of art and literature may thus be emerging, the fruit not of a "school" of writers or artists, but of a man who expresses himself as an individual, choosing to live at the margins of society and using "escape" to survive and continue his creative work. And could this new system of thought, this new "ism" not attract other individuals, who are also weary with, or even disgusted by, collective action, thus becoming a sort of "ism of without-ism?"

Gao warns his readers right in the preface itself – or rather the "Self-preface" (*zixu*) to "Meiyou zhuyi:" "The premise of 'without isms' is 'being without'; it is not premised on a void, because then there would be no premise, of course no conclusion, and not even any isms." [17] The form "meiyou zhuyi" cannot be construed as a noun – "withoutism" – but should rather be understood as verb/object structure: "I have no ism," *wo meiyou zhuyi*. Therefore, it is not a philosophical concept (*zhexue gainian*), but a simple observation, guided by common sense, which describes a certain type of stance towards human and political activity.

In this preface, [18] Gao develops what "without-ism" *is* and what *it is not*: it is not empiricism, individualism, relativism, nihilism, anarchism, pragmatism... It is "a choice," the "minimum right of a human being," "the individual's most rudimentary freedom today," "a means of self-preservation," "a great liberation," "a form of resistance against death by a life that is full of vitality..."

In the article itself, Gao takes a clear position against using isms imported from the West to classify modern literature, thereby obscuring the works themselves: "Realism, romanticism, modernism and isms with labels such as new or old, critical or revolutionary, social or national or classist were applied to literature, and this heavy burden made it hard for China's fledgling modern literature to breathe." [19] In passing, Gao deems Lu Xun's call to "import" these notions from the West too "excessive," and deplores the negative influence these labels have exerted on literary creation, which "has always amounted to the surging of blood in the writer's own heart, and has nothing to do with any ism. If a work sets out to expound some ism it will certainly die prematurely." [20]

Gao has himself been stamped with many different labels that have changed in line with intellectual trends and political fluctuations. In the early 1980s, when his *Preliminary investigations into the techniques of modern fiction* was published, he was called a "modernist". Later, after he wrote *Chezhan* (The Bus Stop), he was seen as influenced by the "theatre of the absurd" and was targeted by the "anti-spiritual pollution movement," having been accused of propagating Western ideas of bourgeois liberalism. Not only did his essay open the window on the West (Gao showed how Western writers innovated in terms of form and how they had overcome the limits of realism and naturalism), but his works for the theatre, such as *The Bus Stop*, *Alarm Signal*, *The Other Shore* or *Wild Man* turned their backs on the major principles of socialist realism still dear to the communist authorities then. Later yet, after the publication of *Taowang* (Fleeing), he was labelled a "reactionary!" Some critics believed *Soul Mountain* should be linked to the current of "root-searching" literature (*xungen wenxue*)... However, already in 1993, Gao had rejected being pigeonholed in any theoretical category, just as he rejected any sort of national belonging: "I should say that in both politics and literature I belong to no group, nor am I bound to any ism, including nationalism and patriotism." [21]

In his fiction too, Gao has rejected classification and categorization, together with the accompanying political struggles. In chapter 72 of *Soul Mountain*, a new character appears in the form of the boring literary critic, who sketches out a critique of the novel that is being written ... He begins his di-

12. Gao Xingjian, "Zuojia de weizhi": (The position of the writer) in *Lun chuangzuo*, *op. cit.* p. 29-44, Hong Kong, Mingbao Yuekan/Singapore, Xinjiapo qingnian shuju, 2008; also published by Lianjing, Taiwan.
13. Published in the collection *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without Isms), Hong Kong, Tiandi tushu, 1996.
14. "The Case for Literature" and "Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth" in *The Case for Literature, op. cit.*
15. *Pour une autre esthétique*, (For another aesthetic) translated into French by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, Paris, Flammarion, 2001. In Chinese the text appeared in *Lun chuangzuo*, *op. cit.*, p. 121-192.
16. Gao Xingjian and Fang Zixun, *Lun Xiju*, Taipei, Lianjing, 2010.
17. "Author's Preface to *Without Isms*" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.*, p. 25
18. *Ibid.*, p. 25-31
19. "Without Isms" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.*, p. 64
20. *Ibid.*, p. 65
21. *Ibid.*, p. 66

