Conversations with Gao Xingjian: The First "Chinese" Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

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The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gao Xingjian on 12 October 2000 surprised not only the Chinese-reading public but also the rest of the world. No Chinese writer had ever won the prize since its inception in 1901, so there were mounting expectations that an author from China might be named. The veteran novelist Ba Jin and the exiled contemporary poet Bei Dao were frequent suggestions, but Gao's name was rarely mentioned. There had also been rumours concerning Taiwanese writers. Beyond the field of Chinese literature specialists, amongst whom he was known primarily as a playwright and not as a novelist, Gao was largely unknown, or rather he was little known to Anglophone readers, for in France and Sweden his novel *Lingshan* (*Soul Mountain*) had been published and acclaimed in the mid-1990s. Naturally, being translated into Swedish made his works more accessible to those who judge the Nobel nominees, but several other Chinese writers had been similarly translated into Swedish, notably by Gao's translator Göran Malmqvist, and many more have been rendered into English and French, languages which present no obstacle to the judges, the Swedish Academy.

Who then is this Chinese-speaking, naturalized French, Nobel laureate whose works have been banned in his country of origin and who was until recently unknown to the majority of the world's readers? And what of the opinions and the pronouncements of Gao Xingjian on whom renown has now focused the gaze of a previously indifferent reading public? Beyond the usual envy and resentment generated by the award of the Nobel Prize amongst fellow writers, questions have been raised about Gao's ideology, his statements relating to China's modern literature, his representation of women and so on. For the moment, it seems that Gao prefers not to discuss these contentious issues directly. In the past, however, he has spoken not only about himself but also about Chinese politics, and the ideological impulses behind his writing. We thus present here the translated transcripts of two conversations with Gao: between Lee and Gao in 1990, and between Dutrait and Gao in 1998. We have contextualized these conversations with a biographical and bibliographical narrative of Gao Xingjian's career.

Born in 1940 in the Jiangxi town of Ganzhou, Gao was raised in a family interested in both classical and modern cultures. His father, a bank manager in Nanjing, was an amateur of Chinese painting and classical literature while his mother had been educated by American missionaries. Having read a story by the francophone writer Ilya Ehrenburg recounting his bohemian lifestyle in the Paris of the 1920s, Gao decided to take up

French. He graduated from Beijing's Foreign Languages Institute in 1962 and worked as a translator. During the Cultural Revolution he was sent to cadre schools in Henan and Anhui for "re-education." It is a period of his life he revisited in the novel *Yige ren de shengjing* or *One Man's Bible* (discussed below). He wrote a great deal during the Cultural Revolution, but claims he did so mainly for the psychological relief it provided. In 1975 he was assigned to *La Chine en construction* (the French edition of *China Reconstructs*) which gave him the opportunity to come into contact with French "foreign experts" and recent French literature. It was in the late 1970s that he first read the modern French writers Prévert, Sartre, Camus, Gide, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Ponge, Michaux and Proust. In 1977 Gao was given the responsibility of ordering foreign literary works for the Writers' Association, which gave him unparalleled access to the external literary scene. In 1978 he accompanied Ba Jin on an official visit to France, and in 1980 Ai Qing. It was then that he first made the acquaintance of several French sinologists and his future French translator, the co-author of this article, Noël Dutrait.

By joining the Beijing People's Art Troupe in 1982 Gao was able to indulge his predilection for experimental theatre with the staging, in collaboration with the director Lin Zhaohua, of his play *Juedui xinhao* (*Alarm Signal*) which broke many of the conventions of modern Chinese theatre.[1] The following year saw the production of Gao's *Chezhan* (*Bus Stop*), a comedy inspired by Samuel Beckett's tragedy *Waiting for Godot*, which highlights the absurdity of a society which promises a future that never comes. While the departure by foot of a Silent Man who refuses to wait may be read as an act of individualism, just like those who stay and wait for the bus to town and eventually walk there together, he nevertheless knows where he wants to go, while for Beckett's Didi and Gogo, there is no meaning and no direction.[2] From Gao's third play, *Yeren* (*Savage*) produced in 1985, despite an apparently polyphonic structure in which various viewpoints concerning man's relations to nature vie for the audience's attention, there emerges a dominant ecological position promoting the protection of forests and pandas.[3]

Starting with the production of *Bus Stop*, Gao's plays attracted the criticism of the literary authorities who condemned this Chinese theatre of the absurd. The playwright, who was under the impression that he had himself rigorously censored his plays to avoid political controversy, was surprised by the extent and nature of the criticism and, convinced that he would be sent to a Qinghai labour camp, fled the capital for China's remote borderlands and hinterlands. Gao used the experience to gather material for the novel he was planning.

