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Sebastian Veg

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china perspectives

On the Margins of Modernity

A Comparative Study of Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō [1]

SEBASTIAN VEG

Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō share an interest in margins that was the basis for a conversation between them in 2006. A closer comparison of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*, 1982-1989) and Ōe Kenzaburō's *The Silent Cry* (*Man'en gannen no futtobōru, 1967*) also reveals a shared distrust of modernity, and a more precise preference for the margins of local culture. This cultural critique of modernity can be documented in their essays. However, although their respective doubts about modernity and central culture translate into similar formulations of an individual ethics, Ōe does not share Gao's vision of a detached writer of "cold literature," but rather continues to explore the political implications of his ethical stance. It is argued that their respective definitions of literature can be viewed as explorations of an alternative form of modernity.

A public dialogue was organised between Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō in Aix-en-Provence in October 2006, formalising a personal affinity that had developed between the two writers on previous occasions. Marginality was the topic chosen for the discussion, which was then included by Gao in his latest volume of essays. [2] While the event was of course not unrelated to their status as Nobel Prize laureates for literature, Ōe becoming the second Japanese writer to receive the prize in 1994 (after Kawabata Yasunari in 1968) and Gao the first Chinese-language laureate in 2000, the connection between the two writers was first and foremost a personal one. Ōe Kenzaburō, born in 1935 in Ōse village, Shikoku, and Gao Xingjian, born in 1940 in Ganzhou, Jiangxi, are part of the same generation, one that personally experienced many tragic aspects of the ideologies of the twentieth century, and they share a generally sceptical or critical attitude towards the great narratives of modern history. In particular, both have been singled out for their critical positions towards their own countries: Ōe as a critic of Japan's militaristic modernisation; Gao both in the 1980s in China as a "bourgeois liberal" and after the Nobel Prize as a "dissident" critic of China from the outside. In this sense they share a marginal position with respect to the "nations" they are sometimes seen to represent, and more generally to the very idea of national literature.

Both studied French, Ōe under Watanabe Kazuo at Tokyo University, where he was admitted in 1954, and Gao Xingjian at Beijing Foreign Studies University from 1957; their early contact with post-war French literature may have shaped their understanding of the writer's role in society. Ōe was involved with the Japanese left: in 1960 he travelled to China as a member of the Japan-China Literary Delegation and met with Mao Zedong, before resigning from a similar association four years later in protest against China's atomic bomb test (remaining a life-long opponent of nuclear power). He also travelled to Paris to meet Sartre, on whom he had written his master's thesis. Gao Xingjian during this time joined the Chinese Communist Party and became a young cadre assigned to work at the Foreign Language Press, which remained his work unit until the early 1980s. [3] Through their early academic study as well as their later literary recognition, they are both enmeshed in European and world literature, and both have been at pains to reflect on the position this entails for them in society and in the world, which they describe as marginal on several levels, including—though not limited to—the position of Chinese and Japanese-language literature in literary institutions historically dominated by European languages, such as the Nobel prize.

Both writers have taken a critical attitude towards modernity

1. The author would like to thank Arif Dirlik and Dung Kai-cheung, as well as an anonymous reviewer, for their helpful comments, and Noël Dutrait for providing the tape of the original discussion between Gao and Ōe.

2. See "Dajiang Jiansanlang yu Gao Xingjian duihua" (Dialogue between Ōe Kenzaburō and Gao Xingjian), in Gao Xingjian, *Lun Chuangzao* (On Creation), Taipei, Lianjing, 2008, pp. 324-333. This text was originally published under the title: "'Bianyuan' weizhi de xiezuo dadao pushi jiazhi" (Writing in a "marginal" position attains universal value), *Mingbao yuekan*, April 2007, pp. 25-30.

3. Biographical elements from Terry Yip, "A Chronology of Gao Xingjian," in Kwok-Kan Tam (ed.), *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2001, pp. 311-339; Noël Dutrait, "Gao Xingjian, l'itinéraire d'un homme seul," *Esprit*, no. 280 (December 2001), pp. 146-158; Michiko Wilson, *The Marginal World of Ōe Kenzaburō*, White Plains, ME Sharpe, 1986, pp. 129-130; Maya Jaggi, "In the forest of the soul", *The Guardian*, 5 February 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/ 2005/feb/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview9 (3 May 2010).

or modernism, eschewing on one hand the idea that Asia and Asian literature should in some way "imitate" modernism, whether political or literary, but also on the other the symmetrical proposition that it should revert to some kind of pre-defined "tradition." Gao is just as scathing on the subject of post-modernism, which he describes as the "contemporary sickness" of art. [4] Each writer thus takes an oblique – or marginal – stance in addressing the question of non-European or non-Western literature and its specificity – desirable or not. In a way, the heart of the problem is the definition of modernity itself, in particular the type of connexion that can be drawn between the socioeconomic model of industrial development or the political rise of liberal democracy on the one hand, and the body of literature that is commonly referred to as European modernism on the other. This connexion raises the question of whether non-European literature should strive for a different kind of stance towards modernity. Gao and Ōe have long been involved in this discussion: Gao was branded a "modernist" in the China of the early 1980s and criticised for drawing inspiration from the Western avant-garde; [5] Ōe links Japanese modernity to the politically ambiguous "modernisation" of Meiji, which in his view prepared the way for the militarism of the Shōwa era. Conversely, Gao has repeatedly criticised modernism, including as early as 1987 in an essay discussed below, and again in his Nobel lecture, while Ōe, despite his misgivings about Meiji, endorses Sōseki's unique form of "modern" writing.

Examining some of the theoretical viewpoints developed in the two authors' Nobel lectures and other essays, this paper will attempt to clarify their ambiguous positions regarding modernity. It will then relate the question of modernity to their discussion of marginality, and in particular to the importance of locality in their fiction, focusing on Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*, 1982-1989) and Ōe Kenzaburō's *The Silent Cry* (*Man'en gannen no futtobōru* or The Football Game of the First Year of Man'en, 1967). Finally, examining the position of the writer in the context of modernity, it will draw a distinction between the ethical values implied by Gao and Ōe.

Overcoming modernity

In one of his most dense and subtly argumentative essays, which was written in 1987 but can be seen as a blueprint for his 2000 Nobel lecture, Gao Xingjian examines the question of modernity and Chinese literature. The title "Belated modernism and present-day Chinese literature" refers to the Chinese writers who emerged in the wake of de-Maoisation: Gao argues that with a few exceptions (he quotes Lu Xun and Li Jinfa), May Fourth writers were strongly influenced by two nineteenth-century trends, Romanticism and critical realism, and that China therefore only experienced "modernism" in the 1980s. However, recalling the historical importance of the realist canon in China, he rejects the idea that there is an incompatibility or a contradiction between modernism and realism among the Chinese writers of the 1980s (whom he refers to as *xiandaipai*, reserving the term *xiandai zhuyi* for early twentieth century modernism): "In Chinese contemporary literature, drawing a simple distinction between 'the modernists' and realism is naturally not helpful to the development of this literature." [6] Therefore, while he argues that in the age of mass communications, "Chinese literature, which undertakes to create in the Chinese language, can no longer afford not to develop communication with the literature of all nations in the world," [7] he also makes clear that there can be nothing mechanical about this "communication." The European modernists have become classics, their place in world literature is established: "But there is no need at all for us to follow in their tracks, and to spend another half a century going over their path one more time; even less is there a need to leave aside our own creation in order to criticise them one by one." [8] Therefore, the path to modernity followed by Chinese "modernists" can only be different from the path followed in Europe, and these "modernists" should be analysed in their own right and on their own terms. [9] European modernity should be neither rejected nor blindly imitated.