alogue with the third-person narrator ("he"), exclaiming: "This isn't a novel!" [22] Then, having recognized the writing as "modernist" and "imitating the West but falling short," [23] and having placed the writer as belonging to "the searching-for-roots school," he concludes: "You're a nihilist!" [24] To this the narrator replies: "He says he actually has no ideology but does have a small amount of nihilism in him, however nihilism isn't the equivalent of absolute nothingness [...]." [25] In chapter 52, the narrator, speaking in the first person "I," outlines his own philosophy for survival: "I have established for myself this way of sequencing which can be thought of as a sort of logic or karma. Ways of sequencing, logic or karma, have been established by people in this vast, unordered world in order to affirm oneself, so why shouldn't I invent my own sequencing, logic or karma? I can then take refuge in this way of sequencing, logic or karma, and be secure in my own actions and have peace of mind." [26]

The refusal to believe in a grand principle capable of saving world is also expressed in chapter 65 of *Soul Mountain* in which the narrator says: "I have long tired of the struggles of the human world. In all the fine-sounding discussions, controversies and debates, I have invariably been made the topic, subjected to criticism, made to listen to instructions." A little later: "Everyone wants to be my teacher, my leader, my judge, my good doctor, my adviser... [...] or else grandly represent my country for me when I myself don't know what is country or whether or not I have a country." [27] For some time in his life, the narrator tried to argue with his contemporaries, but each time his detractors seemed to have gained the upper hand, refusing to concede his point of view. Weariness too seems to have been an element in his rejection of -isms and his need to live as an isolated individual, even though he rejects reclusion. As he says in the same chapter: "It is also impossible for me to be a recluse." [28]

The title of Gao's second novel, *Yige ren de shengjing* (One Man's Bible) is in itself a statement by the author on his place vis-à-vis the world and creation: *yige ren* may be understood as "a man" or "one man," or even "a single man." This man presents his own "Bible:" a surprising term for a writer who has declared several times that he has no religion. In the second sentence of the Nobel Lecture he delivered in Stockholm in 2000, Gao declared: "Putting aside discussion of the existence or non-existence of God, I would like to say that despite my being an atheist I have always shown reverence for the unknowable." [29] By definition, the Bible is a collection of texts held sacred by the Jewish and Christian religions; the meaning of the term can be extended to refer to "a work that holds authority for an individual, a group, an era." In this sense it can apply to the "Little Red Book" of Mao Zedong's quotations. But in this case, the Bible is that of "one man" who, obviously, can represent only himself, and hold authority only for himself. In chapter 18 of *One Man's Bible*, the narrator, freed from the oppressive burden of his old enemy Mao Zedong, concludes: "Now you are without 'isms.' A person without 'isms' is more like a person. An insect or a plant is without 'isms.' You, too, have a life and will no longer be manipulated by any 'isms,' and you prefer to be an onlooker living on the fringes of society. Unavoidably, there will be perspectives, views and tendencies, but, finally, no particular 'isms'." [30]

This is a simple individual, who can only write, and therefore live, by relying on his own ideas and his own language, with no grand principles whatsoever. All these ideas put together and this attitude toward life constitute a sort of Bible, for the use of one and only one man, because "in this agitated world, [...] if an individual still wants to hear his own inner voice once in a while, he must rely on this feeling of loneliness. Given that loneliness does not become suffering, it is necessary for a person in order to be able to act and find a place in society." [31]

In his lecture at the Swedish Academy in 2000, Gao reaffirmed his understanding of the relationship between literature and politics: "The new century has already arrived. I will not bother about whether it is in fact new, but it would seem that the revolution in literature, revolutionary literature and even ideology may have all come to an end. The illusion of a social utopia that enshrouded more than a century has vanished, but when literature throws off the shackles of this and that -ism it still has to return to the dilemmas of human existence. However (these) have changed very little and will always be the topic of literature." [32]

