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# Gao Xingjian: Fiction and Forbidden Memory<sup>(1)</sup>

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**From *Soul Mountain* to *One Man's Bible*, Gao Xingjian's fiction is committed to a labour of transgressive remembering: excavating minority heritages eclipsed by the dominant culture, protecting individual memory from established historiography, and sounding the dark areas of personal memory, less to indulge in "repentance" than to examine identity. The writing of memory, thanks to fictionalisation, thus comes to resemble an exorcism that makes it possible to defy prohibitions by casting out external and internal demons and by imposing the existential prescription against normative judgement.**

In Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain*, written between 1982 and 1989, there is a long description of an ancient mask. It is an anthropozoomorphic mask sculpted out of wood, no doubt dating back to the last Imperial Dynasty, and which survived the destruction of the anti-superstition campaigns and of the Cultural Revolution. The narrator found it in the storage rooms of a museum in the southern province of Guizhou, a region inhabited by ethnic minorities, where it was still used for the *Nuo* or *Wunuo* ritual theatre (not to be confused with the Japanese *Noh* theatre) of the shamanistic tradition. The object excavated has fairly realistic features, with a pair of horns on the top of its head, two sharp fangs pointing up towards its nose, and two eyes with holes in them, giving it a threatening and surprised expression. In all likelihood, it represents the god "who opens the mountain" (Kaishan) or the god "who opens the road" at the beginning of the ritual (Kailu).<sup>(2)</sup> This episode gives pride of place to these divinities, taking up all of Chapter 24 and echoing the theme of the mountain in the novel. To the description the narrator adds a rather psychological interpretation of the mask: "This face also accurately expresses the animal nature in human beings and the fear of this animal nature within themselves." This shocked reaction expresses the growing, sometimes painful awareness of man in self-contemplation, as an "understanding of nature and the self is fully encompassed in the round black holes of the eye sockets."<sup>(3)</sup> These annotations thus show an attention that transcends the simple ethnological dimension of discovery, making a metaphorical use of it that connects with social relations and the examination of identity.

The mask thus described and decoded may serve as the

starting point for the present discussion. Inscribed as a gesture against oblivion, its revelation denounces the violence of history, while also revealing an ambivalent fictional approach. Gao Xingjian superimposes fiction on eyewitness accounts, a viewpoint that is both critical and self-reflective, pondering both orchestrated amnesia and personal forgetfulness. The author's ethnological propensity, as shown in *Soul Mountain*, thus anticipates the lucidity that characterises *One Man's Bible*<sup>(4)</sup> by means of a work of memory that proves transgressive in several ways: defending buried minority cultures, which are the casualties of the ravages of dominant culture, protecting individual memory from established historiography, and finally, examining the dark areas of one's personal past in order to become reconciled with oneself. This threefold cultural, political, and personal aspect allows us to compare Gao Xingjian's commemorative writing with a certain exorcist ritual, which makes it possible for him to defy prohibitions while casting out internal demons. Gao Xingjian's two novels, while apparently different on a diegetic level, resemble each other in a common thematic preoccupation with the relationship between fiction and forbidden memory, which the following paragraphs will seek to clarify by means of a contrastive textual study.

1. The author would like to express his thanks to Sebastian Veg and the two anonymous readers of *China Perspectives* for their advice.
2. Yves Créhalet, *Le Masque de la Chine*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2007, pp. 32, 100, 104.
3. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, trans. Mabel Lee, New York, Harper-Collins, 2000, chap. 24 p. 141.
4. During the lecture he gave on 22 February 2010 at the Ca' Foscari University, Venice, entitled "Gao Xingjian: homme seul ou artiste universel?" (Gao Xingjian: man alone or universal artist?), Noël Dutrait stated that the novel's initial title was *The Man and The Mask*.

The Nuo Mask representing  
the Kaishan God.

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*Soul Mountain* is a fictionalised account of an ethnological research project. Its approach is undeniably original in the context of the 1980s: in contrast with the “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*)<sup>(5)</sup> that was taking over intellectual circles, Gao Xingjian took a personal approach, far from the fads of the day and official supervision. By trying to revive the buried memory of peripheral cultures eclipsed by the vagaries of history and politics, he immediately put himself in opposition to the central government, where the followers of “culture” enter into more or less voluntary connivance with the dominant ideology. Gao Xingjian’s fundamentally ethnological approach thus differs from the philosophers and historians who assign a consensual rather than a critical significance to cultural debates. Debates were indeed raging, initiated by leading lights such as Jin Guantao, Li Zehou, and Gan Yang, who led groups of intellectuals congregating around more or less formal or official institutions: the Academy of Chinese Culture (*Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan*), the series “Towards the Future” (*Zouxiang weilai*), and the periodical *Culture: China and the World* (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*), to mention only the best-known. These discussions and publications largely succeeded in by-passing, if not in breaking, the hold of the prevailing Marxist dogmatism. However, the positioning of the intellectuals was marked by a deep ambivalence towards the official ideology. Feeling imbued with the mission of the “New Enlightenment” (*xin qimeng*), in reference to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the intelligentsia sought to compare the reforms in progress with the process of modernisation that China had experienced beginning in the mid-nineteenth century: the introduction of scientific and technological knowledge, and the attempts at institutional reform and the changing of mentalities. The aim of establishing parallels was to legitimise the necessity of modernising the country by adding cultural renewal to technological innovation. The cultural alibi ended up conforming to the official discourse on this collective project, in a complicity that paradoxically diverged from the anti-establishment spirit of May Fourth. There is no better illustration of this collusion than *River Elegy* (*He shang*), a documentary that shows the tragic consequences that can be visited on a backward country such as China, defeated by seaborne invaders despite its thousand-year history.<sup>(6)</sup> The pathetic strains resound as a call for a burst of energy, which in reality rests on a logic of instrumentalisation: culture must henceforth serve economic necessity and the project of modernising the country in order to contribute to the renaissance and glorification of the nation, following the example of, but running counter to, the West. It