1. *Shiyue*, No.5 (1982).
2. *Shiyue*, No.3 (1983) Geremie Barmé (trans.), *Renditions*, Nos. 19 and 20 (1983).
3. *Shiyue*, No.2 (1985). Translated as *Wild Man* by Bruno Roubieck in *Asian Theatre Journal*, No. 7 (1990). For an illuminating discussion of Gao's early plays see Jessica Wai Yee Yeung, "From China to nowhere: the writings of Gao Xingjian in the 1980s and early 90s," M. Phil. thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1996, pp. 47–85.

Gao finally left China definitively at the end of 1987 at the invitation of a German foundation. He settled in Paris, sold his paintings, and worked on his ongoing novel and plays. About 18 months after his move to Europe, he was invited to Stockholm to participate in a conference whose primary task was to discuss an overall strategy for exiled Chinese writers and to re-launch the literary journal *Jintian* (Today). In its early samizdat format *Jintian* had been the foremost "non-official" literary magazine of the late 1970s Peking Spring, its co-editors being Bei Dao, Mang Ke and Chen Maiping (Wan Zhi).[4] At the time of the conference Bei Dao was living in Sweden and many had expected him to be awarded the 1989 Nobel Prize for Literature. Bei Dao remained the Chinese "favourite" for a number of years and at the time no one mentioned Gao's name in connection with the prize.[5] Having lived in Europe for more than two years, while most of the other Chinese writers and intellectuals in exile had left China only in 1989 and 1990, Gao was better placed, but also more than willing, to discuss the condition of the exiled writer and the possibilities for a Chinese exile literature to develop:

Lee: *Gao Xingjian, could you say a few words about when and how you left China, what you've been doing since, what your plans are?*

Gao: *I now live in Paris. I left China at the end of 1987; I had an invitation from Germany. Since then I have lived continuously in Europe, writing but painting too since I am also a painter. In the light of what happened at Tiananmen Square, I feel that I could not go back. Moreover, I feel that going back would have no sense. Going back is impossible, because on the one hand I feel there's no need to go back, and as far as the future facing Chinese literature is concerned, it's exile,* la fuite. *I believe this is very much a self-inflicted outcome.*

Lee: *Although in ancient China poets were sometimes banished to the borderlands, China has not really had a tradition of writing in exile overseas. Do you feel that it is now possible for an exile literature to evolve?*

Gao: *Yes, I do feel it's possible this time. Previously, there was no real exile literature as such. Naturally, there were several writers who wrote while abroad for short periods of time, but this time, in the wake of the events of Tiananmen Square, there is a large number of writers who have left China, as well as a large number of artists. Historically speaking, even if it's not unique, I feel that this time it's an important phenomenon. This phenomenon is not the same as in the West or in Eastern Europe. It has existed in Russia from the time of Tsars right up until today. In the West, you had James Joyce, for instance, and for him going into exile was*

4. First published in December 1978, *Jintian* ceased publication at the end of 1980 under pressure from the authorities. The May 1990 *Today* meeting also served as the focal point for peripheral events, public poetry readings, dramatic performances and seminars arranged by Swedish sinologists. Gao's play *Taowang* appeared in the first issue of the relaunched *Today*.

5. The conversation took place during the conference on 11 May 1990.

very natural; he was not comfortable in his own country. Sometimes there is political pressure; sometimes it's a matter of personal choice. It's not catastrophic. But in the case of the Chinese writer, of Chinese literature it's of major significance.

Lee: *But is it not the case that Chinese writers abroad have a great deal of difficulty, not only in economic terms but also linguistically and culturally?*

Gao: *Yes, historically China has been a sealed-off continent, considering itself to be the centre looking upon the West and even on other parts of the East with a sense of superiority. So the idea of a writer or an artist living abroad has been historically unthinkable. For instance, there was Yu Dafu who lived in South-East Asia, and found himself unable to write, and that was just South-East Asia.*[6] *Then there were a few writers who went to France. In England there was Ye Junjian who during the Second World War continued to write novels.*[7] *There was also Lao She who went abroad, to America, and wrote a few things.*[8] *But in a real sense Chinese exiled writers and Chinese exile literature have never existed. So now these writers who have just gone into exile face the immediate question of whether they will be able to continue to write. Naturally this will be a test for each author. But there is also an undeniable reality. Why have these writers left China? Either it's in order to escape political oppression, or because of a lack of freedom of creative expression. When a writer leaves China it's to attain the freedom to create freely, that's the most important thing. It's not for problems of everyday survival. The question becomes how to assure that freedom. This will require a good deal of hard work from Chinese writers, I personally feel it will require hard work on my part, but that doesn't mean it cannot be done.*