These reflections lead to a particular worldview, based on individual experience, and give rise to an attitude bringing free-

22. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, translated by Mabel Lee, London, Flamingo, 2001, p. 452.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 453.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 454.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 410.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Nobel Prize website *op. cit.* and "The Case for Literature" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.,* p. 32
30. Gao Xingjian, *One Man's Bible*, translated by Mabel Lee, HarperCollins, New York, 2002 p. 152. (French version: *Le Livre d'un homme seul*, translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, La Tour-d'Aigues, éditions de l'Aube, 2000, p. 200.)
31. Gao Xingjian, « Biyao de gudu » (Necessary solitude), *Lianhebao*, Taipei, 11 July 2002, reprinted in *Lun chuangzuo*, *op. cit.,* pp. 341-343.
32. Nobel Lecture: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html.

dom and ease. In the play *Bayue xue* (Snow in August), the character of the writer appears on stage, and may be considered as representing Gao himself. To the singer who asks him: "Mister, are you in a hurry to go to the capital for the civil examination? Or are you one of those talented scholars longing for recognition?" the writer replies: "I'm doing nothing at present, just spending my life playing games. But I can't really get myself to sever my ties with the world either. I'm still a man of the world." [33] Having called into question the isms of the 20th century and the weight of politics that have repeatedly almost brought modern Chinese literature to "suffocation," Gao has developed, in parallel with his creative work, reflections on the nature of his creation and his own role as an individual, writer and artist. The controversy on realism and modernism he unleashed in 1981 with the publication of *Preliminary investigations into the techniques of modern fiction* opened the path, according to him, to his future fiction, "which did not conform with China's guidelines at the time." [34] In 1990, he developed the idea of "cold literature" (*leng de wenxue*) a literature of fleeing and spiritual cleansing. [35] Being neither hero, idol, victim, spokesperson nor judge, the writer can quietly observe from the margins and undertake a personal introspection.

In the area of fiction, Gao substitutes "flow of language" (*yuyanliu*) for the "stream of consciousness" (*yishiliu*): this is a narrative technique that combines reality, imagination and memories in order to overcome the concept of time. Gao notes that his masterpiece, *Soul Mountain*, "uses pronouns instead of characters, psychological perceptions instead of plot, and changing emotions to modulate the style. The telling of stories is unintended, and they are told at random. It is a novel similar to a travel diary, and also resembles a soliloquy." [36] After *Soul Mountain*, he again took up soliloquy or monologue, as well as "flow of language" as the major technique in *One Man's Bible*.

In theatre, Gao turned his back on the socialist realism favoured by the communist authorities and on the Stanislavski method, advocating instead the "threefold performance" of the actor (*sanzhongxing biaoyan*), [37] a technique he first laid out in an interview with Bernard Bretonnière in 1993 and subsequently revised and expanded. [38] He also developed the idea of "total theatre" (*wanquan xiju*) after the first production of his opera *Snow in August* in Taipei and Marseille. [39]

After making a film in collaboration with Alain Melka and Jean-Louis Darmyn in Marseille in 2005, he defined his cinematographic art as "tripartite film" (*sanyuan dianying*), the parts referring to image, sound and text, treated on an equal footing. [40]

In a second film, *Après le déluge* (After the flood), in 2008, he developed in a masterly fashion his conception of cinematographic creation by filming dancers gliding in front of his own paintings to the accompaniment of a most original soundtrack.

In visual art, Gao calls for "another aesthetic" (*ling yizhong meixue*): a return to intuition, to sensations, to the present moment, to real life, as he has written in the essay entitled "For another aesthetic." Going against political correctness, Gao refuses revolutionary art and revolution in art, calling for a return to premodernist art and a form of painting that "seeks new possibilities of expression in art, seeks boundlessness at the very boundaries of art." [41]

After having experienced health problems, Gao began to travel again in 2006. He has taken part in exhibitions of his paintings in important museums, publicly expressing his views on art and on his position as an artist in modern society.

