

WALKING OUT OF OTHER PEOPLE'S PRISONS:  
LIU ZAIFU AND GAO XINGJIAN ON CHINESE LITERATURE  
IN THE 1990s

Mabel LEE

University of Sydney, School of Asian Studies  
Sydney, N.S.W. Australia 2006

In the early 1980s the names of Habermas, Derrida, Foucault were suddenly familiar to Chinese intellectuals, along with those of other Western writers and thinkers who had been banned for half a century. Western creative works and literary theories played an important role in subverting the authority of the literary principles of Mao Zedong which had been progressively implemented until they became cast iron orthodoxy during the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, in Chinese literature and criticism, the writer, reader and the works had been ideologically “sanitized” of human odour: criticism, harassment, imprisonment and even the threat of loss of life were effective deodorants. The rigid conformity imposed upon minds during that period, created symptoms of spiritual deprivation. The response was a voracious appetite for the rations of personal freedom which allowed for a modicum of individual diversity and difference: this diversity and difference was to be found both in foreign literature and art, and in China's pre-Marxist cultural heritage. As liberalization was promoted by the Party primarily as a means to achieve economic modernization, it was the culture of the modernized West which was accorded official sanction; at the same time, the marketing of Western capitalism was highly attractive to a society weary of conformity. For reflective minds in society, the appeal of Western literature was equally attractive.

Established as a semi-autonomous non-government organization on the campus of Peking University in 1980, the Institute of Comparative Literature saw as its mission the introduction of world literature to China. It was due to Yue Daiyun, Professor of Chinese, whose efforts, persistence and creatively working around bureaucratic obstacles succeeded in launching the Institute,<sup>1</sup> and subsequently encouraged the growth of similar units on university campuses throughout the country. Usually there was a close liaison with the foreign language departments on campuses and many young students began to eagerly study West-

---

<sup>1</sup> Yue Daiyun's biography is documented in Carolyn Wakeman, *To the Storm: the Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman* (University of California Press, 1985). Yue's personal experiences as the revolutionary portrayed by Wakeman is consistent with her achievements in the area of comparative literature studies in China since 1980.

ern literature and literary discourse because it answered a psychological need to understand why the developments of the Cultural Revolution had taken place. Some students gradually had opportunities to go abroad to study.

Various Western theories were passionately embraced for a time by intellectuals, depending on their relevance to the rapidly changing Chinese context.<sup>2</sup> The times were charged with the exhilaration and excitement of learning about new things. Xiaobing Tang, a young intellectual who has continued his studies in the West, discusses in retrospect the literary trends of those times, applying the analytical tools of cultural studies. He notes the inherent contradiction dur-

---

<sup>2</sup> See Xiaobing Tang, "The Function of New Theory: What Does It Mean to Talk about Postmodernism in China", Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang (eds), *Politics, Ideology and Literary Discourse in Modern China* (Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 278–99, which presents an analysis of how New Theory became part of the literary discourse in China during the 1980s and the political and practical reasons for its remaining at the margins. Tang maintains that New Theory succeeded to establish itself because it fitted in with the government's agenda of modernization: it "implicitly endorsed the official ideology of modernization, of catching up with, in every possible way possible, the strange modern world of science and technology." It was only when Liu Zaifu began to enunciate his theories on subjectivity in literature that new thinking on literature ran foul of the bureaucrats: this challenged the orthodoxy and those in entrenched positions of power in the Chinese literary world. Tang notes that the impact of "New Criticism, Psychoanalysis, Structuralist Poetics, Semiotics, Reception Aesthetics, Reader's Response, Hermeneutics, Archetypal Criticism, Deconstruction, and Poststructuralism, all the way to Feminist Theory, Western Marxism, and Postmodernist Critique, the entire course of literary criticism of the twentieth century West and more is frantically crammed into scores of introductory essays, dozens of translated selections, all in a matter of a few years", while maintaining that the New Theory remained impotent because of the inadequacy of practitioners in the face of the hegemonic influence of the old structures of orthodox literary thinking.

See also Yue Daiyun, "Western Literary Theory in China, 1985–1995" (unpublished manuscript, 1995) which maintains that different theories exerted different influences in China, because of their particular relevance, and even because of historical accident, at particular points in time. She notes that (American) New Literary Criticism had a substantial effect because it demanded close reading of the text and discounted both effect on the reader and author intent which during the Cultural Revolution constituted the nub of criticism. There was a revival of interest in Marxism, as young Chinese intellectuals came to read Benjamin, Adorno and Habermas, peaking in 1985 when Frederic Jameson gave a series of lectures at Peking University. Yue also notes that some Western concepts, particularly Freud's psychoanalysis, opened new areas in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. Freud's psychoanalysis was known much earlier, and exerted some influence in the 1930s but it subsequently disappeared during the War of Resistance; then in the 1980s there was a revival in Chinese literature. Some Western theories attracted attention in China because of their affinity with traditional Chinese literary analysis: hermeneutics was central to traditional Chinese scholarship with its attention to textual commentary and annotation; and Western reception aesthetics with its relativity and multiple perspectives in aesthetic appreciation and the subjective understanding of the reader based on personal experience, for a long time have been a part of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Postmodernism, postcolonialism, gender studies, historicism were all introduced as theories for academic study and have exerted varying degrees on the literature produced.