Lee: *How about your own circumstances?*

Gao: *Currently I support myself by painting. Eighty per cent of my income comes from painting, 20 per cent from royalties and performance fees from my plays. Naturally, Chinese writers face a great difficulty when compared with Western writers, because Chinese writers write in Chinese, they have to be translated. Another problem is whether the West is receptive to Chinese modern culture. There's a process of familiarization that needs to take place. So at present you cannot rely on writing to survive. That's why many writers are obliged either to apply for grants and bursaries, or find some form of employment. I think that this situation will be common to most Chinese writers, so I am fortunate in being able to live off my painting and occasional royalties. But I feel that the problem we face today is no longer political oppression but rather of economic oppression, subsistence. But this question of subsistence is*

6. Chinese novelist (1896–1945) who lived in various parts of South-East Asia from 1935 until his death.

7. Chinese novelist and translator (1914–99).

8. Chinese novelist (1899–1966) who lived in England (1924–30), and in the USA (1946–49).

not the most difficult problem. There's also the need to maintain one's luxury, and as far as Chinese writers are concerned, I think writing is a luxury…. The question of a writer's livelihood, thanks to the help of friends and by finding some work, is not impossible to resolve.

Lee: *I'd like to follow up with several questions. First, what will you write about in exile? Secondly, for whom are you writing? You've just said that Chinese writers depend on translation, so is the readership a non-Chinese one? And thirdly, I'd like you to talk about the writers still in China. They don't suffer the economic hardship you've spoken about, or at least they don't have insurmountable economic problems, yet they still face political pressure. But isn't this political pressure in some way productive, doesn't it give the writer an even greater urge to write? Won't a divergence emerge between the Chinese writer at home and the writer in exile?*

Gao: *Yes. Perhaps two different sets of circumstances will emerge. On the one hand there's what people call Chinese writing overseas, or exile writing. In China, I think that there are a number of writers who will continue to write. During the Cultural Revolution I also kept on writing, but I felt a sort of* auto-censure*, a self-censorship. Because if you really write what's on your mind, it could be very dangerous. So it's very difficult to assure a frame of mind and an environment to create freely. So once that period was over, there were no literary works to show for it. Today writers in China face the same problem. That is to say, on the psychological level, how to construct themselves an environment in which they can freely express their sentiments. Abroad this pressure does not exist, you can write freely. But there could be other problems for the author in terms of the psychological environment necessary to creative activity. This can go in two opposite directions. For instance, as far as my own writing is concerned, at present I don't feel that I have nothing to write about. I have never written as much as I have in the past two years or so. But my case is particular, I have no difficulty when it comes to communicating with Westerners or living in France because I have no language barrier. I don't feel it's [living abroad] unbearable, on the contrary I feel there are a lot of new things to be learnt from it. But although I learn new things, the form of what I do is still Chinese. I have recently written two plays and there's a novel I've just finished. Of course, as to the backdrop of the two plays, one talks about life in ancient China, it's called* Tales from the Classic of Mountains and Seas*,[9] while the other is about real contemporary politics, it's called* Taowang.[10] *But I don't want to emphasize their Chinese background, neither do I*

9. *Shanhaijing zhuan* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 1993). The *Shanhaijing* itself is a mythic geography and history of ancient China composed of texts dating back to the Warring States period.

10. *Taowang*, "a modern tragedy in two acts" set against the backdrop of the events of 4 June 1989 at Tiananmen Square, is translated as *Fugitives* in Gregory B. Lee (ed.), *Chinese Writing and Exile*, Select Papers, Vol. 7, The Center for East Asian Studies, The University of Chicago (1993), pp 89–137.

want them to be taken as realistic or historical, I'd like them to be read at the level of their common human meaning. So naturally the way I write them is different.