Similarly, Ōe, in a series of talks given in Europe and America in the early 1990s, links the development of "modern Japanese literature" with the political "modernisation" of the

4. "Xiandai xing chengle dangdai bing" (Modernity has turned into a contemporary sickness) in Gao, *Lun Chuangzuo*, pp. 130-134, for example: "The attack on society, politics and cultural tradition that modernity brought to modern art has now, in this globalised, commercialised post-modernist time, been dissolved into a marketing technique based on 'only new is good'; avant-garde art has become a global movement promoting fashion" (pp. 130-131). Therefore it seems difficult to define Gao by any sort of "postmodernist aspiration" (Jessica Yeung, *Ink Dances in Limbo: Gao Xingjian's Writing as Cultural Translation*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2008, p. 99).
5. See for example Gao's essay "Ge ri huang hua" in *Meiyou zhuyi* (Without -isms), Hong Kong, Tiandi tushu, 2000, pp. 158-166; "Wilted chrysanthemums" in *The Case for Literature*, translated by Mabel Lee, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 140-154. When there is a published English translation of Gao's text, quotations are taken from the published translation, followed by the reference in the Chinese original.
6. Gao Xingjian, *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 103.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101
8. *Ibid.*, p. 101
9. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Meiji era. While the tradition of "pure literature" or *jun bungaku* that developed at this time was grounded in cosmopolitanism—writers like Natsume Sōseki were both deeply versed in Chinese classics and knowledgeable about contemporary European writers—the essence of the modernist project rested on an ambiguity that became fully apparent after World War Two: "Japan's modernisation reveals the history of an Asian country that sought to extricate itself from Asia and become a European-style nation." [10] In Ōe's view, it took place "at the cost of an ugly war which [Japan] started in China and which left neighbouring Asian countries devastated. Japan itself was reduced to a smouldering ruin." [11] Nonetheless, Ōe believes that this ambiguity was already profoundly perceived by Sōseki: he quotes the protagonist Daisuke in *And Then* (*Sore kara*, 1909) as an example of a young intellectual complaining that Japan "poses as a first-class power," while at the same time being himself engulfed by the "life appetites" for material well-being embodied in European modernity. [12] Therefore, Ōe argues, modernisation has led to decline, "a state of outright spiritual poverty." [13]

This statement can be read as an echo of the theories of the famous intellectual and sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi on "overcoming modernity." [14] Using the slogan of a much-criticised writers' conference convened in 1942, Takeuchi called for Japan to invent its own modernity, regretting that it had simply adopted the colonialist and developmentalist model represented by nineteenth century Europe, which from Meiji to Shōwa led it to become a colonial power itself. This adoption is what he calls the revenge of the slave, aspiring to become the master's master: "The slave refuses to recognise that he is a slave. He is a true slave when he thinks he is not a slave. And he reveals the full extent of his slavishness when he becomes a master." [15] Takeuchi concludes that just as, in a colonial configuration, the hope always exists that the colonised may become colonisers, in Japanese literature, even despair is transformed into hope of salvation from outside. [16] By contrast, Lu Xun's "desperate resistance" against both tradition and modernity was, for Takeuchi, a possible way in which to redirect the reflections of Japanese intellectuals. [17] The title of Ōe's Nobel lecture, "Japan, the ambiguous, and myself" (*Aimai na Nihon no watakushi*), which reflectively echoes Kawabata's unquestioningly optimistic Nobel speech "Japan, the beautiful, and myself" (*Utsukushii Nihon no watakushi*), highlights the "ambiguity" of Japan's modernisation to suggest the need to truly "overcome modernity," just as Takeuchi salvages the slogan of the 1942 conference for his own critique of modern Japan. This filiation running from Lu Xun via Takeuchi to Ōe sheds new light on how the latter positions himself with respect to Gao, who is similarly at pains to "overcome" aspects of modernity.

Gao Xingjian's 2000 Nobel lecture "The Case for Literature" (*Wenxue de liyou*) also addresses the apparent achievements of modernity. The closing of the twentieth century, in his view, marks the end of utopian politics and the literature that accompanied them: "The illusion of a social utopia that enshrouded more than a century has vanished, and when literature throws off the shackles of this and that -ism, it still has to return to the dilemmas of human existence." [18] Literature is part and parcel of this dystopian modernity: in the twentieth century "politics interfered with and stifled literature to an extent that has seldom been seen in human history"; [19] furthermore, literature itself was inhabited by the "ideology of continuing revolution," which repeatedly caused writers to attack both their immediate predecessors and the underlying traditions of their culture. [20] In this way, modern Chinese literature became drowned in "isms": "Chinese literature in the twentieth century endured disaster after disaster, and indeed almost reached its last

10. K. Ōe, "On modern and contemporary Japanese literature," in, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures*, Tokyo-New York-London, Kodansha International, 1995, p. 55. No mention is made of a translator or a Japanese original in the English publication of this essay. When quoting from Ōe's other texts, published English translations are used, followed by the reference to the Japanese original.
11. K. Ōe, "Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian audience," in *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, pp. 25-26; *Aimai na Nihon no watashi*, Tokyo, Iwanami shisho, 1995, p. 177.
12. Quoted from *And then*, in Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, pp. 22-23; *Aimai na Nihon no watashi*, pp. 175-176.
13. K. Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, p. 26; *Aimai na Nihon no watashi*, p. 177.
14. This expression, as explained by Takeuchi, epitomises Japan's "ambiguity," or at least the ambiguity of Japan's war, presented simultaneously as a war of colonial invasion and a war against imperialism. Takeuchi Yoshimi, *What is modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Richard F. Calichman, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 120. For a critical perspective, see also Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.
15. Takeuchi Yoshimi, "What is modernity? (The case of China and Japan)," in *What is modernity?*, p. 72.
16. Takeuchi sees Japanese literature (and scholarship) as essentially colonial in that they are related to an ideal existing outside that must be pursued and captured. Takeuchi Y., *What is modernity?*, p. 67. Dazai Osamu is one of the examples he gives of a writer who transforms even despair into hope (p. 49).
17. Takeuchi ironically comments that Lu Xun was inevitably misunderstood by Japanese writers, who saw him as a "Chinese Ōgai," a believer in progress and modernisation (*ibid.*, p. 73).
18. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 42; *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 10.
19. "Literature as Testimony: the Search for Truth," in Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 49 ; *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 16.
20. "Literature as Testimony," in Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 51; *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 18.

gasp, because it was ruled by politics: both the revolution in literature and revolutionary literature alike put literature and the individual with their back to the wall." [21] This is why Gao Xingjian's writing is "without -ism."

In "Belated Modernity," Gao goes on to sketch out the major differences between Western modernism and the Chinese "modernists" of the 1980s, adding his own thoughts, which often in turn set him off from the latter group.

> *Firstly, [Chinese modernists] express an endorsement of the self, rather than negating the self, as did Western modernism. They assert the value of human dignity with a Nietzschean tragic passion, rather than undertaking a cold-blooded dissection of the self. They are opposed to traditional feudal ethics and uphold the legitimacy of sexuality, rather than rejecting the very idea of ethics and being disgusted by sexuality. They reveal the absurdities within reality; they do not see this absurdity as existence itself.* [22]

Gao's attitude towards modernism is ambiguous. He criticises what he describes as (belated) "Chinese" modernism, which appears as an avant-gardist politicised romanticism, defined by its endorsement of Nietzsche, the will to liberate the individual from oppressive traditions, and the possibility for the individual to overcome the absurdities of reality. This is the type of modernism that Gao associates with ideology and politicised literature, because of its propensity to endow literature with a central social role. [23] "Western modernism," on the other hand, is characterised by its amoral introspection into the depths of human nature. Among the long list of names of Western modernists provided in this article, it is Kafka—rather than the avant-garde—who no doubt tallies most closely with Gao's description of a cold questioning of the self and the absurdity of all human endeavours. Kafka has in fact already gone further than the Nietzschean writers who make Gao uncomfortable: "In the last century, Nietzsche already proclaimed that God is dead, and that what we revere is ourselves. Why does Chinese literature today need to replace God with that very same self? What is more, after Kafka, that self has already died. This is a time in which old values pass away very quickly." [24] Although he writes earlier that there were few "modernists" in early twentieth century China (presumably in the sense of writers like Kafka), it seems clear the Gao's criticism of the "belated" modernists of the 1980s in fact also targets the "non-belated" May Fourth writers, or at least those that were later constructed as the May Fourth "mainstream." This is confirmed by Gao's systematic linkage between "literary revolution" and "revolutionary literature," as in the passage from "The Case for Literature" quoted above.