is on this level that intellectual debate proved itself to be most in harmony with the preoccupations of the ruling party. “Towards the Future” was to be the slogan that summarised the convergence of all the arguments, both intellectual and governmental: the return to tradition as merely an obligatory detour in order to point the nation towards a future full of prosperity.

The literary movement known as “the search for roots” (*xungen wenxue*), which emerged in the midst of these intellectual debates, is an unambiguous expression of this prospective and dichotomous vision. Han Shaogong was its instigator, and pointed from the beginning to the diversity of regional cultures, emphasising the necessity of preserving them and rooting literary creation in them. However, the movement’s manifesto, Han’s “The Roots of Literature,” reveals a culturalist positioning that is more preoccupied with illustrating the greatness of the nation than with championing minority cultures under threat. Thus Han Shaogong, in his conclusion, heralds an essential Chinese “identity” culture opposable to “all sorts of things” coming from the West:

*In China today we are proceeding with spectacular reform of the economic system, and with the cultural and economic construction of the country. We are borrowing multiple sciences and techniques, and all sorts of things from the West. We are turning to mod-*

5. See Joël Thoraval, “La Fièvre culturelle chinoise” (Chinese cultural fever), *Critique*, no. 507-508, 1989, pp. 558-572.

6. See Joël Thoraval, “La Tradition rêvée. Réflexions sur L’Élégie du Fleuve de Su Xiaokang” (A dreamt-up tradition: Reflections on Su Xiaokang’s *River Elegy*), *L’Infini*, no. 30, 1990, pp. 146-168.

ernised ways of living. But [...] China remains China, particularly in the literary and artistic fields; we have our cultural characteristics, our mentalities, and our national identity, and it is incumbent on us to liberate the thermal energy produced by modern ideas in order to mould this identity once again and give it back some lustre.<sup>(7)</sup>

This formulation seeks to be holistic and mythifying. While the author distances himself from it in his creative practice, particularly later in *Maqiao cidian* (*The Dictionary of Maqiao*), which is more closely attentive to the revalorisation of a local heritage threatened with extinction by the effects of uniformisation, such a theoretical programme was to find increased resonance in the following decade, and even beyond, in a supposedly postcolonial critique that even to day seems far from exhausted.<sup>(8)</sup>

Gao Xingjian's approach, on the contrary, aims to unearth forgotten, threatened, and marginalised cultures, pointing to the hierarchies within the political frontiers, and dissenting from the official creed and common discourse on the subject. Returning to the sources does not in any way serve to magnify national culture, but rather to condemn discrimination and overshadowing. *Soul Mountain* thus presents a series of field researches, enriched with philosophical, historical, and literary meditations.

The novel recounts two journeys that are woven together by alternating uses of a "you" and an "I." The splitting of the character makes it possible for him to differentiate his journey across the vast regions of China, from the Tibetan plateau to the east coast via the middle valley of the Yangtse River. The "you" is looking for the unlikely place named "Soul Mountain," which is always being pushed further away, towards the "other shore." This essentially internal journey parallels the geographical crossing carried out by the "I." The spiritual quest is thus superimposed on an ethnological exploration that leads the narrator to meet diverse population groups and cultures spread over the mountainous regions of the southwest. Visits to remote temples and villages, the collecting of local songs and customs, the adaptation of stories and legends, all confer a deliberately composite construction to this ethnotext.

This formal heterogeneity coincides with the multiplicity of southern cultures, which the author seeks to rehabilitate in the face of an orchestrated amnesia. At a time when his contemporaries are preoccupied with glorifying the national heritage that was significantly destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian takes it upon himself to challenge Han

supremacy, which is far from favourable to peripheral cultures. Behind this inquisitorial account lies a historical distinction. As the author reminds us, there is a traditional dichotomy between the cultures of the North and of the South, respectively symbolised by the Yellow River and the Blue River (the Yangtse). The culture of the North gained influence over the centuries, thanks to an imperial system backed up by Confucian orthodoxy. This official culture gradually overshadowed the sometimes older cultural heritage of the South, traces of which can be seen among the ethnic minorities such as the Miao, the Yi, the Qiang, etc. So the narrator agrees with the archaeologists and the museum curators when he discovers these masks, which were used for the *nuo* theatre, usually associated with Daoist ritual. He revels in the incantations and magical procedures (Chapter 2), the ritual dances, the ballads and funeral chants, which he sees as incarnations of a primeval vitality that will not tolerate any policy of uniformisation. Love songs echo in the depths of the valleys, expressing a spontaneity that becomes scarce in classical poems, imprisoned in the rules of prosody. The dust of pious retellings and of Confucian rationalism falls away from revisited myths, which shine forth once again in their original colours: the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), Immortal Inhabitant of the Western Paradise, unveils the totemic face of the tiger,<sup>(9)</sup> the driver-out of devils par excellence; Yu the Great, heroic tamer of the waters and exemplary founder of the first semi-historical dynasty of the Xia, is revealed, through the recounting of his story, as the developer of the land after the flood.<sup>(10)</sup>

The uncovering of these treasures is favoured by exploration of the terrain combined with rereading works banned from the Confucian canon, such as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*), which contains a mine of information about mythical collections and ancient geography.<sup>(11)</sup> This ethnological approach calls into question an imperial culture that has managed to create the appearance of the enormous

7. Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de gen" (The roots of literature), *Wanmei de jiading* (A perfect hypothesis), Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 1996, pp. 1-8.