Lee: *That's to say you feel there's a universality to them?*

Gao: *Yes. Of course, Westerners understand these plays differently from the way in which a Chinese audience would understand them. But both audiences can appreciate them. I also feel that a good work of literature has to transcend national boundaries. The constraints of national boundaries are very foolish constraints. Moreover, I really detest the hackneyed old theme of patriotism. So the reason I write in Chinese is because my cultural background is the Chinese-language. I use Chinese to express my experience, that what's important to a Chinese writer. The questions of whether I'm writing about China or not, and what kind of reader I'm writing for are not important questions for me. The important thing for me is that writing is a kind of luxury, and if it's a luxury there's no point in raising such questions.*

Lee: *So don't you have an ideal reader in mind when you write? You don't worry, then, about whether the reader is Chinese or Western?*

Gao: *No, that's right. During this conference [in Stockholm] we've been discussing the problem of going into exile, of fleeing. But what we're faced with now is not just a question of fleeing political oppression and the Chinese environment; there is also the flight from the Other, flight from other people. It was Sartre who said Hell is other people. But it's not enough to flee the Other, there's also the need to flee oneself.... I think the Self is like a black hole capable of sucking everything in. It's terrifying. So it's very important for an exile writer to flee the Self, that's the only way he can establish the lightness and calm he needs to write. So I feel that in addition to fleeing present political circumstances, there is also a perpetual flight. This is a subject that all humanity can understand. There's a French behavioural scientist who wrote a book called* Eloge de la fuite *(*In Praise of Flight*).*[11] *After I'd finished writing this play [*Taowang*], I read his work and felt that our ideas were very similar. If a good writer, and I think people in the West encounter this also, wants to express fully what he has to say, he mustn't let himself be influenced by the market, or by what's fashionable. So both for the Western writer and the Chinese writer, I think going into exile, fleeing, is something normal. I think it's time we overcame the idea that we're in an exceptional environment that leaves us unable to create, and recognized that for a writer being in exile is something completely normal. There's nothing terrifying about it. In addition, when we talk about motherland, and talk about nation and so on, it's just a manner of speaking. Apart from that, there are no confines that determine what you should write about. So based on that I've come to a realization that writing is simply a luxury. It's just to show that you're still alive, that you still exist.*

11. Gao is referring to Henri Laborit's *Eloge de la fuite* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

And this kind of consciousness is very important for a writer; otherwise he can't be called a writer. So I feel that this is also a means of protecting the self. So given a perspective like this, I can write.

Lee: *Over the past one hundred years or so the Chinese intellectual has sought to serve the people, serve the masses. Is there a way in which the Chinese author today could serve China, or should he even think in those terms?*

Gao: *I dislike this whole business of patriotism and nationalism. I think that at this point in history it constitutes, if not a reactionary ideology then, a conservative tendency. In real political life patriotism is the most reactionary of watchwords. The Nazis favoured this sort of* nationalisme*; the Communist Party also uses it. Conservative, reactionary governments everywhere, use this kind of watchword to trick people. So the original sense of patriotism has vanished. The same could be said for the so-called "People" [renmin]. In this play I've written [*Fugitives*] I express this viewpoint. Politicos who aim to achieve a certain objective often speak in the name of the People. I think Chinese intellectuals should no longer use these concepts to express themselves. An intellectual only represents himself; he's better off avoiding speaking for the collectivity, representing the People, representing the motherland, saving the nation. I think nobody can save anybody. I personally don't think I can save anybody. If I still write it's to show that I exist. But there's also a sense to it, and that is if the Chinese intellectual can shake off this kind of blind nationalism, patriotism, jingoism, chauvinism that would be a liberation … I think the Chinese intellectual needs an* indépendance absolue *[total independence], mentally,* spirituellement*, he needs a detached, independent attitude. I think Chinese intellectuals are not sufficiently mature. Why do they keep on going down the same old road, constantly engaging in revolution? It's precisely because the Chinese intellectual isn't mature enough…. He needs to engage in independent reflection, a reflection which would include Chinese politics and Chinese culture, a reflection on the current conditions faced by humanity. This is his first duty. Of course, you can also participate in the movement for democracy, I'm not against that, I think that needs to be done. But I don't feel the need to do that in the name of a group, I feel that would be a form of suicide for a writer.*

When published in *Jintian* later in 1990, the play discussed above by Gao, *Taowang*, would result in the playwright's official condemnation by the Chinese authorities. His novel *Lingshan* (*Soul Mountain*) was published later in the year by a Taiwanese publishing house.[12] Gao also sent a copy of the manuscript directly to the Swedish sinologist and translator Göran Malmqvist who translated the novel into Swedish.[13] A French