ing the 1980s when New Theory was a “general intellectual effort to translate the text of contemporary China into a supposedly world language”:

...while the counterhegemonic enterprise of instituting a new theoretical framework has to challenge political repression by resorting indiscriminately to classical humanism, liberal pluralism, or a postmodern ideology of heterogeneity, the haunting specter of a market economy, on the other hand, hardly appears any more charitable or desirable when it reveals its mercantile face and elects to ignore all these intellectual concerns. Between political unfreedom and market indifference there is no real choice.<sup>3</sup>

These comments were made in the 1990s but it is unlikely that Chinese writers and critics of the 1880s, including Xiaobing Tang, would have been aware of the contradiction. Nevertheless, the New Theories of the West progressively assisted in the process of “deconstructing” the tenacious hold of intellectual habits which became entrenched, reinforced and established as tradition during the Cultural Revolution. In the same period, there was simultaneously a phenomenal growth in the publication of translations of Western literature as well as in the study of various Western languages.

Just as it was hoped that China’s economic development would quickly catch up with the rest of the world, so Chinese intellectuals, including writers, wanted accelerated development in their areas of specialization: access to reading across an international spectrum of writing, provided intellectual experiences previously denied to them and created a tension, a need for expression within, and as a legitimate part of, the international community to which they had been projected through their exposure to global literary trends. In the Chinese literary world this response occurred first as an instinctive response to the gradual lifting of restraints on freedom of artistic expression by writers in their creative works. This was followed by critical works which sought to explain the changed literary processes as universities began to train students in Western literary theories.

Although the custodians of revolutionary purity in literature were to launch campaigns against the spiritual pollution of the West, liberalization on other fronts coupled with China’s earnest endeavours to gain acceptance, approval, and acknowledgment by the rest of the modernized world, ie. an identity as a modern nation, made it difficult to stem the import of Western culture. During the decade of the 1980s creative literature and literary theory gradually diversified and globalized, in tandem with the new developments in the economy and society. The liberalization policies of Deng Xiaoping had generated an irreversible dynamics with a life of its own and which was to culminate in the student movement of 1989.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Xiaobing Tang, “The Function of New Theory”, p. 292.

<sup>4</sup> For example as Liu Kang argues, the decade saw the emergence of a civil society within the political reality, in the realm of culture and ideas. A major problem was therefore the crisis of identity of the intellectuals who had for decades been associated to the Party as “cul-

More than half a decade has passed since 1989 which is clearly a watershed year in which the Party reasserted its authority, even while allowing greater liberalization in certain areas of life. In the period of a decade and a half, Chinese literature has changed substantively. A significant number of Chinese writers have taken the option of permanent residence overseas where they are continuing to publish in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, or in other countries where there are Chinese communities large enough to sustain Chinese literary activities. Participation in local and international literary activities is also common. Today in the mid-1990s, the integrated PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan publications scene provides an important and lively international forum for “undirected” and uncensored literary discourse for Chinese writers and academics, regardless of their place of residence. Physical distance in fact provides space for detached evaluation and reflection on literature and on the developments which have taken place in Chinese literature in the present century, and this intellectual freedom is keenly cherished.

In the same period, talented young academics such as Liu Kang, Xiaobing Tang and others have mastered Western theories and have emerged in Western cultural studies circles, armed with the empirical evidence provided by their knowledge of the Chinese literary scene to adequately substantiate their paradigmatic claims. Many of their perceptions are keen and incisive, but they unavoidably adopt the aggressive, militant stance symptomatic of cultural studies. This paradigmatic trap is missing in the writings of the two middle-aged writers and cultural critics, Liu Zaifu and Gao Xingjian, who are the focus of this paper. The seniority in age differences accounts for personal experiences superimposed on a more lengthy historical period of time. Their analyses of the 1990s Chinese literary scene, and the creative act in general, are unique and original. Gao Xingjian keeps abreast of the most recent European literary trends and Liu Zaifu has devoted himself to the study of cultural and intellectual history and recent literary analytical theories. The fact that their literary views do not employ Western analytical theories in their discussions of literature does not mean that they are ignorant of them, nor that their literary analyses are any the less valid. From the 1990s they are consciously “walking out of other people’s prisons”. However the directions they have subsequently taken lead in opposite directions.

Their works discussed in the paragraphs below enunciate a new awareness and self-confidence which they claim, is now possible for Chinese literature after almost a century of intellectual insecurity brought about by China’s contact with the industrialized nations of the West and Japan. The ruminations on Chi-

---

tural workers”: the separation of cultural activities from the Party’s political agenda left intellectuals feeling “immensely liberated... but disoriented as to their new social identity in an increasingly open, commodified and contradictory society, where power still remains in the hands of the Party.” See Liu Kang, “Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China” in Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 31.

nese literature by playwright and novelist Gao Xingjian (b. 1940)<sup>5</sup> and the literary theorist, cultural historian and essayist Liu Zaifu (b. 1941)<sup>6</sup> will be examined alongside one another and in the context of some points raised by their younger contemporaries who have seemingly become enamoured of the collective stance of Western theoretical discourse.