Ōe expresses similar misgivings about the emergence of "modern literature" in Japan as a complement to the institutional modernisation of the Meiji era, in a vein that can be linked to Liang Qichao in China, for whom "new fiction" was meant to be one among a long list of "news" necessary to shape a "new citizen." It is revealing to tie in Gao's criticism of the Liang Qichao-May Fourth tradition with Ōe's doubts about Meiji, because Liang's idea of "political fiction" was largely inspired by the emblematic Meiji intellectual Fukuzawa Yukichi. [25] Both writers reject this utilitarian or overly committed view of literature, which is somehow linked to social and political modernity. While they underline their cosmopolitanism, they remain uncomfortable with the Nietzschean or Promethean variety of modernity that, in Gao's view, has bestowed on literature itself a dangerously central position in society: "We should not credit literature with too high a value; it is only an expression of human culture. Writers are not warriors, nor are they saints with halos on their head." [26]

It is particularly interesting to note that, just as Ōe leaves a special place for Sōseki as a "reluctant modernist," the modernist who recognised the perils of modernity, [27] Gao exempts Lu Xun, together with the poet Li Jinfa, from his critique of early twentieth century Chinese writers. [28] Although he has elsewhere criticised Lu Xun for his 1902

21. "The Case for Literature," in Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 33 (modified); *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 4.
22. Gao X., *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 102.
23. For this reason, although I am in agreement with the idea of *Soul Mountain* as "a late, great modernist novel in our allegedly postmodern times" (Jeffrey Kinkley, "Gao Xingjian in the 'Chinese' Perspective of Qu Yuan and Shen Congwen," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 132), it is also important to reflect on why Gao Xingjian himself would probably not define it in this way.
24. Gao X., *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 102.
25. See Hiroko Willcock, "Japanese Modernization and the Emergence of New Fiction in Early Twentieth Century China: A Study of Liang Qichao," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Oct., 1995), pp. 817-840.
26. Gao X., *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 102
27. Similarly, Takeuchi Yoshimi exempts Sōseki from his critique of "colonial" Meiji literature: "For Sōseki, Japan's modern civilization was a failure, in that it was not internally generated; rather it remained an external affectation through and through. Sōseki sought in vain for a way to transform the modernizing process into an internal one" (Takeuchi Y., *What is modernity?*, p. 154).
28. Gao's ambiguous relationship with Lu Xun is evident in the discussion in *Preliminary investigation into the technique of the modern novel*, in the chapter entitled "Xiandai jiqiao yu minzu jingshen" (*Xiandai xiaoshuo*, *op. cit.*, p. 113-114; translated by Ng Mau-Sang as "Contemporary Technique and National Character in Fiction," *Renditions*, 1983, p. 55-58. See also Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian's dialogue with two dead poets from Shaoxing: Xu Wei and Lu Xun," in Raoul Findeisen and Robert Gassman (eds.), *Autumn Floods*, Bern, Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 401-414.

poem recalling his will to "sacrifice [his] blood to the Yellow Emperor" or his post-1927 "conversion," he has not voiced direct criticism of Lu Xun's fiction—an important point, because for Ōe's generation, Lu Xun was associated with Takeuchi's criticism of Meiji, and the possibility of a different kind of modernity. Jeffrey Kinkley has formulated the hypothesis of a "third type" of modernism, distinct from "Western high modernism" (which he defines as directed against positivistic modernity), and "treaty-port modernism" devoted to "urban glitz and material and social newness." He associates this third type with academic positions and geographical borderlands, particularly Kunming, and writers such as Shen Congwen and, at least partially, Lu Xun. [29] It could probably also be related to the Japanese notion of *jun bungaku*, which, as underlined by Ōe, was originally used as an antithesis to Meiji modernisation (by the romantic poet Kitamura Tōkoku), and has now come to signify "non-commercial" literature or "belles lettres." It is this third type of "reluctant modernists" (Lu Xun and Sōseki) that both Gao and Ōe are interested in, because they do not sacrifice the marginal position of literature to the demands of the age, but reject the central role for literature in nation-building inherited from the Romantic tradition and the Promethean attitude still implicit in some of Nietzsche's writings.

Marginality and locality

For Gao and Ōe, calling into question the project of modernity can be seen as a two-tiered process: it involves, on one hand, a critique of the progress-oriented ideology of economic development (some would probably refer to "capitalism"), and of colonialism or assimilation of "weak" or marginal cultures. At the same time, it is concerned with re-evaluating literature's own role in legitimising this Promethean project, and with limiting its social meaning to an individual ethics. This re-evaluation implies that literature should distance itself not only from ideologies, but more largely from the idea that it encapsulates a form of truth. Gao writes in the "Author's preface to *Without -isms*" that "To be without -isms is the minimum right for a human being. Putting aside any greater freedom, one should at least have that small freedom of not being a slave to any -ism." In order to safeguard this freedom, literature should renounce its aspirations to becoming a centre of power: "As the individual cannot control this world, it would be best for him to stand to the side rather than to think rashly that he can rule the world, or to let himself be senselessly slaughtered by it." [30] Marginality is therefore the consequence of a philosophical position that seeks to preserve its doubts about truth or the sense of history that a certain brand of confident modernist was eager to brush aside.

Soul Mountain resonates with this aspiration on a micro-thematic, structural, and philosophical level. The protagonist of the novel, both in his "I" and "you" incarnations (which alternate in even and odd-numbered chapters), sets out on a multi-tiered quest, ostensibly in search of Soul Mountain. It is mentioned in the first chapter by a man the you-narrator meets on a train, and described as a place of wild men and untouched forests: "It's all virgin wilderness." [31] The protagonist originally decides to search for this mountain as a way to assuage his nostalgia: "You've lived in the city for a long time and need to feel that you have a hometown. You want a hometown so that you'll be able to return to your childhood to recollect lost memories." [32] In Chapter 2, this quest is echoed by its more rationalised variant expressed by the I-narrator: "While you search for the route to Lingshan, I wander along the Yangtze River, looking for this sort of reality. I have just gone through a crisis (...) I should have left those polluted surroundings long ago and returned to nature to look for this kind of real life." [33] In Chapter 3, the second "you" chapter, when the narrator reaches the town of Wuyi, he is transported back to his childhood by the sounds and smells of the mountain village, and believes he recognises the language of Song tales when he hears the peasants speak. The "you" chapters serve, throughout the novel, to expand on this theme of the roots of Chinese culture, and are continuously interlaced with references to the heterodox and popular tradition recorded in works such as *Of Moun-*

29. J. Kinkley, "Gao Xingjian in the 'Chinese' Perspective," pp. 143-145. This categorisation is perhaps a little misleading: the bulk of Chinese literary modernism is associated with May Fourth and a form of social commitment—very different from "treaty-port modernism" if this is defined as inspired by the European avant-garde (although parts of the avant-garde were also very political). It might be more useful to see this "third type" as neither committed to social causes (May Fourth) nor preoccupied with formal experiments (treaty-port). Jeffrey Kinkley has given an extensive analysis of the type of modernism he has in mind based on three stories by Shen Congwen ("Shen Congwen among the Chinese modernists," *Monumenta Serica*, no. 54, 2006, pp. 311-341). Regarding Gao and modernism, see also Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian on the Issue of Literary Creation of the Modern Writer," in K. K. Tam (ed.), *The Soul of Chaos*, pp. 21-41; and Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian: Contre une modernité esthétique," in N. Dutrait (ed.), *L'écriture romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2006, pp. 13-23, an article dedicated to investigating Gao's anti-Nietzschean stance. Similarly, in the Japanese context, Ōe can be seen as harking back to a "third" type of modernism (Sōseki), which is neither defined by a political agenda (Fukuzawa Yukichi) nor endorses modernist "neo-sensationism" (Kawabata), which could be compared to Chinese "treaty-port" literature.

30. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, pp. 29, 27 (modified); *Meiyou zhuyi*, pp. 2, 4.

31. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, trans. Mabel Lee, New York, Harper-Collins, 2000, p. 3; *Lingshan* (Soul Mountain), Hong Kong, Tiandi tushu (simplified character edition), 2000, p. 3.

32. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 8; *Lingshan*, p. 8.

33. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 12 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 11.

tains and Seas, and other compendia of legends. Here, locality (hometown, childhood, the mountain village) serves as a geographical translation of marginality in that it fractures the idea of the national into countless variations and components.

Chapter 52, in which "you" is described as an emanation or the "shadow" of "I," explicitly connects the two quests:

> *Wallowing in my imagination, I travel into my inner mind with you who are my reflection. Which is more important? This perennial and perplexing question can become a debate as to which is more real, or even sometimes an argument. Let people debate or argue. It really has no connection with the spiritual voyage that I or you, immersed in travel, is experiencing.* [34]

The convergence of the two quests or their capacity to complement each other demonstrates that by alternating imagination and reality, the narrator continues to seek a form of totality and authenticity: simultaneously the origin of Chinese civilisation, the true nature of his own self and origin, a pristine natural environment untouched by culture, and finally the "truth" that literature purports to reveal.

However, this quest for unity and authenticity fractures into myriad multiplicity. The most obvious thematic symbol of this is the fragmentation of Chinese culture, first into alternative popular traditions, in the imagination of the you-narrator (Taoist legends, local folklore, such as the story of the *qi* snake, a Jin-era *chuanqi* about a nun who washes her own intestines every day in Chapter 48 [35]), and simultaneously into the countless minority cultures in the anthropological research conducted by the I-narrator: the Yi (chapters 20, 22), the Qiang (chapters 2, 68), and the Miao (chapters 39, 41, 43). In Chapter 59, the I-narrator marvels: "It's not unique to the ethnic minorities, the Han nationality also has a genuine folk culture which hasn't been contaminated by Confucian ethical teachings!" [36] This idea, which can be traced to pre-May Fourth thinkers such as Zhang Binglin, and is formulated most cogently in Gao's essay "Literature and metaphysics" (*Wenxue yu xuanxue*), [37] is in fact already an important aspect of "Belated modernity." In this essay, Gao first expressed the opposition between the unified culture of the Yellow River basin, echoed in the centralising aspects of Confucianism and its practice of *jiaohua* (the term translated by "Confucian ethical teachings" in the previous quotation), and the countless marginal cultures strewn along the Yangzi river, which he terms "non-literati culture" (*fei wenren wenhua*). [38] Chinese literature has of course long drawn inspiration from these marginal cultures expressed in Taoism and local traditions.

These ideas are very evidently steeped in the debates of the 1980s about "root-searching" (*xungen*) literature and, as underlined by Jeffrey Kinkley, the opposition between "yellow" and "blue" China, famously illustrated in the television series *River Elegy*. [39] They are also related to an early-twentieth century interest in locality that is documented from Zhang Binglin to Zhou Zuoren and Shen Congwen. Kinkley ties this aspect in with modernism, arguing that once again in the 1980s, modernism is defined by the search for primitivism. The structure of the novel, however, introduces a different perspective. While the narrator does indeed start out by searching for "primitive," "authentic" culture, "uncontaminated" by Confucianism, this quest is repeatedly broken and diffracted. Lingshan, Soul Mountain, fractures into a multiplicity of places, such as Lingyan, Soul Rock, where women come to pray for male children. The conclusion can only be that there is no source of Chinese culture, any more than there is a pristine nature (in Chapter 75, the narrator underlines that the Yangzi itself is entirely polluted, from its source to the sea) or a true "self" that can be separated from the world. In a very striking image, the "wild man" thus ironically turns out to be a persecuted Rightist in hiding (Chapter 61). [40] The narrator sees his own identity fracturing into

34. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 312-313 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 298. In this instance, Mabel Lee translates *zhenshi* (*hezhe geng wei zhenshi*) as "authentic" ("which is more authentic"), while in the previous quotation from Chapter 2, she translates *zhenshi* (*xunzhao zhezhong zhenshi*) as "reality" ("looking for this sort of reality"); I have therefore modified the occurrence in Chapter 52 to "which is more real." Noël and Liliane Dutrait's French translation does the opposite: in Chapter 2, *zhenshi* is translated as "truth" ("je recherche la vérité", Gao X., *La Montagne de l'âme*. trans. Noël and Liliane Dutrait, La Tour d'Aigues, L'Aube, p. 25), while in Chapter 52, it is translated as "real" ("Lequel est le plus réel?" *ibid.*, p. 422).

35. The insertion of this tale, which also occurs in Gao's play *Between Life and Death*, is commented on at length by Gang Gary Xu as a trope for moral introspection ("My Writing, your Pain, and her Trauma: Pronouns and Gendered Subjectivity in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 99-129; pp. 100-101). Xu refers it to a seventeenth century story by Drunken Master Heart-Moon of West Lake (Zui Xihu xin yue zhuren), while the narrator presents it in the opening lines of the chapter as a Jin-era legend. The reference to sexually daring literati fiction of the late Ming is perhaps less crucial to the narrator's stated purpose of collecting ancient legends (and his implicit endorsement of Jin-era heterodox traditions), but it effectively pinpoints the extent to which the purportedly "primeval" texts of "authentic" Chinese culture have in fact been rewritten over and over again.

36. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 358 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 341.

37. See Gao X., *Meiyou zhuyi*, pp. 167-182; *The Case for Literature*, pp. 82-103.

38. Gao X., "Chidao de xiandai zhuyi" in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 105.

39. J. Kinkley, "Gao Xingjian in the 'Chinese' Perspective," p. 142.

40. The play *The Other Shore* (*Bi'an*) is also part of this discussion: in addition to illustrating the inexistence of a transcendent "other shore" (which can also stands for authenticity or the "truth"), the play can also be read as a trope for the painful process of remembering the Cultural Revolution, as argued convincingly by Syren Quah in this issue.

a multiplicity of personal pronouns. No more is there a "truth" to literature, as the narrator concludes in the last chapter: "Pretending to understand, but still not understanding. In fact I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing. That's the way it is." [41] The fragmentation of the self, carefully constructed in the novel, is an essential component of Gao's sceptical stance about literature's capacity to reveal any form of truth, and at the same time an unmistakable endorsement of the power of modernist form to guard against the excesses of modern politics. [42] In a break with early twentieth century and 1980s perspectives, locality in Gao's novel no longer stands for authenticity.

But experiencing the inexistence of a centre, of Soul Mountain, of a coherent self and a single truth, is in fact liberating. As the old man in Chapter 76 says: "The road is not wrong, it is the traveller who is wrong." [43] Rather than the inaccessibility of the "other," as suggested by Gary Xu, [44] this sequence seems to underline that the traveller who invests the "other shore" with metaphysical meaning (no matter whether it pertains to the search for a true self in a Buddhist context, the authentic meaning of the world, or the roots of culture) is all too easily led to neglect the empirical other, his fellow human beings and the world they inhabit. [45] Gao Xingjian repeatedly rejected the idea of "roots" or authenticity in "Belated Modernity," in Chapter 72 of *Soul Mountain*, and again in "Literature and metaphysics": "I am not an anticulturalist, but I don't recognise myself as a 'roots-searching' writer, because those roots have been under my feet from the time of my birth. The question is how to understand them, including how to understand myself." [46] Nonetheless, Gao Xingjian's version of modernity should not be seen as a post-modern renouncement of all quests for truth, authenticity, or the self; it simply implies that these quests cannot be defined by their object: there is no "root," no "self," no "origin," no "Chineseness" to be found at the end of the quest. It is the quest itself and the multiplicity of answers and encounters it offers that make it worthwhile.