12. *Lingshan* (Taibei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1990, 2000).
13. Göran Malmqvist (trans.) *Andarnas berg* (Stockholm: Forum, 1992).

translation followed, but the Anglophone reader had to wait until 2000 for an English-language version of the novel.[14]

After the completion of *Lingshan*, Gao devoted his efforts largely to painting and drama. Commissioned by France's Ministry of Culture, he wrote several plays directly in French: *Au bord de la vie* (*On the Edge of Life*), *Le Somnamabule* (*Sleepwalker*) and *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end* (*Weekend Quartet*).[15] In 1995, the French translation of *Lingshan* received a good deal of critical acclaim including articles in the French weekly *Express*, the mass circulation national dailies *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, and a three-page spread in the daily newspaper *Libération*. In the light of *Soul Mountain's* success, his French publishers urged Gao to publish the short stories which had appeared in Chinese before he left China. These were collected and brought out under the title *Une canne à pêche pour mon grand-père* (*A Fishing-rod for my Grandfather*).[16] The stories shows the experimentation with narrative technique (the use of pronouns in place of names, the transition from dream to reality, and from "I" to "you" within the same sentence) that Gao would deploy and developed in the novel *Lingshan*. In an afterword to the Chinese edition of his short story collection, *Gei wo laoye mai yugan*, Gao sets out his conception of the novel:

1. My novels do not tell a story, they have no plot and that flavour that attracts readers that one usually finds in novels. The flavour of my novels, if they have one, is derived solely from the language I use …
2. In my novels, I never give a physical description of the characters, I use personal pronouns to provide the reader with different perspectives…. I believe it provides a deeper understanding than the supposedly clearly defined characters of the usual novel.
3. In my novels, I've eliminated all simple, objective description of the environment. Even if a few descriptions remain, they are made from some purely subjective viewpoint or other.

In the mid-1990s Gao worked on another novel *Yige ren de shengjing* (*One Man's Bible*) which interweaved the recent history of contemporary China, and above all of the Cultural Revolution, with the narrator's life in the West.[17] Gao discussed the novel with Dutrait in a conversation that took place in September 1998, the year in which Gao took French nationality, and just two years before being projected into the limelight of world attention.[18]

14. Noël and Liliane Dutrait (trans.), *La montagne de l'ame* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de I'Aube, 1995); Mabel Lee (trans.), *Soul Mountain* (London, New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

15. *Au bord de la vie* (Carnières, Belgium: Lansman, 1993); *Le Somnambule* (Carnières, Belgium: Lansman, 1995), *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end* (Carnières, Belgium: Lansman, 1998).

16. Noël Dutrait (trans.), (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1997, 2001); *Gei wo laoye mai yugan* (Hong Kong: Xinshiji chubanshe, 1996).

17. With a foreword by Noël Dutrait and an afterword by Liu Zaifu (Taibei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1999, 2000).

18. A version of this conversation appeared in French in *Perspectives Chinoises*, No.49 (1998).

Dutrait: *You said once that in writing* Soul Mountain *you had finished with feelings of nostalgia for the country in which you were born and where you lived almost 50 years of your life. Why then did you revisit China and its history in your most recent novel,* Yige ren de shenjing *[*One Man's Bible*]?*

Gao: *When I finished writing* Soul Mountain *in France, I thought that I had also finished with my nostalgia for China, a nostalgia which constitutes a heavy burden for Chinese writers exiled in the West. One of the fruits of exile is that it enables the conservation of one's creative force, but it also necessitates facing up to a new reality. That's why I turned to themes having to do with life in the West. In the five plays I wrote after finishing the novel, the Chinese backdrop gradually faded away.*[19] *I have the firm conviction that a man who has left his so-called motherland cannot only carry on living, but also continue to create. It's only later that he can look back and examine the painful experience he lived through in his country. I thought I had sufficient distance to settle this old score, but in fact it wasn't so. I worked on three successive versions and spent three years before being able to eradicate the tumour amidst all the memories that I'd forced myself to forget. It was the condition necessary for the birth of a literary work. Art does not consist of putting one's grievances on show, and if one cannot take pleasure in creative work, one is better off avoiding such sensitive issues. If I went back over my past in order to write this novel, it was also to ease a hidden pain and to augment my inner resources, to be able, later on, to write an even better work.*

Dutrait: *But there are already numerous accounts of the Cultural Revolution. What did you hope to add with your novel?*