While a part of the Chinese diaspora, the experiences of these two writers, are quite different as will be evident in the biographical sketches in the paragraphs below. However there is considerable similarity in their assessments of the developments which have taken place in the history of Chinese literature during the present century. Their perceptions of China's literature and history has been derived from lived experiences, as are their perceptions of creative processes, for both are creative writers.

There are of course also substantial differences in the modes of reflection on literature by Liu Zaifu and Gao Xingjian. As writers, both have their own unique prose style and artistic sensitivities; both are master stylists but the genres they choose are different, as are the issues they seek to explore in their writings. However, they share a belief that literature is a matter of the individual and not the collective; and that Chinese writers have voluntarily sacrificed Chinese literature for the collective. They also share the view that in the 1990s Chinese writers should re-assert themselves as writers, that literature should no longer be linked to politics. Their similar ages mean that they were born soon after the beginning of the War of Resistance and that they have personally experienced the birth and the growing pains of the People's Republic.

The choice of focussing on these two writers is neither arbitrary nor accidental, but has arisen simply because the opening lines of Gao Xingjian's "Without Isms" (Meiyou zhuyi, 1993)<sup>7</sup> refers to Liu Zaifu's essay "Farewelling the Gods" (Gaobie zhu shen, 1990).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For biographical details and analysis of *Lingshan*, see the following two works: Torbjorn Loden, "World Literature with Chinese Characteristics: On a Novel by Gao Xingjian", *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 4 (1993), pp. 17–39, which contains a bibliography of Gao Xingjian's works; and also Mabel Lee, "Without Politics: Gao Xingjian on Literary Creation", *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6 (1996): 82–101.

<sup>6</sup> For biographical details see Mabel Lee, "Rethinking Literature in the Post-Mao Period: Liu Zaifu's Theory of the Subjectivity of Literature", *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, 18 & 19 (1986), pp. 101–125, which summarizes the essential arguments presented in Liu Zaifu's early works on subjectivity and human character: "On the Subjectivity of Literature" (Lun wenxue de zhutixing) in Hongqi zazhi bianjibu wenyizu (ed.), *Collected Essays on the Debate on Subjectivity in Literature* (Hongqi chubanshe, Beijing, 1986), pp. 1–68, and his book *On the Composition of Human Character* (Xingge zuhe lun; Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986). See also Liu Kang, "Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China", for a theoretical analysis of Liu's subjectivity.

<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the Chinese Literature in the Past Forty Year Conference*, pp. 1701–7. This Conference was held in Taipei, December 1993 and sponsored by the Lianhebao Cultural Foundation.

Gao Xingjian was launched to fame in China when his “experimental” plays *Alarm Signal* (Juedui xin hao) and *The Bus Stop* (Chezhan) were performed to capacity audiences in Beijing in 1982 and 1983. However, being “experimental” was not strong enough an excuse: the authorities stopped the performance of *The Bus Stop* which the Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department called “the most poisonous play written since the establishment of the People’s Republic.”<sup>9</sup> Gao in fact had been under surveillance since 1981 when his book *Preliminary Explorations in the Art and Technique of Modern Fiction* (Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan) was published by Huacheng Publishing House in Guangzhou and opened the debate on modernism in literary circles. By early 1983 a formal criticism of modernism was announced, linking it with capitalism and bourgeois liberalization. It was in this context of anxiety and uncertainty for writers in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution that *The Bus Stop* nevertheless was brought to the stage, and then closed down. At this point Gao decided to abscond from Beijing, undertaking his ten-month odyssey through the Chinese hinterland which was to form the fabric of his novel *Lingshan*.<sup>10</sup> By absconding, ie. fleeing Beijing, he escaped the venomous attacks unleashed on him during the “eradicate spiritual pollution” campaign and at the same time restored himself to a good state of mental and physical health.<sup>11</sup> In 1985 he accepted invitations to Germany and France. Apart from a brief return to China in 1986, Gao has been resident continuously in Paris since 1987.

---

<sup>8</sup> Liu Zaifu, *Expelling the Gods* (Fangzhu zhu shen; Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi chubanshe, Hong Kong, 1994), pp. 293–307.

<sup>9</sup> Gao Xingjian, “Stale chrysanthemums” (*Geye huanghua*), in *Minzhu Zhongguo*, 2 (1992): 80. This article is the most detailed account of Gao’s recollections on the circumstances of his writing and staging of *Alarm Signal* and *The Bus Stop*. See also Geremie Barmé, “A Touch of the Absurd: Introducing Gao Xingjian, and His Play *The Bus Stop*”, *Renditions*, 19 & 20 (1983): 373–9 and in the same volume, his translation of *The Bus Stop*, pp. 379–86, and Chan Wai-sim’s “Postscript: On Seeing the Play *The Bus Stop*: He Wen’s Critique in *Literary Gazette*”, pp. 387–92. See also Josephine Riley and Michael Gissenwehler, “The Myth of Gao Xingjian” in *Berichte des Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institut für China- und Südostasien-Forschung*, Number 27 (Engelhard-Ng Verlag, Bonn, 1989), pp. 129–151; and William Tay, “Avant-garde Theatre in Post-Mao China: *The Bus Stop* by Gao Xingjian”, in Howard Goldblatt (ed.), op cit., pp. 112–118.