Gao discusses this in his essay "Literature as testimony," the subtitle of which reads in Chinese: *Dui zhenshi de zhuiqiu*, translated by Mabel Lee as "The Search for Truth." This is a perfectly acceptable translation, provided that "truth" is understood as *zhenshi*, i.e. "empirical truth," rather than "philosophical truth" (*zhenli*). For this reason, and in keeping with the translation of *zhenshi* in *Soul Mountain* (see note 9 above), it is perhaps clearer to follow Noël and Liliane Dutrait's French translation of the subtitle as "The search for reality." [47] Gao discusses this at the end of the essay: "One does not reach reality [*zhenshi*] by relying on metaphysical speculation. Reality is so perceptual and so down-to-earth, it is alive in human perceptions at any time and any place, it is the blending of the subject and the object." [48] No matter whether *zhenshi* is translated as "truth" (as Mabel Lee chooses to do in this passage) or as "reality," Gao Xingjian underlines that the kind of truth available to literature is of an intrinsically immanent nature, and as such can only be sought within reality. Locality is therefore also an image of the diversity of empirical truth.

Kenzaburō Ōe has taken a similar stance on the issue of central and local culture, in particular the cultures of Okinawa [49] and his native island of Shikoku. In the lecture "On Japanese culture before a Scandinavian audience," Ōe mentions this interest as the immediate source for the novel *The Silent Cry*: "One of the motives I had for writing this novel was my growing awareness at the time of a culture in Japan very different from the dominant Tokyo one." This led Ōe to become interested in Okinawa, "which even now retains its non-Yamato cultural identity, blessed with the richness and diversity peculiar to peripheral culture." [50] He adds that this village culture, rooted in traditional cosmology and life-

41. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 506 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 484.
42. For this reason, I am doubtful about Julia Lovell's understanding of *Soul Mountain* as a novel in which scepticism is "conquered by romanticism," in which the self regresses to a "romantic core behind a modernist façade" and is in the end "capable of speaking truth for the people" ("Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 1-50; p. 22). See also Jessica Yeung's slightly different assessment of the novel as "a hollow gesture to maintain the appearance of an avant-garde novel, which is in consumed just like any other literary spectacle" (*Ink Dances in Limbo*, p. 99).
43. Gao X. *Soul Mountain*, p. 478; *Lingshan*, p. 457.
44. See G. Xu, "My Writing, your Pain, and her Trauma," p. 117.
45. In this sense I think that Gary Xu's reference to Emmanuel Lévinas and the specific quotation "through my relation with the Other I am in touch with God" is misleading, because Gao Xingjian is precisely concerned with the necessity NOT to invest the "other" with metaphysical meaning, but to take pleasure in the empirical world and the chance encounters with fellow human beings it allows the traveller. It remains true that, if the "other" is hypostatised in Xu's sense, then it becomes inaccessible. Gao on the other hand believes that literature can reach the other: "However difficult it may be for people locked into their own experience to understand each other, if with the help of literature there can be some communication, no matter how small, this originally aimless act of writing leaves human beings with a testimony to their existence. And if literature still has some significance, it is probably this." ("Literature as testimony" in *The Case for Literature*, p. 63 (modified); *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 28.
46. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 103 (modified); *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 182
47. See "Le témoignage de la littérature. La recherche du réel" in Gao X., *Le témoignage de la littérature*, trans. Liliane and Noël Dutrait, Paris, Le Seuil, 2004, pp. 135-158.
48. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 60 (modified); *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 25.
49. Ōe was taken to court by a group representing the Japanese army over his book *Okinawa Notes* (1970), in which he states that Okinawans were driven to suicide at the end of the war. An Osaka court ruled in his favour in March 2008. See Steve Rabson, "Case Dismissed," *Japan Focus*, 8 April 2008, http://www.japanfocus.org/-Steve-Rabson/2716 (5 May 2010).
50. K. Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself*, pp. 31 and 32; *Aimai na Nihon no watakushi*, pp. 181 and 182.

cycles "has been my way of resisting, on a mythological level, the homogenising, centristic culture that has exerted its influence even over my own home in Shikoku," [51] adding that "my novels may fall further out of the mainstream, insofar as they are based on folktales and mythology that pose a direct challenge to the emperor system." [52] Recalling the colonisation and brutalisation of Okinawa by imperial Japan, in a vein similar to Gao's depiction of Confucian *jiaohua*, Ōe recommends that Japan should learn from Okinawa and Korea "how not to be at the centre." [53]

The Silent Cry ostensibly portrays just such a quest for authenticity and locality, which as in *Soul Mountain* turns out to be problematic. It is the story of two brothers, Takashi and Mitsusaburō, in the aftermath of the protests against the renewal of the American-Japanese Security Treaty in 1960. Takashi has taken part in the protests against the treaty, then has travelled to America with a Japanese theatre troupe (named "Our Shame") to search for atonement. Finally, returning to Japan, he decides to move back to the village of his ancestors in Shikoku in order to begin "a new life," taking his older brother and his wife with him on the pretext that the owner of the local supermarket wants to buy their old family property. [54] In the seemingly untouched world of the forests of Shikoku, they return to a world of semi-legendary characters: the mythical Chōsokabe, the elusive hermit Gii, a legendary "wild man" in the forest who makes an appearance in Chapter 12, and the immensely obese Jin, the caretaker of the family house. The figure of Gii (the main figure in Ōe's *Flaming Green Tree* trilogy) is commented on by the narrator Mitsusaburō with a quote from the famous Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio (about a naked women he had observed), confirming that Gii is closely related to an intellectual concern with the significance of local culture. [55] Furthermore Ōe has introduced an implicit link between Shikoku and Okinawa: according to the author, the brothers' clan name Nedokoro is derived from an Okinawan word meaning "place of one's roots," [56] which ties in with the quest that Takashi is pursuing:

> *In America, I often heard the word* 'uprooted,' *but now that I've come back to the valley in an attempt to make sure of my own roots, I find they've all been pulled up. I've begun to feel* uprooted *myself. So now I've got to put down new roots here, and to do so I naturally feel some action is necessary."* [57]

The protagonists' critical stance toward post-war Japanese industrial modernity therefore seems to entail a quest for a more authentic form of culture, not unlike in the China of the 1980s. The search for roots leads to the discovery of a parallel between the dates of the anti-American actions of 1960 and a village revolt crushed by the two protagonists' great-grandfather in 1860, the "First year of Man'en" that gives the novel its title. [58] This revolt, directed against what the villagers perceived to be an excessively high interest rate taken by the Nedokoro great-grandfather, was led by his younger brother: the peasants attempted to set fire to the family house and occupied the sake distillery. [59] The interpretation of the novel itself hinges to a large extent on how to make sense of this rebellion and, at the same time, how to legitimise its re-enactment by Takashi 100 years later. While Mitsusaburō clearly states, "For my part, I was incapable of joining a mob, either in my dreams or in reality," [60] Takashi leads the village youths in a new version of this uprising against the "Supermarket Emperor," a Korean industrialist accused of raising prices excessively and at the same time contributing to the rampant commercialisation and "Americanisation" of this previously pristine forest village.