In Aix-en-Provence, he participated in a public dialogue with fellow Nobel laureate for literature, Kenzaburo Oe. He expressed the admiration he felt for the untiring vitality with which the Japanese writer engages in political and social struggles; however, he also reiterated that in his view, the writer, like a modern day Sisyphus, always risks fighting in vain. [42] His voice, like that of Oe, cannot but be that of a small minority, which, nevertheless have a human value far greater than that of officialdom and command far greater authenticity. In the United States, in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and several European countries, he has untiringly reaffirmed his unflinchingly apolitical position, which leads him to remain on the margins of society. This position did not, however,

33. Gao Xingjian, *Snow in August*, translated by Gilbert C.F. Fong, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong 2003, p. 47.
34. "Without Isms" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.,* p. 65
35. "Cold Literature" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.,* P. 80
36. "Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*" in *The Case for Literature op. cit.,* p. 94
37. This term is translated as "triplication of the actor" by Henry Zhao in *Towards a modern Zen Theatre. Gao Xingjian and Theatre Experimentalism*, Londres, SOAS, 2000. (Translator's note)
38. Bernard Bretonnière, "Entretien avec Gao Xingjian" (Interview with Gao Xingjian), in *Dialoguer Interloquer* (Dialoguing interlocuting), translated by Annie Curien, Saint-Nazaire, M.E.E.T., 1993, p. 131-139.
39. See the "Introduction: Marginality, Zen and Omnipotent Theatre" in *Snow in August* translated by Gilbert C.F. Fong *op. cit.* p. x-xi, French version *La Neige en août*, translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, Marseille/Arles, Opéra de Marseille/Actes Sud, p. 17-19. To a question by Cheng Meng-Jui, Gao replied: "If one takes an academic approach, *Snow in August* is an entirely novel and difficult creation and it's difficult to give it a label. We provisionally considered 'omnipotent theatre'. We wanted to train a troupe of actors and nurture their potential to become 'omnipotent actors' who could sing, dance, take on comedy roles and deliver dialogue; we'll even have some acrobats."
40. Gao Xingjian, "Concerning *Silhouette/Shadow*", in Fiona Sze-Lorrain (ed.), *Silhouette/Shadow, the Cinematic Art of Gao Xingjian*, Paris, Contours, 2007, p. 19-34.
41. *Pour une autre esthétique* (For another aesthetic), *op. cit.*, p. 54.
42. "Dajiang Jiansanlang [Kenzaburo Oe] Gao Xingjian duitanlu", in Gao Xingjian, *Lun chuangzuo*, *op. cit.,* p. 348-361.

prevent him from meeting the socialist candidate Segolene Royal in the French presidential election in 2006 a few days before she travelled to China (and reported on her website), but he only talked about his own situation and offered his personal opinion on present-day Chinese society.

In 2008, the French daily *Le Monde* reported a statement he made addressing 500 people at the inaugural conference of the literary festival Kosmopolis in Barcelona: "A writer is first and foremost an individual. As an individual, he cannot manipulate politics. If he puts literature in the service of politics, he becomes its tool, an agent of propaganda. In this case he loses his truth, his voice." [43]

What Gao has constructed throughout his work is rather a personal *art de vivre*, a new ethics suited to an isolated and fragile individual, who knows nothing but doubts: "I have only doubts, and even doubt all notions of value. It is only life that I do not doubt, because I myself am a being who is full of vitality." [44]

But he does not deny that the responsibility of literature as testimony is deep, as literary works last forever whereas history is being constantly rewritten in line with changes in society. "History inevitably bears the imprint of a ruling power and is therefore revised with each change in power. In contrast, once a literary work is published it cannot be rewritten. This makes the writer's responsibility to history even greater, even if it is not the writer's intention to take on this burden. History can be repeatedly changed because it does not require an individual to take responsibility for it, whereas the writer must confront his own book in print with its indelible black words on white paper." [45]