<sup>10</sup> Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, Taipei, 1990. Gao makes maximum use of the 560 pages of the novel, *Lingshan/Soul Mountain*, to fully explore the unique features of the Chinese language for providing artistic dimensions not as easily achieved in other languages. It is a work reflecting many years of development in both reading, reflecting on techniques, and the actual writing of fiction and drama. His acute artistic sensitivity, innovative techniques, and compelling story-telling expertise, is used to recreate simultaneously his autobiography and the story of China during from his childhood days until the late 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> See *Lingshan*, Chapter 2, which tells of his illness and his unhealthy life-style in Beijing at the time.

To some extent because of his background in French language and literature, Gao Xingjian has slipped with considerable success into the French literary milieu. In 1993 he was honoured with the French award Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, an acknowledgement of his literary achievements.

The plays Gao Xingjian has written since settling in Paris, show a considerable maturity. For Western critics who adopt the "orientalist" stance and demand that Chinese drama must remain static and unchanging in order to be Chinese, Gao's plays are disturbing as they bear no semblance to traditional Chinese drama. Their minimalist stage presentation, however, suggests modern Western drama, and yet they are distinctly foreign for Western audiences. However his plays are to be classified is perhaps less relevant than the fact that fate or destiny had decreed that Gao Xingjian was to take residence in Paris and that his plays were to enjoy considerable success in the theatres of Paris and elsewhere in Europe.

The fact that much of Gao Xingjian's creative works are plays means that performed on stage, they are provided with an additional dimension for accessibility to Western audiences. The unique and highly experimental techniques he employs have in fact found acceptance and acclaim in Europe and have been translated into various languages for stage productions.<sup>12</sup> In 1994 the Swedish translations of ten of Gao's plays by the distinguished scholar Professor Goran Malmqvist were published by the Swedish Royal Theatre to honour Gao's appointment as playwright of the Theatre. Gao Xingjian's novel *Lingshan* (Lian-jing, Taipei, 1990) has been acclaimed by an élite Chinese readership but the widest acclaim has been in Europe, first with Malmqvist's Swedish version, *Andarnas berg* (Forum, Stockholm, 1992), and recently with the French version, *La Montagne de l'Ame*, by Noel and Liliane Dutrait (Editions de l'Aube, Paris, 1995) which has had rave reviews. It would seem that Gao Xingjian has been able to sustain a highly meaningful creative life, enjoying acclaim both in the Chinese and European context. In addition Gao has been able to subsidize his literary endeavours by the sale of his black ink paintings which are highly prized, particularly in Europe and in Taiwan.<sup>13</sup>

A stark contrast, is Liu Zaifu who has been living in exile after the events of June 1989. While director of the Literature Research Unit of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and chief editor of the journal *Literary Criticism* (Wenxue pinglun), his analysis of subjectivity in literature and human character brought him under heavy criticism from the authorities and he was placed under

---

<sup>12</sup> Gao's plays have also been translated into French, German, Italian and English and have been performed on various stages including those of the Theatre National de Chaillot (Paris), the Wiener Unterhaltungs Theatre and Theatre des Augenblicke (Vienna), Thalia Theatre (Hamburg), Royal Lyceum Theatre (Edinburgh), Dionysia (Rome), and Teatr Polski (Poznan) and Teatr Powszchny (Warsaw), and he has in fact directed some of these performances.

<sup>13</sup> His most recent solo exhibition was at the Taipei Municipal Art Gallery, December 1995.

house arrest for several months in 1985.<sup>14</sup> His critical writings on Chinese culture during the student movement of 1989 saw him black-listed, and he reluctantly left “the yellow earth which loves me and yet has abandoned me”.<sup>15</sup> Liu’s life in exile has not been as comfortable as Gao’s and he has been living on the support of visiting research fellowships (University of Chicago, the University of Colorado and the University of Stockholm) and on the royalties from his prolific writings. A recent interview by a Hong Kong reporter reveals an anguished soul deeply scarred by personal experiences but still deeply agonizing over the plight of his homeland. His writings confirm this anguish.<sup>16</sup> Two years after living in exile, he recalls in graphic images the ravages of the Cultural Revolution with a poignancy typical of his creative writings:

Life was accompanied by hunger and fear but also by barbarity and insanity. Ours was truly a generation with a fondness for fighting and an addiction to killing, a generation guilty of a multitude of crimes. Each of our hearts contains a book of crimes, the whip lashes inflicted by others and those we have inflicted upon others.<sup>17</sup>  
...The spiritual food we ate was not only coarse but infused with the gunpowder of revolutionary words so that our bodies contained linguistic toxins and the smell of gunpowder. Our bellies were full of barbed thoughts and if we couldn’t work these off by killing we would have suffocated.<sup>18</sup>