8. See Zhang Weimin, "He wei Zhongguo wenxue?" ("What is Chinese literature?"), *Wenyi zhengming: Lilun zongheban* (Literary and Artistic Debates: Theoretical Assessments), 2009, pp. 31-44. Inspired by the vision of *tianxia*, "All under the heavens," brought back into favour by the work of Zhao Tingyang, which is not without legitimising Chinese expansion against the suspicion of imperialism, the author seeks to transpose the idea of "China" (Zhongguo) to the literary field by considering it as transcending regional, ethnic, and even political differences: "China" designates, according to the author, the "real Chinas" (*xianshi Zhongguo*), including Taiwan. On Zhao Tingyang's theory, see Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* (The Tianxia system: An introduction to the philosophy of a world institution), Nanjing, Jiangsu jiaoyu, 2005.

9. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, *op. cit.*, chap. 20, p. 121.

10. *Ibid.*, chap. 71, p. 450.

monolith it has become. Gao Xingjian subscribes to a renewed, lucid anthropology that breaks through the barriers of racial prejudice, discovering in supposedly “barbarian” traditions the buried roots of Chinese culture: what has been preserved of their primeval culture by those who are today minority peoples remains a priceless treasure of knowledge of Chinese civilisation itself. Some still carry in them an ancient shared tradition, while others have retained a snapshot of a forgotten stage of evolution.

The reminder of the contrast between the dominant culture and the minority cultures aims to shed light on the complicity between cultural policy and political culture, as relations between the Chinese and the ethnic minorities reflect those between the individual and society. The culture of the North, symbolised by the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Confucian classics, according to the author, is at the service of the institution that, in parallel with the endangering of peripheral cultures, exercises repressive power over the individual. The survival of southern traditions testifies to the resistance of the South, the cradle of Daoism and *chan* (Zen) Buddhism, which, far from the Imperial power and Confucian orthodoxy, offered refuge over the course of history to persecuted or disgraced scholars.<sup>(12)</sup> While it cannot be reduced to this antagonistic dichotomy, *Soul Mountain* remains a parable of flight, which takes the narrator far from the censorious and persecuting capital on a salutary return to the sources in those far-off regions. Thus militant ethnology metaphorises the demand for individual freedom, mixed with the temptation to be a hermit, which is represented more forcefully in *One Man's Bible*.

The latter novel, which differs from *Soul Mountain* by depicting a man in exile<sup>(13)</sup> haunted by painful personal memories, in fact presents a reading of the same preoccupation with memory, even though there is a shift of focus and a thematic reconfiguration: while *Soul Mountain* brings relics to light against the standardising effects of the dominant culture, *One Man's Bible* is once more a personal story that the author revives by contrasting it with established historiography, which has wiped out the most traumatic chapters in the country's recent past. It reads as a warning against the dangers of mass amnesia created by the manipulations of the authorities and by the “folklorisation” of history. It is a challenge to the official alibi of modernisation that sacrifices the work of memory to the future,<sup>(14)</sup> but also a rejection of any nostalgia for the revolutionary past, whether motivated by commercial exploitation or as a reaction against a developmentalist, materialist, and unequal society. From this point of view, he is part of, but

differs from, a literature of memory, which appeared in the 1990s in China and overseas, and which focuses on the periods of the Cultural Revolution and of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957.

Literature did not hesitate to tackle the Cultural Revolution as soon as it was over, as well as the tragic events of the People's Republic. A “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue*) carried with it a stream of narratives that continued unabated throughout the 1980s. The denunciation of violated humanism by Liu Xinwu, Dai Houying, Zong Pu, Li Ping, Zhang Xianliang, and Feng Jikai gave rise to a literature of emotional testimony taken up by many other writers: *Random Thoughts*, which Ba Jin published in stages after 1978,<sup>(15)</sup> *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters* by Yang Jiang in 1981,<sup>(16)</sup> and the various eyewitness accounts collected and published by Feng Jikai from 1986 on,<sup>(17)</sup> are just a few of the dozens of existing titles. Reports, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts abound, making up for the silence of the historians and of an official discourse preoccupied with ensuring economic growth by drawing a line under the periods of disaster.