The two revolts raise similar issues of political legitimacy. While the narrator is in sympathy with the necessity of resisting a certain form of modernity, and is less than enthusiastic about selling their old house to the Supermarket Emperor, he does not condone the violence and the "revolutionary" methods of his brother, who institutionalises looting as the only form of legitimate economic exchange, and refuses to take Mitsusaburō's money when he tries to buy something

51. K. Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself*, p. 35; *Aimai na Nihon no watakushi*, p. 184.
52. K. Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself*, p. 37; *Aimai na Nihon no watakushi*, p. 185.
53. K. Ōe, "Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma," in *Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself*, p. 98. This text also seems to be an English "original."
54. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, New York, Kodansha International, 1974, p. 37; *Man'en gannen no futtubōru* in *Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu*, Tōkyō, Shinchōsha, vol. 3, 1996, p. 41.
55. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 56; *Man'en gannen no futtubōru*, p. 57. The reference to Yanagita Kunio is interesting in a Sino-Japanese context because Yanagita was a major source of inspiration for Zhou Zuoren, shaping his preoccupation with local culture (popular Daoism and shamanism) as an alternative to state Confucianism. Prasenjit Duara believes that this form of resistance to both capitalist modernity and Confucian tradition was inspired by Yanagita's critique of State Shintoism and its instrumentalisation by Meiji politicians. Zhou Zuoren wrote the essay "Locality and literature" in order specifically to encourage writers to draw inspiration from local culture. See Zhou Z., "Difang yu wenyi," *Zhuo Zuoren ji*, Guangzhou, Huacheng, 2004, vol. 1, pp. 60-62; and Prasenjit Duara, "Local Worlds: the Poetics and Politics of the Native place in Modern China," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99/1 (Winter 2000), pp. 13-45, in particular pp. 16-19. Zhou Zuoren's views can also easily be related to Lu Xun and Shen Congwen's fiction.
56. See "Speaking on Japanese Culture before a Scandinavian Audience," in *Japan, the ambiguous, and myself*, p. 33; *Aimai na Nihon*, p. 182.
57. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 59; *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, pp. 59-60.
58. The Man'en era lasted a little more than a year, from 1860 to 1861.
59. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 104; *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, p. 98.
60. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 106; *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, p. 99.

at the supermarket. His attitude is portrayed as barbaric, in particular the racist violence he directs against the Korean businessman. He in fact uses local culture for his own ends in reviving the Nembutsu dance and turning it into an anti-modern ritual. [61] Finally, having seduced Mitsusaburō's wife, Takashi accuses himself of raping and murdering a village girl, and commits suicide after a lengthy "confession" to his brother. Mitsusaburō himself comes to discover that the "new life" in the valley that his brother enticed him with was an illusion:

> *So I'd returned to the valley in search of my "thatched hut." But I'd merely been deceived by the unexpected veneer of sobriety that Takashi had acquired (...). My "new life" in the valley was only a ruse devised by Takashi to forestall my refusal and clear the way for him to sell the house and land for the sake of whatever obscure purpose was firing him at the moment. From the very outset, the journey to the valley hadn't really existed for me. Since I no longer had any roots there, nor made any attempt to put down new ones, even the house and land were as good as nonexistent; it was no wonder my brother should have been able to filch them from me with only a minimal exercise of cunning.* [62]

Here also, the quest for roots, for a personal truth, entails only successive revelations of shameful family secrets, whereas the spirit of resistance and of marginality supposedly hidden in the local culture of Shikoku is manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, in the service of an oppressive political ideology of purity from modernisation and regression into a primitive form of life. [63] In this sense, one may say that for Ōe, just as for Gao, the search for roots, for local culture, for the self, is not a search for a final revelation, and that any purported revelation of the truth, especially if the claim is made by literature, will turn out to be illusory and, most probably, tragic.

It is important to note that for both writers, at the same time as the centrality of cultural tradition fragments into locality, the self is also fractured into a multiplicity of experiences. It is needless to dwell on Gao Xingjian's division of the narration into I-chapters and you-chapters, in addition to sometimes introducing a "he" or a "she" who may be linked with various aspects of the self, which thus fails to coalesce into a coherent whole. Interestingly, while in his 1987 essay "Belated modernity," Gao Xingjian placed personal pronouns, along with verbal tenses, in the category of influence from western languages that was not necessarily beneficial to Chinese literature, [64] in his 2006 discussion with Ōe, he stresses that the division of the self into the three aspects of "I," "you," and "he/she" is universal and common to all languages and cultures. [65] A similar case can be made for the fracturing of the self in Ōe's novel through the trope of family relations. Mitsusaburō's dead older brother, his revolted younger brother, his raped and dead sister, his mentally impaired child, the re-enactment of the family conflict between his great-grandfather and his younger brother, represent so many different ways of considering the self. Despite his "rooted" family name, Mitsusaburō is unable to reach a coherent understanding of his self by simply returning to his ancestral village.

For Ōe too, it is the quest itself that is important, and the various layers of conflicting truths it brings to light. Ōe has a special preference for grotesque characters and their stories, and expressed to Gao his personal identification with the "fat woman" who tries to predict the future to the I-narrator in Chapter 14 of *Soul Mountain*. [66] Ōe connects his interest in peripheral cultures not with a search for authenticity, but with the Bakhtinian idea of the novel: "As someone who left his native village for Tokyo and whose eyes had been opened by the study of European culture there, I had rediscovered—through my encounter with Okinawa—my own forest home, the fertile ground in which my writing had developed." [67] Similarly, in his dialogue with Gao Xingjian in Aix-en-Provence, he jokingly remarks that margin in Japan-

61. Performed during a Festival for the dead, the dance is supposed to exorcise spirits who may return to haunt the village, such as a young man killed at Hiroshima and, more importantly, Takashi and Mitsusaburō's brother, who was killed during a revolt in the Korean ghetto after the war (Chapter 7). Takashi revives it to replicate the anti-authoritarian frenzy of the peasant revolt of one hundred years before.
62. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, pp. 134-135; *Man'en gannen no futtubōru*, p. 122.
63. Fredric Jameson writes that while "new regionalism" represents an "inevitable protest against urban standardization and the destruction of nature and the peasantry" in the contemporary context, "it also tends to organize itself into an ideology and a compensatory fantasy rather than a political program. *The Silent Cry*, however, teaches us that we must grasp 'the power of the land' as the recovery of history […]. The 1960 looting of the new capitalist supermarket (in *The Silent Cry*) once again recapitulates the cycle of revolt that resonates through Oe's novels, now in mythical form (in *M/T and the Marvels of the Forest*, 1986), and now in the grim and bloody desperation of *The Silent Cry*." ("Madmen like Kings" in *The Modernist Papers*, London, Verso, 2007, p. 370). In this way, the authenticity of the *terroir* reveals itself as an illusory alternative that gives way to the conscientious probing of history (as discussed in the last part of the present article below).
64. Gao writes, "Does the strict division between the three personal pronouns suit the thinking habits of Chinese people?", "Chidao de xiandai zhuyi," *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 107
65. Gao X., *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 330.
66. Ōe brings this up in his discussion with Gao (Gao X., *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 329). Many thanks to Professor Iizuka Yūtori for pointing out that Ōe has himself reused this character in his recent novel *Urei kao no dōji* (The infant with a melancholy face).
67. K. Ōe, "Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian Audience," in *Japan, the ambiguous*, p. 33; *Aimai na Nihon*, p. 183.



Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō in Aix-en-Provence in 2006.
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ese is *shūhen* but also *hashi*, which is homophonous with *hashi* meaning "bridge": the margin is therefore also connected to the world.[68] This provides the meaning of the denouement of the novel, in which Mitsusaburō, having buried his brother and sold the house, decides to take up a job in Africa to "see the world." In this preference for life over truth, for the experience of diversity over any sort of metaphysical revelation, Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō are indeed probably so close that "there is nothing to discuss" between them, as Ōe put it in Aix.

The two authors' doubts about modernity give rise to a new stance, on one hand forward-looking and cosmopolitan without being iconoclastic or utopian; on the other concerned with the past and those "left behind" by history without advocating regression or nostalgia. The concern for the geographical margins in *Soul Mountain* is therefore not so much a "root-seeking" search for authenticity as it is a concern with finding a position in which the writer is not obliged to espouse any form of centrality. Ōe's preoccupation with envisioning central culture from the viewpoint of local cultures underscores that this concern is not tied to China's specific history. In this sense Gao and Ōe are both preoccupied with on the one hand voicing their doubts about the ideology of progress, and at the same time resisting any form of regression into the purported "authenticity" of tradition, which for both of them can only be a romantic reconstruction. It should not be forgotten that the technique of alternating pronouns used by Gao to fragment the stable self is clearly identified by him as modernistic as early as 1981 in *Preliminary investigation into the technique of modern fiction.*[69]

This type of marginality and fragmentation are certainly not unknown to European modernists; their function is nonetheless uniquely highlighted by Gao and Ōe. While neither of them defines himself primarily as an "Asian" writer, both have reflected on the possible meaning of such a category, Gao when he declared that *Soul Mountain* was his attempt to write the long-awaited "great Asian novel" (originally planned to be two or three times as long, but cut short after 1989),[70] and Ōe in relation to the necessity for post-war Japanese writers to symbolically "leave Europe" and "enter Asia."[71] Their attitude towards the notion of Asia is quite similar to Takeuchi Yoshimi's idea of "Asia as method."[72] Rather than constituting a form of "belated" modernism, their preoccupation with the local and the marginal can be traced back to the beginnings of Chinese and Japanese modernity, and to those intellectuals who rejected a central position for writers in achieving "wealth and power" for their country. Avoiding the idea of "belatedness" and the impulse it implies for imitation and "catching up," they seek a marginal position that also construes in a positive way the marginality of Japan and China with regard to nineteenth-century industrialisation.

