**Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940–)**

Gao Xingjian was born in Jiangxi, China in 1940. Forced to exile in 1987, he settled in France in 1988 and became a French citizen in 1997. A multi-talented artist, he is the author of numerous plays and an opera, as well as novels, short stories, critical essays and poems. His writings have been translated into multiple languages and his plays have been produced in several countries.In addition to being a writer, Gao is a filmmaker and a painter whose work has been exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide. In 1992 he was named Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government, and in 2000 became the first author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for a body of work written in the Chinese language. Aside from the universal appeal of his work, Gao is mostly known for his modernist approach to drama and literature. His talent has derived chiefly from successful synthesis of Chinese and Western cultural and literary traditions. He is considered a highly innovative writer whose creative use of language, according to the Nobel Committee, has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama.

Gao began his literary career in the late 1970s after the end of the Cultural Revolution with the publication of novellas and theoretical essays on literature. In the early 1980s he became deeply involved in the debate over modernism in China while working as a highly acclaimed playwright in the experimental theatre. From 1980 to 1987, Gao published short stories, novellas, plays and critical essays, including two theoretical treatises “Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan” 现代小说技巧初探 (“A Preliminary Exploration of the Techniques of Modern Fiction,” 1981) and “Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu” 对一种现代戏剧的追求 (“In Search of a Modern Form of Drama,” 1987) that aroused heated debates among scholars and writers in China. The avant-garde and subversive nature of his work soon caught the attention of the Chinese Government. While Gao’s theatrical debut *Juedui xinhao* 绝对信号 (*Alarm* *Signal,* 1982) was a great success, *Chezhan* 车站 (*Bus Stop*, 1983), the absurd drama that established his reputation, was condemned during the governmental campaign against “intellectual pollution.” *Yeren* 野人 (*Wild Man*, 1985) gave rise to a heated domestic polemic and in 1986 *Bi’an* 彼岸 (*The Other Shore*) was banned by the government. Since 1987, none of Gao’s works have been performed in China though he has continued to write extensively in exile.

Western playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meherhold, Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Artaud have greatly inspired Gao’s approach to theatre, yet Gao has taken his plays beyond this Western influence by rethinking the theatrical space from a Chinese perspective. In particular, he has worked with the flexible and interchangeable subject positions in the Chinese language to develop a language for theatrical performance based on a theory of Zen Buddhist contemplation. For example, in *Shengsijie* 生死界 (*Between Life and Death*, 1991) and *Duihua yu fanhua* 对话与反话 (*Dialogue and Rebuttal*, 1992), Gao shows how dialogue can be used to demonstrate changing subject positions and changing points of view.

Gao continued his experiment with language in his two autobiographical novels, *Ling shan* 灵山 (*Soul Mountain*, 1989) and *Yige ren de shenjing* 一个人的神经 (*One Man’s Bible*, 1998), using pronouns instead of characters to construct a dialogue between the different facets of his protagonist’s self. *Soul Mountain* depicts a man’s journey through the Chinese countryside consisting of imagined encounters and dialogues between the protagonist’s selves – named “I,” “You,” and “He.” Using a technique he calls “flow of language," Gao combines reality and imagination to express his protagonist’s search for his roots, inner peace and liberty. *One Man's Bible* is also built upon a dialogue between the protagonist’s selves – in this case “You” and “He” – searching for the meaning of existence in the face of human cruelty and trauma. “You” represents the protagonist in the present as a writer in exile outside China, while “He” represents the protagonist in the past sharing his experience of the Cultural Revolution.

Flight and exile have been central notions in Gao’s conception of literature ever since his flight from government persecution to the mountains in Sichuan, China in 1987. In 1990, he developed the idea of "cold literature,"a literature free of all political or ideological influence, characterized by fleeing and spiritual cleansing. Avoiding the mantle of hero, idol, victim, spokesperson or judge, the writer quietly observes reality from the margins of society, undertaking a personal introspection.

For Gao Xingjian, writing represents the solitary act of the individual and a means of self-exploration and self-affirmation.

**List of Works:**

Gao, X. (2000) *Soul Mountain,* Sydney: Harper Collins. (Gao Xingjian wrote his masterpiecefrom 1982 to 1989. It was first published in Taipei in 1990.)

--------- (2002) *One Man's Bible*, Sydney: Harper Collins. (Gao Xingjian’s second and last novel was first published in Taipei in 1999.)

--------- (1999) *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. (This collection of plays by Gao Xingjian includes *The Other shore*, *Between Life and Death* and *Dialogue and Rebuttal*.)

--------- (2005) *Cold literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. (This bilingual collection includes “Cold Literature” and “The Case for Literature,” two fundamental essays by Gao Xingjian.)

--------- (2012) *Gao Xingjian: Aesthetics and Creation*, Amherst: [Cambria Press](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambria_Press). (This collection presents important theoretical essays by Gao Xingjian on theatre and literature.)

**References and Further Reading:**

Tam, K. (ed.) (2001) *Soul of Chaos: Critical* *Perspectives on Gao Xingjian,* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press. (This edition presents critical essays by major scholars of Gao Xingjian’s work.)

Labedzka, I. (2008) *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre: From the Word to the Image*, Leiden: Brill. (A very interesting exploration of Gao Xingjian’s theatrical work.)