Gao Xingjian makes no secret of his reservations about this form of memorial literature. He has expressed doubts about the lasting value of Solzhenitsyn's writings, deeming them outdated by the archives of the Gulag as soon as these become accessible. This is a specific reference to the ongoing research projects on this subject, such as the virtual museum of the Cultural Revolution based in the United

11. Rémi Mathieu, *Etude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne. Traduction annotée du Shanhai jing*, 2 volumes, Paris, Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 1982. Gao Xingjian himself emphasises the importance of this work, of the *Shuijing zhu* (*The Annotated Classic of The Waters*), and of the mythology studies of Yuan Ke in the preparation of his novel. See Gao Xingjian, “Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*,” in *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 101.
12. See Gao Xingjian, Gao Xingjian, “Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*,” in *The Case for Literature*, op. cit., pp. 82-103.
13. On the subject of Gao Xingjian and exile, see Sebastian Veg, “Fuite sans fin et exil impossible: *Le Livre d'un homme seul* de Gao Xingjian” (Escape without end and impossible exile), in Jean-Pierre Morel, Wolfgang Asholt, Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt (eds.), *Dans le dehors du monde. Exils d'écrivains et d'artistes au XXe siècle*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010, pp. 279-295.
14. On the necessity of preserving the memory of the “educated youth” who were sent to the country, see Michel Bonnin, “The threatened history and collective memory of the Cultural Revolution's Lost Generation,” *China Perspectives*, no. 2007/4, pp. 52-64.
15. Ba Jin, *Suixiang lu* (*Notes as The Pen Flows*), Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 1987. For a partial translation into English, see *Random thoughts*, translated by Geremie Barmé, Hong Kong, Joint Publishing Co, 1984.
16. Yang Jiang, *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, trans. Geremie Barmé, Hong Kong, Joint Publications, 1982.
17. Feng Jikai, *Yi bai ge ren de shinian* (*Ten years in the lives of a hundred people*). For a partial translation into English, see *Voices from the whirlwind: An oral history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1991.

States.<sup>(18)</sup> One can see here both a recognition of the authority of the archives and a concern to distinguish them from literature, which goes beyond mere documentary objectives and functions to offer a personal reading of history. Gao Xingjian does not significantly differ, in this respect, from those other memorial narratives that are more inclusive of personal experience and subjectivity, and more elaborate in their formalisation. Zhang Chengzhi, in *Rivers of The North* (1984), gives himself over to his personal memories mingled with self-questioning about his role during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>(19)</sup> Liu Xinwu, in a more dialogical approach, takes on the life of Ren Zhong, a simple man caught up in the worst torments because of his closeness to Yu Luoke,<sup>(20)</sup> in a hybrid illustrated text that blends memories, reported narratives, and diffuse impressions.<sup>(21)</sup> The violence of history unleashes in Yu Hua a process of phantasmagorical dehumanisation, as shown in *1986*, an allegory of the cataclysmic decade.<sup>(22)</sup> No doubt Gao Xingjian prefers fiction for its ability to arrive at the truth, looming up from the gapped memory of history and from a questioning of identity, in a confrontation with the troubled past and the experience of trauma.<sup>(23)</sup>

*One Man's Bible* has something of the nature of a fictional construction, springing from a long gestation. Its genesis goes back 20 years, since a group of short narratives published in the 1980s already display a clearly memorial character, correlated to the various periods in the author's life: "Twenty-Five Years Later" relates to the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, "Friends" and "Huadou" tell of acts of persecution perpetrated during the Cultural Revolution, "You Must Live" presents the oppressive atmosphere in the Cadre School, "My Mother" depicts a character who died for her progressive convictions but cannot be the object of any commemoration, "The Other Shore," recalls the refuge given to the character by a local Party Secretary, a wise protector.<sup>(24)</sup> These fragments of memory written in the name of narrative experimentation<sup>(25)</sup> were not unconnected with Gao Xingjian's interest in the renewal of literary technique in the context of literary themes still largely imbued with socialist realism.<sup>(26)</sup> But these texts taken together now appear more as the testing ground of a broader commemorative writing, reorganised from a factual, narrative, and interpretative point of view: experience, rising from its buried state, distanced in time and space, now serves the imperative of the reconstruction of identity associated with the revelation of the protagonist's threefold status during the Cultural Revolution: that of victim, witness, and participant.

*One Man's Bible* is written with the pronoun shifts already used in the first novel, but instead of the "I" and the "he," there is an alternation between "you" and "he." The second person, by soliciting the complicity of the ideal reader, introduces a collective dimension to the commemoration. However, the essential effect of the "you" and "he" couple is to create the double personality on which the intimate focus is fixed. The "you" is a present enunciator in exile, who examines the "he" of the past, living in the China of that time. Thus is established a kind of distancing and indirect monologue, since the two enunciators are separated by space and time. To this duality, of course, is added an "I" who is both subterranean and sovereign, and who plays the part of a hidden and refereeing camera.

This arrangement firstly justifies the narrative of events. It makes it possible to keep pathos at a distance, in accordance with the principle of "cold literature" (*jeng de wenxue*). The narrative, in the third person "impersonal," so to speak, gives the memories an impassive feel, confirmed by the time/space construction. The Cultural Revolution takes place in a chronology that is barely disturbed by apparent distortions and inserted comments. Thus the key episodes follow one another, from the summer of 1966, the chaotic beginning of the movement, up to the narrator's escape to the countryside in the South in 1970, including the short time he was forced to spend at a Cadre School in 1969. The