In Liu Zaifu’s analysis, it was poverty that made people callous, gave them the guts to swallow rats, birch trees, and even the flesh and soul of the same species. The great primeval forest of his native village had once provided shade and protection for generations. The villagers had turned it into red soil, but could he blame them for chopping down the forest, could he blame them for wanting to live? He confesses that in 1958 he had been one of the red ants which in a few days denuded the mountain: “In that year everyone turned into poets, revolutionaries and crazed red ants.... I was also a crazed red ant carrying a red flag on my shoulder and singing battle songs.”<sup>19</sup> The graphic symbolism of the destructive hordes of crazed red ants and the green mountains turned red was not missed by

---

<sup>14</sup> Liu Kang presents an excellent analytical account of Liu Zaifu’s understanding of subjectivity within the context of Li Zehou’s creative aesthetics and philosophy. Li Zehou’s writings which have influenced a generation of Chinese intellectuals, represent a critical and creative appropriation of Kant and other Western philosophers, including Liu Zaifu as he himself acknowledges. See Liu Kang, “Subjectivity, Marxism and Cultural Theory in China”, pp. 23–55.

<sup>15</sup> Liu Zaifu, “Dirge to the Great Forest” (Da senlin de wange) in *Notes While Drifting in Exile* (*Piaoliu shouji*; Tiandi tushu youxiangongsi chubanshe, Hong Kong), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> See Dai Ping’s interview, “Anguish Clutches the Heart of Liu Zaifu” (Liu Zaifu bei kuanan zhuazhu xinling) in the one-page *Ming Pao* Sunday Supplement.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46–9.

PRC critics and Liu is called “a whore scheming to get a chastity arch erected” for himself, and charged with slandering the land which had given him birth.<sup>20</sup>

However, it is not only PRC critics who are capable of exerting strong pressures on the writer. The circumstances surrounding Gao Xingjian’s two-act play *Absconding* (Taowang, 1990) is a good example.<sup>21</sup> The play is set in a disused warehouse after tanks were ordered into Tiananmen on 4 June 1989. The play is coldly cynical and contains no impassioned rhetoric for either the demonstrators or the authorities. A young man and young woman who were in the Square find refuge in the warehouse. In the darkness and confronted by death they are drawn physically close to each other, even though they are complete strangers. They are interrupted by the arrival of a middle-aged man, also a fugitive from the authorities. Gao speaks through the cynical comments of the middle-aged man. The young man makes a break from the warehouse and gunshots are heard; the couple left in the warehouse imagine that he is dead. In the darkness it is the young woman who takes the initiative, although the middle-aged man makes a feeble attempt to resist. They make love there and then. A critic in the PRC attacked the play as the “irresponsible” work of a writer who was overseas and “had not personally experienced the events of June 4”. The behaviour of the protagonists in the play is pronounced decidedly “decadent”.<sup>22</sup> Worse still, the American drama group which had commissioned the writing of the play was dissatisfied with the lack of student heroes and asked for revisions. Gao paid the translation fees and withdrew his manuscript. For Gao there is a clear separation between literature and politics: literature is the concern of the individual, of the self, whereas politics is concerned with the collective will and the abnegation of the self. The incident caused him to publish his thoughts on literary creation, especially Chinese literature. “Jottings from Paris” (Bali suibi; 1991),<sup>23</sup> “The Myth of the Nation and Insanity for the Individual” (Guojia shenhua yu geren diankuang; 1993),<sup>24</sup> and “Without Isms” (1993).

---

<sup>20</sup> Shancheng ke, “Let’s Look at Liu Zaifu as he ‘Drifts in Exile’” (Qie kan piaoliuzhong de Liu Zaifu), *Wenyi lilun yu piping*, 3 (1994), p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Jintian* 1 (1990), pp. 41–64. Gao states that he had been invited to write a play about the events in Tiananmen. The resulting work, *Taowang* took out specific reference to the events which occurred in Tiananmen and there were no heroes; he had written the play as a politico-philosophical play. “The Americans wanted me to change it, so I withdrew the manuscript, and paid the translation fee myself. When I write I have what I want to say, I do not want to please anyone’s tastes. The solitary and independent writer confronts society and speaks and expresses himself in the voice of the individual, it is this voice which is more truthful.” See “Without Isms”, pp. 1706. Gao Xingjian’s plays have recently been published as a collection, *Gao Xingjian liu zhong* (Tijiao chubanshe, Taipei, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> See Yu Sanniu, “An Irresponsible Book” (*Xinkou cihuang zhi shu*), in *Lost “Heroes”: the Persons and about Them* (*Wangming “jingying” qi ren qi shi*; China Youth Publishing House, 1991), pp. 235–7. See also Zeng Huiyan’s review of the articles contained in this volume, in *Baixing* Fortnightly 224 (June 1991), pp. 6–7.