Individuality and ethics

Luckily for the discussion, there are also important differences between the two writers. Marginality represents for both Gao and Ōe a critique of modernity, and is thus similar in its negative dimension. But the marginal position, positively defined as an individual ethics, takes quite different aspects in the two authors' works. In Gao's case, marginality is closely linked with the ideas of escape, "cold literature," and preserving the individual voice. Ōe is more committed to constructing an ethical position that goes deeper than the fragmentation the self must confront when it enters the world. Defining himself in his Nobel lecture as the heir of the Japanese post-war writers, and aspiring to "cling to the very end of that literary tradition inherited from those writ-

68. Gao X., *Lun Chuangzuo*, 326. In fact, Ōe argues that the true "Yamato spirit" as first outlined in the *Genji Monogatari* is a spirit of cosmopolitanism: only after Chinese classical book learning has been accomplished can Japanese talents be treated with due respect. K. Ōe, "Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian Audience," in *Japan, the ambiguous*, p. 18; *Aimai na Nihon*, p. 173.
69. See Gao X., "Rencheng de zhuanhuan" (Interchangeability of personal pronouns), *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (Preliminary investigation into the technique of modern fiction), Guangzhou, Huacheng, 1981, p. 13-18.
70. N. Dutrait, "Gao Xingjian, l'itinéraire d'un homme seul," p. 150
71. K. Ōe, "Japan's Dual identity" in *Japan, the ambiguous*, for example p. 63 and pp. 97-98. Ōe is turning around Fukazawa Yukichi's recommendation to "Join Europe, leave Asia" (*Nyu Ō, datsu A*).
72. For Takeuchi, universal values ("freedom" and "equality") were weakened when they were associated with colonial invasion by the West, and the task to ensure global equality therefore fell to Asian poets such as Tagore and Lu Xun. However, their Asian identity is not a cultural substance: it is "possible as method, that is to say, as the process of the subject's self-formation. This I have defined as 'Asia as method' and yet it is impossible to definitively state what this might mean" (*What is modernity?*, *op. cit.*, p. 165).

ers," [73] he links his marginality with a form of commitment that was defining for this generation: "Using the 'image system of grotesque realism' as a literary weapon, and exploring the cultural characteristics of the marginal areas of my own country and Asia, I have moved along the same path, one leading toward the 'relativisation' of an emperor-centred culture." [74] He insists on the "*humaniste*" spirit of Rabelais transmitted by his professor Watanabe Kazuo.

Despite this difference, both authors reject the idea of an ideological "truth" imparted by literature and share the idea of "self-preservation" of the writer, with remarkable parallels in their writing. In *Soul Mountain*, the important thing is simply to survive, as the I-narrator states in Chapter 75: "I'm just fighting to survive, no I'm not fighting for anything, I'm just protecting myself. I don't have the courage of that woman and I have not reached a state of utter despair yet, I still madly love this world, I haven't lived enough." [75] Survival and the preservation of one's own "small voice" are the only authorial stance that can be construed from the novel; nonetheless, this "love for the world" should not be interpreted in an overly negative way, as fear of death, but also as enjoyment of life. In Chapter 28 of *Soul Mountain*, the I-narrator, stuck in a small mountain village because of a surly bus driver, relishes the idea that he is in no hurry to go anywhere: "It's not my mission to save some strange creature or to save the world." [76] Faced with the obviously unreasonable construction project of the Three Gorges Dam in Chapter 51, the I-narrator offers little specific comment: "I am always searching for meaning, but what, in the end, is meaning? (...) I can only search for the self of the I who is small and insignificant like a grain of sand." [77] To this the you-narrator replies in the following chapter that the novel is "the same as life and does not have an ultimate goal." [78] In this absence of transcendent meaning, the immanence of life has the highest value: it is to be both preserved and enjoyed.

There is also a strong element of survival through self-preservation in *The Silent Cry*, which is structured around a repeated scene in which one of the protagonists hides in an underground cellar or secret room. At the beginning of the novel, one morning before dawn, Mitsusaburō, holding his dog, crawls into a pit in his garden that has been dug to install a septic tank. There, he meditates on the suicide of his best friend, who has hanged himself, his face painted red and a cucumber stuck into his anus. In the last chapter, when he returns to the old house one last time, after Takashi's death, on the day the Supermarket Emperor plans to tear it down, Mitsusaburō repeats his act of retreat from the world, crawling into a pit in the cellar to meditate on his brother's suicide, seeking a form of meaning that will allow him to continue living.

However, the pit is situated inside a hidden cellar that he discovers on this occasion, and which contains papers and books related to the 1860 uprising. It turns out that Mitsusaburō's great-grandfather's younger brother did not in fact flee to America after the failed rebellion, but hid out for ten years in the hole in the cellar. He wrote letters in which he pretended to be on a ship to America, but all the while continued to reflect and read about revolts against the imperial system and theories of democracy (writings by the philosopher and translator Nakae Chōmin). [79] Not only does this revelation clear the younger brother's honour, it also reveals him as the inspiration and probably the leader of another revolt in Ōkubo in 1871, which succeeded, without bloodshed, in obtaining the resignation (and suicide) of a dictatorial official. It is in this way suggested as an alternative to the failed rebellion led by Takashi one hundred years later, which is denounced as a political illusion. The great-uncle's final letter, a critique of the Meiji Constitution of 1889, which Mitsusaburō had in fact discovered earlier but hidden from Takashi, attests to the degree of his democratic conscience. Distinguishing between "recovered rights" wrested by popular movements from below, and "conferred rights" granted by a despotic government from above, he criticises the Meiji Constitution as an example of the latter. [80] In this case, therefore, the great-uncle's "escape" from the world and "self-preservation" is invested with a form of political meaning—a critique of Meiji authoritarian modernisation—that is absent from Gao's novel. Gao's narrator "still madly loves the world," and this alone is sufficient for him to bestow meaning on his self-preservation. Mitsusaburō does not love it, but the example of successful "self-preservation" by his great-uncle gives him the will to try one more time to live in the world by taking up the job in Africa.