18. See <http://www.cnd.org/cr/pref.htm> (visited on 8 January 2010). The CND site began publishing documents, eyewitness accounts and essays on the Cultural Revolution in 1991. In 1996, on the initiative of Wang Youqin and others, there followed the creation of a virtual museum of the Cultural Revolution.
19. Zhang Chengzhi, *Beifang de he* (Rivers of the North), Beijing, Zuojia chubanshe, 2000. See also the French translation by Catherine Toulally, *Les Rivières du Nord*, Beijing, Foreign Language Press, 1992.
20. Yu Luoke (1942-1970) was a worker who was sentenced to death for having written articles protesting against certain ideas of the Cultural Revolution, in particular against the theory of "revolutionary heredity."
21. Liu Xinwu, *Shu yu lin tong zai*, Jinan, Shandong hua bao chubanshe, 1999. See the French translation by Roger Darrobers, *L'Arbre et la forêt*, Paris, Bleu de Chine, 2002.
22. Yu Hua, *1986*, in *The Past and the punishments*, trans. Andrew Jones, Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 1996. On the violence and the phantasmagorical aspect of Yu Hua, see Isabelle Rabut, "Yu Hua et l'espace hanté" (Yu Hua and haunted space), *Les Temps modernes*, no. 630-631, mars-juin 2005, pp. 212-246.
23. On these aspects, see Yinde Zhang, "Gao Xingjian et Jorge Semprun: Mémoire et fiction identitaire," in Noël Dutrait (ed.), *L'Écriture romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2006, pp. 47-70.
24. "Ershi wu nian hou" (Twenty-five years later), "Pengyou" (Friends), "Huadou" (Huadou), "Ni yiding yao huozhe" (You must live), "Muqin" (My mother), "He nabian" (The other shore), in Gao Xingjian, *Gei wo laoye mai yugan*, Taipei, Lianhe wenxue chubanshe, 2000, pp. 67-75, 1-11, 101-143, 12-36, 155-165, 177-209. Published in English as *Buying A Fishing Rod For My Grandfather*, short stories, trans. Mabel Lee, London, Flamingo, 2004.
25. Gao Xingjian, "Postface" (1987) to *Gei wo laoye mai yugan*, op. cit., pp. 260-261.
26. Gao Xingjian, *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (Preliminary investigation into the technique of the modern novel), Guangzhou, Huacheng chubanshe, 1981.

fundamental linearity is underscored by topography, which while providing little detail does not in any way hinder localisation: the upheavals in various parts of the capital, such as the narrator's work unit in the centre and the universities concentrated in the west of Beijing, his brief stay at the Cadre School situated on the banks of the Yellow River, and the refuge he finds in the country in the south of Anhui.

The Cultural Revolution constitutes the central point around which stretches a series of events that marked the history of China after 1949, as well as the author's personal and family life. The catastrophic decade is presented as the result of a succession of political tragedies, including the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957. The novel repairs the gaps of memory: the violence experienced by the narrator during his first year at university, the tragedy of his mother drowning in a lake on a collective farm, the conviction of his fellow high school student, labelled a Rightist for having expressed himself incautiously even though he was answering the call of the Party. He thus recalls a chapter of history that had been erased, revealing the masquerade of the totalitarian regime that was able to bring intellectuals into line by trapping them with the lure of the famous slogan "Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom."

By the extension of time and the mixing of personal experience with reported narratives, the novel, beyond individual events and tragedies, denounces a dictatorship resting on the cult of personality and the Utopia of the "New Man." The denigration of the Communist Party and the critique of the totalitarian system are flaunted with an impudence that contrasts with most of the mainland writing on the same subject. But the singularity of Gao's work cannot be reduced to this subversive power, which is partly favoured by an extraterritorial narrative position. Rather, it translates into an unrivalled lucidity in the representation of a system whose perversity can be demonstrated only on condition that one examines oneself and breaks one's own self-censorship.

The narrative of events, whether objective or critical, is paralleled by self-analysis of the narrator's own behaviour by means of pronoun alternation: he thus proves to be both judge and defendant, even though the "you" refuses to pass any judgement on the "he" that he claims to merely observe. This dividing into two creates interstices that enable a questioning of the personal involvement in the collective madness produced by the system. Taking on a coercive policy that mixes informing with fear, the narrator has no hesitation in establishing a parallel between this "Red Terror" and fascism, despite the reservations of Margarethe, a German Jew, who seeks to distinguish racist from ideological totalitar-

ianism: "Fascism was no worse than the Cultural Revolution [...] the Red Terror [was] an infectious disease that made people go mad."<sup>(27)</sup> The comparison between the two totalitarian systems leads the narrator to bravely raise the delicate question of personal behaviour as he progresses towards remarks that challenge the posture of victimhood: "During the Cultural Revolution, people were 'rebellious' [...]. However, after the end of the Cultural Revolution people avoided talking about 'rebellious,' or simply forgot that part of history. Everyone has become a victim of that great catastrophe known as the Cultural Revolution and has forgotten that before disaster fell upon their own heads, they, too, were to some extent the assailants."<sup>(28)</sup> The two-fold rejection, in the course of the same page, of amnesiac and falsifying historiography as well as the discourse of victimhood, reorients the diatribe towards introspection. Nevertheless, this introspective memory still comes up against obstructions that only an exorcist form of writing seems capable of removing.

Personal memory is subjected to a complex configuration that is repeatedly underpinned by an implicit ritual of exorcism. In this respect, *One Man's Bible* oscillates between forgetting and blocked memory. In contrast with Margarethe, who bears the burden of collective suffering, the narrator advocates forgetting, seen as the only remedy for *mneme*, the invasive memories that are synonymous with a descent into "Hell." Forcible amnesia, however, leads to haunting by the past, obliterating anamnesis with a memory that sinks into vain repetition without managing to make the slightest recollection emerge. Blankness and saturation, following on the violence of history and on casuistry, are dragged into an interweaving that ends in a painful obstruction. Then comes the maieutic method.