<sup>23</sup> *Guangchang zazhi*, 4 (1991): 14–15.

<sup>24</sup> *Mingbao yuekan*, 8 (1993): 114–121.

On the issue of separation of literature and politics, Liu Kang's "Subjectivity, Marxism and, Cultural Theory in China" presents a brilliant analysis of Liu Zaifu's notion of subjectivity in literature and particularly of the influence of Li Zehou's aesthetics on Liu Zaifu, and on a whole generation of intellectuals. Liu Kang however asserts that the emphasis on the self in literature by Liu Zaifu and others promoted the importance of the self for a devious political purpose, namely for self-empowerment.<sup>25</sup> While the paradigms of the theorists are useful as tools of analysis, the paradigms sometimes discount human differences and differences in time: the paradigm subsumes reality and seeks to make reality fit the paradigm, regardless of the person under scrutiny. It would seem that yet another collective view has been established to encroach upon the self of the individual.

In "The Myth of the Nation and Insanity for the Individual" Gao Xingjian argues how patriotism has plagued the development of China's literature in modern times. From the May Fourth period Chinese intellectuals, including writers, have regarded themselves as spokespersons of the people, and in doing so abnegated their rights as individuals.<sup>26</sup> Chinese nationalism and patriotism have made the achievement of human rights, particularly the recognition of freedom of thought, extremely difficult. Chinese intellectuals have been able to courageously oppose the traditional ethical system and the political power of the bureaucracy yet have been helpless when confronted with the modern superstition of the nation. This superstition is founded in a national collective subconsciousness which is more deeply entrenched than ethical phenomena. Its strength is based on the primitive instinct for survival. "Following the disintegration of the feudal imperial system, the feudal ethics based on loyalty to the ruler turned into a patriotic nationalism possessed of moral and ethical powers."<sup>27</sup>

In Gao's analysis of events in Deng Xiaoping's China, the relaxation of control and loss of control over literature meant that Chinese intellectuals had gained a limited amount of space, and that in the process of their political struggle for democracy, emancipation of the individual and awareness of the self had re-emerged. Nietzsche's philosophy of the superman and romantic sentiments of saving the world reached a high tide and Chinese intellectuals once again enacted their historical role as either people's heroes or martyrs. Gao is not opposed to intellectuals participating in politics but argues that political participation should be for the individual to choose. If all Chinese intellectuals become involved in politics then the fate of intellectuals would be the same as during the

---

<sup>25</sup> Liu's "generation of intellectuals has become disillusioned with politics, and they try to distance themselves from it as much as possible. Yet politics inevitably intervenes at the very moment of depoliticization. Liu Zaifu tries to transcend politics by proposing aesthetic universals, but his aesthetic enterprise betrays the political intent he is unwilling to acknowledge." Liu Kang, "Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China, pp. 46-7.

<sup>26</sup> *Mingbao yuekan* 114 (1993), n.p.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

May Fourth period, a mass suicide. While he expresses deep reverence for those many intellectuals who had sacrificed themselves for the nation and the well-being of the people, he also sympathizes with those who had entered politics, and in so doing, sacrificed their academic and creative lives.<sup>28</sup>

It was a misfortune for literature that the writer Lu Xun was crushed to death by the politician Lu Xun. Clearly, for Lu Xun it was not necessarily a misfortune but it may have been a source of regret.<sup>29</sup>

As a creative writer Gao Xingjian sees only one option, to abscond. Against power politics, public opinion, ethical preachings, the benefit of the party and the collective, in order to preserve personal worth, personal integrity, and intellectual independence, ie freedom, the individual has no option but to flee. It is only by fleeing that one can preserve one's self integrity and autonomy. The alternative is either to rot in gaol, to be crushed by the criticism of the masses, to drown and be swept along by the flow of traditional practice, or to be tortured to the end of one's days by empty glory, oblivious to what the self is all about.<sup>30</sup>

The notion of fleeing recurs frequently throughout Gao Xingjian's work. It is his solution for the individual in socialized existence, even in its smallest unit of two persons. The 560 pages of the novel *Lingshan* allows him to examine many aspects of the meaning of socialized existence for the individual but it is in the play "Absconding", described earlier that it is brilliantly captured in drama. The tragic events of Tiananmen, 1989, were shown internationally on television day after day: these visual images therefore provide a setting in addition to that in the text of the play. The additional setting for readers who were in the Square at the time is of course not limited to the images captured by the television cameras. This short one-act play succeeds in examining many facets of human behaviour but it is the relationship between the individual and the collective which concerns the present discussion. The middle-aged man comments that to go on the attack without understanding the strategies of organization and retreat, one shouldn't get involved in politics, otherwise one would only be a sacrifice in the gamble. He is angrily rebuked by the earnest young man for not coming forward as a leader, if he foresaw all this. This is his simple reply:

(MIDDLE-AGED MAN) I've already told you that I'm a bystander, sometimes I pass by, sometimes I'm pulled into things, sometimes I get worked up, sometimes I speak out, and that's it. I've got my own things to do! I got sick of politics a long time ago. I don't have what it takes to be a leader nor do I have any urge to be a leader. What's more there are already so many leaders out there, I'm afraid of getting my hands dirty.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> "Jottings from Paris" (Bali suibi) No. 32 in *Guangchang zazhi*, 4 (1991) p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* "Jotting" No. 1 and 2.