The contradiction between the existence of this "principle of non-principle" and the imperative need to write about reality is palpable in *One Man's Bible* which, while depicting a narrator who speaks alternatively as "you" and "he," does not fail to occasionally voice doubts over the very act of writing. Chapter 24 is representative of this state of mind as it begins thus: "Is it worth writing pure literature, that pure literary form where style, language, word games, linguistic structures, patterns simply follow their own course, but which is unrelated to your experiences, your life, the dilemmas of life, the quagmire of reality, or you, who are a part of the filth?" [46] And later: "You vomit up the folly of politics, yet, at the same time, you manufacture another sort of lie in literature, for literature is a lie that hides the writer's ulterior motive for profit or fame." [47] The possibility of a literature totally divorced from -isms or one that is completely "cold" would seem to be "contradicted by the novel itself" as Sebastian Veg has shown: "This position on the margins of all collectivity and political engagement appears untenable, and the 'you' ends up looking like a mirror image of 'he,' equally compelled to make choices and take a stand regarding China." [48] Such contradiction is equally evident in Gao's plays. Those written in the 1980s often tackle subjects related to the realities of Chinese society of the time, whereas the ones written in France since 1990 no longer have a context evoking a particular social reality. *Escape*, written just after the Tiananmen incident, constitutes a transition between the two tendencies of Gao's plays. Completed in October 1989, it depicts a young man, a young woman and a man in his fourties taking refuge in a rundown warehouse, but it is far from being an homage to the pro-democracy student movement. The play earned Gao criticism from both the Chinese authorities and dissidents in exile. While evoking the reality of the Tiananmen massacre, Gao shows the absurdity of the human condition with the character, "Middle-aged man" saying: "[Am I] An individualist? A nihilist? Let me tell you, I don't subscribe to any ism, I don't need to. I'm a living human being. I'm not going to put up with being massacred, or being dragged away and forced to kill myself." [49] The only solution the man thinks of is escaping with this life. In Gao's case, escape and then exile allowed him to continue his creative work, which has been considerably enriched in the decade since he won the Nobel Prize. Curiously, the middle-aged man figures in both *The Bus Stop* written in the early 1980s and *Escape*, published in 1991; despite the gap of nearly 10 years, he voices in both the same desire to leave quietly. He also crops up in the play that inspired the opera *Snow in August,* discussed earlier. It would seem that in any circumstance or any epoch, every individual ought to be able to retain the possibility of keeping silent and of escaping. [50]

• **Translated by Sebastian Veg and N. Jayaram**

43. Reported by Raphaëlle Rérolle, "'Kosmopolis' célèbre l'universalité de la littérature en terre catalane" (Kosmopolis in Catalonia fetes literature's universality), *Le Monde des livres*, 31 October 2008, p. 8.
44. "Without Isms", in *The Case for Literature op. cit.* p. 76.
45. "Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth" in *The Case For Literature*, *Ibid*, p. 54.
46. *One Man's Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
47. *Ibid*., p. 196.
48. Sebastian Veg, "Fuite sans fin and exil impossible: *Le Livre d'un homme seul* de Gao Xingjian " (Escape without end and impossible exile: Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible*), in Jean-Pierre Morel, Wolfgang Asholt and Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt (eds.), *Dans le dehors du monde, exils d'écrivains et d'artistes au xxe siècle,* (Outside the world: Writers and artists in exile in the 20th century), Paris, Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2010, p. 279-295.
49. *Escape*, translated by Gilbert C.F. Fong, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2007, p. 29.
50. This issue is also dealt with in my article "L'œuvre de Gao Xingjian, un essai d'analyse globale" (Gao Xingjian's works: Towards a general analysis), in Noël Dutrait (ed.) *L'Ecriture romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian* (Gao Xingjian's Fiction and Drama), Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 71-82.