Margarethe, in *One Man's Bible*, thus follows the "she" in *Soul Mountain* to become the midwife of memory by engaging in inspiring conversations. The encouragements of his German partner are in some ways reminiscent of exorcism, as they turn burning questions and physical union into a ritual of possession, following the example of "she," who is rightly called a "witch": "You say she wants to possess your soul. She says yes, not just your body. If she is going to possess you, she wants to possess everything, she wants to listen to your voice, as she goes into your memories, she wants to imagine with you, curl into the deepest recesses of your soul,

27. Gao Xingjian, *One Man's Bible*, trans. Mabel Lee, New York, Harper Collins, 2002, chapter 8, pp. 66-67.

28. *Ibid.*, chapter 18, p. 151. But the author had already highlighted the mendacity and absurdity of history in Chapter 71 of *Soul Mountain* through the use of arbitrary and contradictory repetitions.

manipulate your imagination, she says, she also wants to become your soul.”<sup>(29)</sup>

These words and actions reveal themselves to work as demon-chasers: by giving birth to memories, they make it possible to transfigure them. No longer imprisoned by the verifying memory, the recollections that emerge in this way give the narrator the possibility of reconciling himself with his past and beginning the process of rebuilding his identity. Thus a complicity between the “you” and the “he” is revealed behind their apparent separation: not only is the distinction belied by moments of confusion, and even of fusion, but also the “he” can take leave of his status as a historical character and engage in dialogue with the “you.” The permutation of the two enunciators then serves to establish a legitimising narrative, which can frame selective recollections.

These are narrativised through a chronological dichotomy, between before and after, established according to a logic of discontinuity that contrasts with the continuous linearity of repressive history. “Before” coincides with the unleashing of the Cultural Revolution that led the narrator to participate in the “rebellion,” joining the general movement in answer to Mao’s call. “After” means his growing awareness of the manipulation of the masses by the authorities. The philosophy of escape, which now guides his behaviour, consequently translates into this (chrono)logical break.

The transmutation of the self nevertheless partially belies the break in continuity, since various subsequent motifs take over previous events in such a way as to provide mitigating circumstances. Thus the moments of revolutionary enthusiasm, as expressed in the *dazibao*, the criticism sessions and the conflicts between various factions of the Red Guards, are modulated according to alibis, which nonetheless make plausible the absence of the narrator character, who was in fact the head of a faction. The Secretary of the local Party, Mr. Lu,<sup>(30)</sup> a mentor to the narrator who is exiled in the south after his escape from the Cadre School, does not fail to influence him; the narrator remains responsible for revolutionary acts, but nonetheless already protects his own colleagues by flouting interdictions and revealing secret information to them. Under these circumstances, his initial commitment to the Communist ideal and instinct for survival are compensated by these virtuous deeds, described in a mode that is as allusive as it is significant.

This is not dissimulation or apology, but a confession of innocence lost and regained, as suggested by two Biblical references. The narrator admits that he allowed himself to be led into the whirlwind of the Cultural Revolution with the

conviction and the fervour of an “apostle with a divine mission to save the world.”<sup>(31)</sup> This transitory commitment quickly gave way to disillusionment and scepticism, which transformed him into “[his] own [...] apostle”<sup>(32)</sup> and a follower of a new divinity, Freedom. This twofold apostolate reads less as a fortuitous metaphor than as an intentional evangelical allusion when one thinks of the literal meaning of the novel’s title, *Yi ge ren de shengjing*: One Man’s Bible. It is also not without analogy with the conversion of Saint Paul<sup>(33)</sup> in the resonance of Victor Hugo’s phrase, itself metaphorical: “Saint Paul only became a saint under mitigating circumstances. He got into Heaven only by the stage door.”<sup>(34)</sup>

The more or less voluntary recognition raises the question of “confession” and of “repentance” (*chanhui*), a stumbling block for all literature of the Cultural Revolution. Han Shaogong in “Visit” shows a former young student who, when he returns to the village that took him in, feels troubled by the memory of a death that calls into question everybody’s innocence.<sup>(35)</sup> Compared to the uncertainties that characterise Han Shaogong’s narrative, Yu Qiuyu, the most media-savvy and controversial essayist because of the active part he played in the leadership at the time, displays unusual nerve in an auto-hagiography that makes him into a victim as well as an erudite hermit, happy to withdraw from the snares of the world.<sup>(36)</sup> The general lack of any signs of repentance in the eyewitness accounts of the period is indeed striking. Qian Zhongshu attributes this strategy of silence and embellishment to the feeling of shame and remorse,<sup>(37)</sup> while historians and literary critics try to find

29. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, *op. cit.*, chap. 32, p. 181.

30. Who in all aspects resembles the character of Secretary Fang in the short story “Bi’an” (The Other Shore) in Gao’s collection *Gei wo laoye mai yugan* (Buying a fishing rod for my grandfather), *op. cit.*, pp. 177-209.

31. Gao Xingjian, *One Man’s Bible*, *op. cit.*, chap. 19, p. 156 (modified); “you zhong sheng-tu jiaoshi de shiming gan,” Gao Xingjian, *Yi ge ren de shengjing* (One Man’s Bible), Taipei, Lianjing, 1999, p. 161.