The young man clearly sees himself in a heroic role and (correctly) accuses him of not being one of the democracy movement, that he is only a bystander. He is showing off to the young woman who is intellectually attracted to what the older man is saying (and physically drawn to him by their circumstances: the darkness, confrontation with death).

(YOUNG WOMAN) So what if he is a bystander? Aren't we all fugitives?

(MIDDLE-AGED MAN) That's exactly it. To be on the run is your, my, and also his fate. To be on the run is the fate of human beings.

As the middle age man goes on about not wanting to be a pawn in a game, not wanting to be manipulated, and that it is because he insists on his own freedom of action that he has no option but to flee, the young man becomes hostile and (correctly) accuses him of avoiding the democracy movement. The middle-aged man's response is that he avoids all situations involving so-called collective will. This provokes the young man to righteous anger: But what about the nation and the people, are you going to just look on as the nation and the people are destroyed?

(MIDDLE-AGED MAN) What is nation? Whose nation? Does it take responsibility for you or for me? Why do I have to take responsibility for it? I take responsibility for only myself.

.....

(MIDDLE-AGED MAN) I'll only save myself. If the race is destroyed then it deserves it! Isn't that what you're trying to get me to confess? What other questions do you have? Has the interrogation ended?<sup>31</sup>

These questions leave the young man perplexed. Implicit are the questions: Is this not harassment and infringement on individual rights? Is this not precisely the object of the protests of the democracy movement?

The conflict between the individual will and the collective will, and the implications for the writer, are examined in depth in "Without Isms" which Gao Xingjian presented at the Chinese Literature in the Past Forty Years Conference held in Taipei. He notes that Lu Xun's principle of "bring-it-here-ism" (*nalai zhuyi*) is not a bad thing in itself, regarding Western ideas; only that Chinese writers have been over-zealous in trying to bring in every existing Western "ism". There is no need follow the same road as Western literature; once the writer has internalized an "ism", it is no longer the same as the original. It is therefore pointless to discuss the "ism" any further, and quite futile "to insist on shouldering other people's placards".<sup>32</sup>

Again, these are conclusions derived from Gao Xingjian's personal experiences. He had been labelled in turn a "modernist" in 1981 with his *Preliminary*

---

<sup>31</sup> The above excerpts from the play are from *Jintian/Today*, 1 (1990): 50–1.

<sup>32</sup> "Without Isms", pp. 1701–2.

*Explorations in the Art and Technique of Modern Fiction*, “Theatre of the Absurd” in 1983 with *The Bus Stop*, “nativist” in 1985 with *Wild Man* (Yeren) and “reactionary” in 1990 with *Absconding*. He rejects all of these labels and declares that he owes allegiance to no “ism” in either politics or literature.

In the present period of ideological disintegration, for an individual to maintain spiritual independence the only attitude to adopt to question. This is also my attitude to what is highly prized or fashionable. In my experience mass movements and popular taste—just like what is known as the self—are all not worthy of worship and certainly not worthy of superstitious belief.

As a writer living in exile he sees his only means to self-redemption as the creation of literature and art. This does not mean that he is an advocate of pure literature which he calls “an ivory tower totally divorced from society”. For him literary creation is the challenge of an individual’s existence to society. The size of the challenge is irrelevant: it is the stance which is important.

Gao acknowledges that literature achieves freedom only when it can detach itself from considerations of material benefit. It is a human luxury after basic needs for survival are met and it is a source of pride for both the writer and the reader that the need for literature exists. This is the social nature of literature. Literature, for Gao, enlightens, criticizes, challenges, overturns and transcends. However the limiting of literature to the narrow confines of a set of political functions or ethical rules and the turning of literature into political propaganda and ethical teachings and even into a weapon of rival political parties has been the misfortune of literature. Mainland China’s literature still has not been able to free itself from this. From the beginning of this century China’s modern literature has been utterly worn out by political struggles. Now for the first time Chinese writers are able to speak with their own voices.<sup>33</sup>

Literature is essentially an individual’s personal affair. The important thing is that it should not be forced upon others and of course it cannot tolerate restrictions being imposed upon it, regardless of the name of the restriction, be it nation or political party, the race or the people. To empower these abstract collective wills, results in the death of literature.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Gao Xingjian’s “Without Isms” opened with a reference to Liu Zaifu’s statement in “Farewelling the Gods” (Gaobie zhu shen, 1990):<sup>35</sup> that it is time for Chinese literature to “emerge from the shadows of others—to farewell the gods”. Liu Zaifu comments that modern Chinese literary criticism which used to be idealistic and progressive, has been replaced by a

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 1702.

<sup>34</sup> Idem.