Gao: *The works which up to now have dealt with the Cultural Revolution have generally been described as "scar literature". But who were the authors of this "scar literature"? I take no interest in writers who are kept in check by the authorities nor for works bridled by self-censorship. What I want to show is how the Cultural Revolution, the most radical manifestation of the communist revolution in a century, first, and before making man an object of sacrifice, transformed him into a servant. I also wanted to demonstrate the powerlessness and fragility of the individual swept away by this brutal storm. Maybe it's more properly the task of contemporary historians, but I just wanted to present a personal case which would constitute a document of a psychological nature not to be found in the archives already made public or in those yet to be so. I offer it as material for reflection.*

Dutrait: *In an essay entitled "Meiyou zhuyi"* (*No Doctrines*) *you state most categorically that you are opposed to "isms," but isn't that a dogmatic and ideological position in itself?*

19. In an interview published in the *Hong Kong Economic Journal – Xinbao*, 29 October 1993, p. 3, Gao went as far as to say that the novel *Lingshan* and the play *Shanhaijing zhuan* "were not related to China in any way."

Gao: *The fact is that "isms" are theoretical constructions, but the world and man himself existed before theory. We can explain existence with the help of theoretical constructions, but we cannot live by theory alone. Theory, whichever theory it may be, leads either to the absurd or to catastrophe. Such has been proven numerous times in the history of humanity. The riches of humankind and of the world itself are infinite and of an inexhaustible diversity. As far as principles are concerned, my doubts are born of my own experience. I dread them like the plague, and try to stay as far away as possible from them. Even when I reflect on literature and art, I never construct theoretical fetters. Furthermore, I keep to the level of free expression. I am simply happy to express myself without trying to pass for a theoretician. If I asserted that I adhere to "no doctrine," it was simply to express a sentiment, but I reject all constraints just as I reject definitions, deductions and proofs. Similarly, in my fiction writing, I display, but I do not draw conclusions.*

Dutrait: *Reading an article you wrote for* Le Monde *recently entitled "L'Esprit de liberté, ma France" ("The spirit of freedom, my France"), it's obvious that you see France as a privileged space providing you with the necessary conditions to live and work freely. But how do you see the future for your compatriots who are unable to leave China?*

Gao: *The future of the Chinese who live on mainland China is their business. There's no shortage of prophets willing to predict China's future. I am not prepared to assume the role of spokesperson for the Chinese, nor for the Chinese people. There are already enough people willing to undertake the task, what's the point in my doing the same? Moreover, I think that speaking of the future can rapidly become deadening and deceptive. Beckett wrote a tragedy on the absurdity of waiting, and I wrote a comedy [*Bus Stop*] on the same theme 20 years ago. A friend recently told me that this play, banned at the time in Beijing, had been produced in Romania and created a certain stir. This play was also based on my own experience. I wrote down in literary form something I felt strongly about at the time. Literature, as we know, knows no frontiers. Writing is something personal, and cannot be dependent upon any external authority. If I chose France, it's because at least France is a democratic country which assures more freedom to the individual than China, even if many French people complain that their country is not democratic enough. I can at least write what I want, therein lies my good fortune. But I expect nothing from the future.*

Since becoming a Nobel laureate in October 2000, Gao has seemed to shy away from expressing himself as candidly as he has done in the past. In a recent, and now rare, exchange with the public which took place at the Château de Lourmarin in the Luberon region of southern France, Gao Xingjian, insisting that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature and not the Peace Prize, affirmed his right to defend the "*individu fragile*" (fragile individual) he is. Part of that defence seems to include the refusal to be interviewed and an unwillingness to talk about politics. He claims that his

life is now in France and he does not wish to discuss Chinese politics. Gao's current, post-Nobel, statements contrast with his previous willingness to discuss Chinese society and, in particular, the condition of the Chinese intellectual. He says now that he wants to differentiate himself from Western intellectuals who since the beginning of the 20th century have felt obliged to get involved in politics.[20]

But beyond national and international politics, many of his readers would like to know how he would respond to criticism of the philosophy and ideology conveyed by his writing; the representation of women has, for example, been particularly controversial. Gao has promised to make one last major statement, a declaration he is preparing to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 2001. What is certain, however, is that the political implications of Gao's being awarded and accepting the Nobel Prize are real enough. After all, was Gao's acceptance of the award not just as political an act as Jean-Paul Sartre's refusing it?[21]

20. Opinions expressed by Gao Xingjian during the event "Rencontre avec Gao Xingjian," 1 June 2001, Lourmarin, France.

21. Jean-Paul Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 but declined the honour.