32. Gao Xingjian, *One Man’s Bible*, *op. cit.*, chap. 24, p. 198 (modified; Mabel Lee translates the word as “follower”); “ni shi ni ziji de shangdi he shitu,” Gao Xingjian, *Yi ge ren de shengjing*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

33. See the New Testament: *The Acts of the Apostles*, ch. 9, “The conversion of Saul.”

34. Victor Hugo, *L’Homme qui rit* (The Man Who Laughs), book III, *Bibliothèque.net*, p. 192; <http://bibliotheque.net/victor-hugo/l-homme-qui-rit/page-192.html> (31 May 2010).

35. Han Shaogong, “Gui qu lai” (Visit), in *Gui qu lai*, Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 1996, pp. 112-127. But he later challenges repentance, considering it to be a sign of submission to the doxa and to intolerable political correctness. See “Chanhui” (Repentance), in *Anshi* (Allusion), Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2002, pp. 97-102.

36. Yu Qiuyu, *Jie wo yisheng* (A borrowed life), Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 2004. The slightly cheeky dedication reads: “These memoirs are dedicated to my elders and to my contemporaries.”

37. Qian Zhongshu, “*Ganxiao liuji xiao yin*” (Brief preface to *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*), in Yang Jiang, *Yang Jiang sanwen* (Essays by Yang Jiang), Nanjing, Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1983, pp. 72-73.

other explanations. Xu Zidong points to the vagueness and the “complex” that hover over eyewitness accounts, which he attributes to the embarrassment felt by former Red Guards, whose behaviour was far from being above suspicion. Xu Youyu, surprised by this shortcoming in the memoirs written in Chinese and English that he has collected, considers that with the exception of Ba Jin, most of them are products of “accusation,” “self-defence,” and even of “rejoicing” rather than “confessions” or “sincere self-analysis.” He sets out a number of interpretations: the capricious nature of the Cultural Revolution that was capable of turning torturers into victims from one day to the next, the persistent hostility created by factionalism, which gets in the way of impartial reflection, and the intellectuals’ preference for silence in order to preserve their integrity.<sup>(38)</sup> Are these feelings shared by Gao Xingjian, who seems to eschew all these configurations? Göran Malmqvist, in any case, tends to distinguish the Nobel winner, considering *One Man’s Bible* as “confessions.” To the Swedish sinologist, the memory of the Cultural Revolution imposes itself on the author despite his reluctance and his repulsion: the “you” feels constrained to face up to a “he” and his behaviour during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>(39)</sup> Liu Zaifu even refers to “self-redemption” in praising the “frankness” with which Gao Xingjian tackled the subject.<sup>(40)</sup> These various commentaries, however, meet with resistance from the author, who questions the idea of “repent[ing],”<sup>(41)</sup> and even more so that of salvation, so strong is his aversion to the politics of the “new man.” This motif, which differs from the majority of the narratives referred to, requires fresh thought.

Displacement thus becomes necessary to understand a body of work that rebels against any moral judgement and is profoundly marked by existential and identity preoccupations.<sup>(42)</sup> Fiction provides the author with a way out of a descent into the depths of the past, which the narrator feels the need neither to justify nor to repent for, but which compels him to reconcile with himself. This diffuse aim implies a “lying truth” directly linked to the effects of the implicit and of editing:

*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. [...] While exposing the land of your ancestors, the Party, the leaders, the ideals, the New People, while also that modern superstition and fraud—revolution—you use literature to create a gauze curtain, so that, viewed through it,*

*that trash can at least be looked at. Hidden on this side of the curtain, in the dark with the audience, you derive pleasure; so doesn’t this provide satisfaction?*<sup>(43)</sup>

There is no cynicism here, despite what some critics have alleged.<sup>(44)</sup> On the contrary, this quote, as well as the whole of Chapter 24, are the beginning of a complex and lucid (self)analysis of the relationship between lies, pleasure, and suffering, with due attention to the “gauze curtain” that places the narrator in a position to observe by concealing himself. The lucidity and ambivalence of veiling and unveiling thus lie at the heart of the art of fiction, which will triumph over forbidden memory, preparing the ground for reconciliation. Indeed, the pronoun shifts contain an invisible and supralucid “I” that not only adjusts the distance between the “you” and the “he,” but also casts a glance at the “you” observing the “he.” This sets off the dialectic of observation and meditation, of memory and judgement, of impassiveness and of projection of desires. The interplay of the dual narrators and the mutual control they exercise over one another go together with a game of concealing and revealing, as suggested by an imperceptible slip of the pen: on the subject of the taboo that hangs over the word “rebellion” among the former “rebels,” the author uses the word *huiyan* (1) instead of *huiyan* (2), using homophony to change the “taboo” into a “recommendation.”<sup>(45)</sup> It would no doubt be excessive to stretch this wordplay to further homophones, such as “obscure word” (*huiyan* 3), or even “regrets” (*huiyan* 4),

38. Xu Youyu, “Ren de daoyi zhicheng zai nali? – dui wu zhong buchanhui wenxue wenben de jiedu” (“Where is morality? Five categories of literary writing devoid of any confession”), in Yu Kaiwei (ed.), *Chanhui haishi bu chanhui* (To repent or not), Beijing, Zhongguo gongren chubanshe, 2004, pp. 15-17; Xu Zidong, *Dangdai xiaoshuo yu jiti jiyi: xushu wenge* (The contemporary novel and collective memory: Narrating the Cultural Revolution), Taipei, Maitian, 2000.