<sup>35</sup> Written at Duke University 1990 and published in the collection *Expelling the Gods*, pp. 293–307.

sense of impoverishment, absurdity and perplexity. This is because the various schools of literary theory in the present century from Liang Qichao's on fiction at the turn of the century to that of Hu Shi and Zhou Zuoren during the May Fourth period, almost without exception have been "stolen"(touqie) from abroad. Liu concedes that this may sound harsh but insists that this is in fact the case. He cites Lu Xun's essay "'Hard Translation' and the 'Class Nature of Literature'" to justify his use of the word "stolen":

People often compare the revolutionary to the mythological figure Prometheus. When tortured by the Emperor of Heaven, he feels no remorse in stealing fire for the people. They are equal in their determination. However when we steal fire from other countries, our intention is to cook our own flesh, thinking that if the taste can be improved it will be of greater benefit to the person eating it and we on our part will, to a lesser degree, have squandered our bodies in vain.

Liu Zaifu affirms that Lu Xun was an honest man and had acknowledged that he had "stolen fire"; furthermore, the early acts of stealing fire had been to enlighten the people. Therefore even though it was stealing it was honourable. However, subsequent "stealers of fire" only "steal skin" and use various foreign "isms" to embellish their faces so that they can intimidate people. What results is absurd and ridiculous.<sup>36</sup>

The literary debates in China, Liu observes, have been the quarrels of other countries: either between Plato and Aristotle, Zola or Hugo or Chernyshevsky and Freud. These are not genuinely Chinese academic debates. No creative changes have been made to the foreign literary theories because the Chinese lack their own theoretical language for an independent deconstruction of these theories; they even lack their own topics and narratives for these.

In other words China's modern literary theories, for virtually a century, have lived in the shadows of others and wandered irresolutely within the prisons of other people's concepts and parameters. Sartre's existentialism enjoyed a period of popularity in China because people liked his concept of "the other is the prison of the self".<sup>37</sup>

This, says Liu Zaifu, "uncovers a basic psychological phenomenon of 20th century China: in the present century there is a shared perception amongst Chinese intellectuals, including writers and theorists, that they are often living in the various omniscient prisons of others. Therefore "walking out of the shadows of other people's prisons" is one of the major goals of Chinese literature at the end of this century. He observes that many PRC writers have already gone through the ritual of "farewelling the gods" which he defines as farewelling the basic intellectual and behavioural modes prevalent in the middle of this century and which have been integrated into hearts and minds.

---

<sup>36</sup> "Farewelling the Gods", p. 294.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 294–5.

To farewell the gods is to farewell the god of revolution, ie. head-butting against the tyranny of the Heavenly pillars. This has been the use of class struggle methodology to find “basic solutions” models for social problems, including cultural problems. In literary theory it has been the use of rough and vulgar class struggle modes of thought to understand literature and to destroy literature. Secondly, it is to farewell the god who “mends heaven”, ie the patching up of old regulations. In literary theory this has been bringing in basic frameworks “stolen” from the literary theory textbooks of Soviet Russia and patching up these derelict literary theories for use. Thirdly it is to farewell Prometheus, the god who steals fire. This has been upholding certain foreign “isms” to solve problems. In literary theory this has been the mode of regarding certain imported political ideologies and literary theories as a means to salvation.

Liu asserts that Chinese literary critics have already come to the realization that the spiritual emperors of 20th century China are all the creations of foreigners, some are German and others are Russian. It is the same with literary theory: these are mainly German or Russian but there are also those made in France and America. This has robbed Chinese literary theories of creative energy and the result is that theoretical discussions of literature are often the discussions of other people’s problems; they are characteristically “duplications”. Liu’s call to farewell the gods is a call to cease living in the shadows of other people’s gods and instead to live an independent existence which transcends these gods. In this way it will be possible “to initiate” things and “to discuss our own problems”. Liu writes with conviction and with optimism on the future of Chinese literature:

In our future, we will of course more effectively learn from and absorb the results of mankind’s achievements but I do not think that it will be possible any longer for us to be controlled by the spiritual emperors manufactured by the people of other countries.<sup>38</sup>

Liu Zaifu has further developed his views on “walking out of other people’s prisons”. His recent recorded conversations with Li Zehou have been transcribed and published as *Farewelling Revolution* (Gaobie geming; Cosmos, Hong Kong, 1995). Liu Zaifu has argued strongly for subjectivity in literature and for the separation of literature from politics. If he has not abandoned his own guidelines, and I suspect that he has not, it would mean that he has now made a choice to commit himself to politics and to further ration the time he devotes to creative literature. He has clearly “walked out of other people’s prisons” by his rejection of Western solutions to China’s problems,<sup>39</sup> but on the other hand he has voluntarily chosen to re-enter the self-imposed “prison” of the traditional Chinese intellectual who is committed to playing a political role in society. For Liu Zaifu, it will therefore only be in those fleeting intervals snatched to write creatively, that he will achieve the personal freedom of literature.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 295–6.

<sup>39</sup> Liu Zaifu, Preface (November 1994), p.12.