Regarding this difference, Gao Xingjian addressed Kenzaburō Ōe directly, telling him that he admired him for being "a modern-day Sisyphus," always willing to try one more

73. K. Ōe, "Japan, the ambiguous, and myself," in *Japan, the ambiguous*, p. 118; *Aimai na Nihon*, p. 9.
74. K. Ōe, "Japan's Dual Identity," in *Japan, the ambiguous*, p. 98.
75. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, p. 477 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 456.
76. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, p. 159 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 154.
77. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, p. 308; *Lingshan*, p. 295.
78. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, p. 315; *Lingshan*, p. 301.
79. See Ōe K., *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, p. 227.
80. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 206; *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, p. 182.

time to change the world through writing, an attitude that Gao considers both admirable and tragic. [81] He has also directly compared Ōe to Lu Xun. [82] In Chapter 65 of *Soul Mountain*, the narrator professes a similar philosophy: "I can't play the tragic role of the defeated hero who fights against fate, but I greatly revere those dauntless heroes who charge into danger, like Xingtian, the legendary hero, who picked up his own cut-off head and continued fighting." [83] Ōe's conception of the ethical stance of the fiction writer can be construed from the criticism levelled by Takashi at his brother, who thinks that literature is inherently deceptive:

> *Writers? Occasionally, I admit, they tell something near the truth and survive without either being beaten to death or going mad. They deceive other people with a framework of fiction, but what essentially undermines the work of an author is the very fact that, provided one imposes a framework of fiction, one can get away with anything; however frightening, dangerous, or shameful it may be. However serious the truth he may be telling, the writer at least is always aware that in fiction he can say anything he wants, so he's immune from the start to any poison his words may contain.* [84]

Ōe's novels and writings are a response to this accusation of impunity or irresponsibility, in that they seek ethical foundations for an individual on the margins. A similar critique could well be directed against some of Gao Xingjian's more extreme assertions, for example in "Cold Literature," when he argues, "The writer bears no responsibility to the reader and the reader has no need to make impositions on the writer. It is for the reader to choose whether or not to read a work." [85] Nonetheless, without going as far as Ōe, Gao has occasionally formulated a less absolute refusal of involvement in "isms" and ethics. For example, he writes in "Literature as Testimony":

> *A writer's moral awareness [*liangzhi*] is an awakening from instinctive chaos and blind violence. Rather than an a priori moral conscience [*liangxin*], should one not rather call it a pair of clearer eyes that transcend the writer's view of good and bad, of politics, and an ensuing capacity for observation that is naturally more penetrating and profound?* [86]

Gao rejects moral theories that are imposed from the outside ("a priori") on the complex matter of life and the ambiguous experience of writing. In this sense, one can indeed speak of a personal ethics based on "active moral introspection," [87] which is also related to his use of pronouns. [88] Nonetheless, although Ōe's stance is more explicit, Gao's minimal ethical position as a clarity arising from experience and its literary (even modernistic) configuration is not alien to Mitsusaburō's final choice of returning to life in Ōe's novel.

Finally, it has been argued that Gao's writing should be seen first and foremost as a personal endeavour, a primarily autobiographical reflection on the self and its multiple personas, in contrast with Ōe's more politically committed stance relating the self to the issues of the day. It is important to note that Ōe's preoccupation with social questions is also inseparable from his painstaking introspection regarding his own family, in particular his handicapped son Hikari, who is the starting point for his thoughts about "survivors," in particular the survivors of Hiroshima, and their capacity to transcend and redeem tragedy. [89] Individual introspection and autobiographical themes, which are present in almost all of Ōe's novels, are therefore woven into his reflections on social and political issues. Conversely, while Gao made clear in Aix that he did not share Ōe's confidence in the power of the grotesque to make the "small, weak voice" of the individual strong enough to be heard in society or in the world, it is difficult to see his writing as concerned only with personal issues. Gao calls for a detachment from the personal viewpoint that endows even autobiographical writing with a wider, interpersonal, significance: "When embarking on this sort of writing, it is best for the writer to be an observer in order to maintain adequate distance, especially if dealing

81. Gao X., *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 328.
82. Gao Xingjian and Liu Zaifu, "Zou chu ershi shiji" (Leaving the twentieth century behind), *Mingbao yuekan*, July-August 2008, pp. 54-60; p. 58.
83. Gao X., *Soul Mountain*, p. 410 (modified); *Lingshan*, p. 393. Gao Xingjian characteristically refers to a hero from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan hai jing*), which serves as a kind of depository for the non-Confucian culture he endorses. Interestingly, Xingtian was also a favourite hero of Lu Xun's, another avid reader of the *Shan hai jing*; see, for example, the end of his essay "Free Talk at the end of spring" (Chun mo xian tan, 1925, *The Tomb*). See also Kirk Denton, "Childhood," *Lu Xun Biography*, MCLC Resource Centre http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/bios/lxbio.htm (5 May 2010).
84. K. Ōe, *The Silent Cry*, p. 157; *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, p. 141.
85. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, pp. 78-79; *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 18.
86. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 58 (modified); *Lun Chuangzuo*, pp. 23-24.
87. G. Xu, "My writing, your pain, and her trauma," p. 108.
88. Xu's conclusion about the "absoluteness and inaccessibility of the 'other'" (*ibid.*, pp. 116-117), in particular of the "gendered" other (and the subsequent idea that because of this inaccessibility, moral introspection can become a form of masochism), is perhaps open to debate. Gao Xingjian's formulations about "observing" the world with "clear eyes" and the narrator's confession in *Soul Mountain* that he "madly loves" the world seem to point in the direction of a less dramatic relationship with the other, on the condition that the idea of "absoluteness" or "centrality" has been done away with.
89. See also the detailed interview with Ōe: Maya Jaggi, "In the forest of the soul," *art cit.*

with a historical period fraught with disasters. This will allow him to avoid the pitfalls of becoming a victim whose writing is bitter and amounts to nothing more than an indictment." [90] Fragmenting the self through the use of pronouns, and taking distance with personal experience through fiction in order to avoid writing as a victim: these aspects of Gao's writing open it up to the world. Therefore, literature can only be defined as individual "testimony" provided that it also stands as testimony to the individual in general: "What allows the writer both to observe the world with clarity and to transcend his (or her) own self is realised in the process of writing itself." [91] Conversely, writing is what allows the writer both to see the world clearly and to transcend his own individuality. Despite their differences, both Gao and Ōe are engaged in a dialectics of personal experience and involvement with society and history: marginality in this sense is not a position removed from the world.

In conclusion, modernity, both socio-political and literary, appears to Gao Xingjian and Kenzaburō Ōe as a doubtful enterprise. Though not all modernists were Promethean prophets, modernity was the period in which literature became inextricably involved with the will to change the world. For two writers who have personally experienced the consequences of a dysfunctional synthesis between oppressive, centralising tendencies in the history of their own countries and European theories of modernisation that brought about a pairing of industrial modernity with colonial expansion in the case of Japan and with communist utopianism in China, modernity itself could probably not come away unscathed. Nonetheless, leaving aside the "ism," they are both clearly modern in the sense that they defy being read as "anti-modernists" or "neo-traditionalists." Their endorsement of Bakhtinian polyphony (Ōe) and the use of pronouns to break up the cohesive self (Gao), positioning the writer as an equally impartial observer of the self and the world, serve as deterrents to readers who would misconstrue their attachment to the local and the marginal. However, their modernness is one that strives to "overcome" political modernity, to define a position for literature that is neither involved with the centre of power nor strives to become an alternative centre of power. It defines itself, on the contrary, by its marginality and individuality, and its interest in suppressed and remote voices, which it does not necessarily purport to make stronger. In this sense it is sympathetic to heterodox, vernacular traditions, but decidedly hostile to traditional morals.

This form of modernity does raise an interesting question: how can the value of individuality be construed from this collection of fragmented, marginal points of view? [92] Or, to put it another way, where does the individual writer seek the authority to call the reader's attention to the diversity of the margins? While both writers stress the importance of reflexivity with respect to experience, for Ōe there is also a question of responsibility toward the reader. For Gao, this responsibility is conceived primarily toward his own life, and life in general; it is the responsibility not to allow literature to substitute itself for life. Whether these two marginal positions, subsequently crowned by the most un-marginal literary prize of all, define a new type of modernity, and whether Asian writers can play a defining role in bringing literature out of the era of ideologies, must be left open to further discussion. •

Glossary

hashi 橋 (bridge) hashi 端 (margin)
jiaohua 教化 jun bungaku 純文學
Kitamura Tokoku 北村透谷 liangxin 良心
liangzhi 良知 Man'en 萬延 Nakae Chōmin 中江兆民
shūhen 週邊 xiandai pai 現代派 xiandai zhuyi 現代主義
xungen 尋根 Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男
zhenli 真理 zhenshi 真實

90. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 54; *Lun Chuangzuo*, pp. 20-21.
91. Gao X., *The Case for Literature*, p. 58 (modified); *Lun Chuangzuo*, p. 24.
92. I have attempted to discuss this question in "From marginality to individuality in Gao Xingjian's early plays," published in French translation in Noël Dutrait (ed.), *L'écriture romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian*, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-167.