39. Göran Malmqvist, quoted by Liu Zaifu, “Gao Xingjian yu linghun ziji” (“Gao Xingjian and self-redemption”), in *Gao Xingjian lun* (On Gao Xingjian), Taipei, Lianjing, 2004, p. 165.

40. Liu Zaifu, “Gao Xingjian yu linghun ziji” (Gao Xingjian and self-redemption), in *Gao Xingjian lun* (On Gao Xingjian), *op. cit.*, pp. 164-193.

41. *One Man’s Bible*, *op. cit.*, chapter 22, p. 182.

42. “Existentialist” philosophy confirms the impact of Sartre on Gao Xingjian’s work as well as on the generation of Chinese students and intellectuals at the beginning of the 1980s. See the article he wrote on contemporary French literature, where from the outset he refers to Sartre and quotes his expressions: “What is Literature? And Why Literature?” in Gao Xingjian, “Falanxi xiandai wenxue de tongku” (Contemporary French literature in torment), *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu*, no. 1, 1980, pp. 51-57.

43. *One Man’s Bible*, *op. cit.*, chap. 24, p. 196.

44. Ngai Ling Tun, “Yuyu huanxiu – lun Yi ge ren de shengjing de wenge jiyi” (Speech withheld: *One Man’s Bible* and the memory of the Cultural Revolution), *Zhongwai wenxue* (Chinese and foreign literatures), no. 1, 2008, pp. 33, 39.

45. “Zhihou renren you dou huiyan zaofan,” Gao Xingjian, *Yi ge ren de shengjing*, *op. cit.*, p. 155. “However, after the end of the Cultural Revolution people avoided talking about ‘rebellious’,” *One Man’s Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

but the hypothesis remains of an unconscious network woven by the unspoken.

The art of fiction, in fact, makes itself answerable to dishonest compromise, especially as it is invested with an anti-destiny ethos. Careful to prove that he is neither an “enemy of the People” nor of himself, the author, for all that, avoids a Rousseauist Confession: he does not seek to plead not guilty and even less to “repent” by re-establishing the truth of events or by asking for the compassion of his readers. He rather positions himself in favour of the relativity inherent in the nature and function of the mask, which requires further comment in the light of this identity narrative.

Contrary to a Christian reading, the mask does not shelter the secrets of inner life, revealed by long introspection. The latter, in the strict meaning of the word, is absent from the novel: behind the eyeholes of the mask lies a bottomless black abyss. Once the mask of conventions has been removed, the narrator prepares to immediately refictionalise the “he.” Without the least intention of depicting a “true” being, he attempts, on the contrary, to maintain him in his imaginary nature with the help of a literature that never pulls away the “gauze curtain.” This fictional claim can be compared to those *Nuo* masks known as *bianlian*, literally “changing face,” which have two or even three superposable faces.<sup>(46)</sup> The attempt also approaches the greco-roman tradition by restoring the Latin word for character, *persona*, which designated the mask worn by an actor on the stage, while referring to the *prosopon*, with no distinction made between the mask and the face. Perhaps the inspiration comes firstly from the “painted face” mask particular to the Beijing Opera, which sits over the face of flesh in a representation of a new individuality. All these examples reaffirm the complicity between mask and fiction. This masked representation establishes the equivalence between telling history and telling a story, and consequently the play with truth that lends a face to a transmuted and transfigured identity.<sup>(47)</sup> This mask-face no longer serves to protect the character from the insults of the outside, but challenges him with his own destiny, as attested in the opening and closing lines of the novel. At the end a religious feeling takes hold of the narrator, who finds himself in Perpignan, near a black metal figure of Christ, listening to a Mass by Kodály.<sup>(48)</sup> Is this the change of heart of a man alone without God, but now full of a new faith? This meditative present, in any case, counterbalances the curse that opens the novel and which so haunted the child. Memorial writing manages to defy it, no longer by rehearsing the relationship between the individual and society, but by inviting us to ponder the relationship of

the individual with the Law, or even with the origins of symbolism. Since the snow is dirtied by footsteps, as the child writing his first words in his diary observes, it is doubtless through the sacred eyes of the mask that the adult narrator allows himself the hope of finding once more this unformulated and primeval memory.<sup>(49)</sup> •

• Translated by Michael Black

#### Glossary

bianlian 變臉

chanhui 懺悔

Falanxi xiandai wenxue de tongku 法蘭西現代文學的痛苦

Gao Xingjian 高行健

huiyan 1 (recommendation) 誨言

huiyan 2 (taboo) 諱言

huiyan 3 (obscure words) 晦言

huiyan 4 (regret) 悔言

Kailu 開路

Kaishan 開山

nuo 傩

Shanhai jing 山海經

Shuijing zhu 水經注

wunuo 巫傩

Yi ge ren de shengjing 一個人的聖經

zhijou renren you dou huiyan zaofan 之後人人又都誨言造反

46. *Le Masque de la Chine*, op. cit., p. 108.

47. Jacques Rancière states in *Le Partage du sensible*, La Fabrique ed., 2000, p. 61: “Writing history and writing a story depends on the same order of truth.”

48. *One Man's Bible*, op. cit., chap. 60, p. 449.

49. Singular echoes of this conclusion may be found in the beginning of Gao Xingjian's Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “I have no way of knowing whether it was fate that has pushed me onto this dais but as various lucky coincidences have created this opportunity I may as well call it fate. 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.” Gao Xingjian “The Case for literature,” trans. Mabel Lee, The Nobel Foundation, 2000, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html) (30 May 2010).