



Noël Dutrait (ed.): L'écriture romanesque et théâtrale de Gao Xingjian.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated by Jonathan Hall

- 1 This volume contains a collection of sixteen papers presented at the conference on the work of Gao Xingjian, which was organised by the research team on Chinese literature and translation at the University of Provence, and was held on January 28th and 29th 2005. There is an introductory text by Noël Dutrait, who also authored one of the papers, and the volume concludes with a post-script and a selective bibliography of Gao's works available in French. The latter omits, among other items, extracts from his play *The Bus Stop*, translated by Danièle Turc-Crisa and published by Alinéa in the anthology entitled *La Remontée vers le Jour*.
- 2 Some of the contributions tend simply to eulogise their subject, often with a barbed attack of the critics of the 2000 Nobel Laureate (Liu Zaifu, Chen Maiping and Torbjörn Lodén). These contributions are of interest because they confirm the political significance of this distinction, but in some cases they betray a certain misapprehension of the literary situation in mainland China. For example, while Pham Xuân Nguyên's article on "Gao Xingjian in Vietnam" praises Gao for his refusal to subscribe to monological interpretations of history, he appears to be unaware that since the 1980s many Chinese literary works have constantly questioned the official version.
- 3 A fair number of the contributions are quite rightly interested in Gao's dramatic writing, and particularly in his play *Snow in August*, which was first staged in 2002 in

Taipei, and then in 2005 in Marseilles. Although several critics draw attention to this play's *zen* or *chan* spirit (regrettably there is no common agreement over this term between the contributions translated from English and those from Chinese), Hu Yaoheng considers it, on the contrary, a further expression of Gao's main theme, that one should have no faith in either sages or rulers.

- 4 Gao Xinjiang's two major novels, *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*, are each studied in separate articles, the first by Li Young-Gu, and the second by Zhang Yinde. Zhang draws a parallel between Gao's work and the stories of Jorge Semprún based on his memories of life in a concentration camp (a comparison that has certain limits, since Semprún did indeed undergo imprisonment in a Nazi camp whereas Gao did not actually experience the Chinese version of the Stalinist gulag).
- 5 All these contributors focus, with good reason, on various aspects of Gao's writing and personality. First among these is Gao's insistence on individuality as a weapon of resistance, not only against power from above but also against that of the mass below, which is linked to the theme of retreat. Mabel Lee shows how the individual in Gao's works is the very antithesis of the Nietzschean superman model which, following the recent vagaries of the Cultural Revolution, is under critical attack. Sebastian Veg analyses the tension between marginality and the social dimension in Gao's early plays, and concludes that a permanent feature of his drama is his "ethical involvement with the world".
- 6 With regard to his literary form, all the contributors comment at length on the use of shifting pronouns, which has been the author's almost systematic practice since *Soul Mountain*, and is to be found in both his novels and his plays (but the first experiments in this usage go back to earlier works; see the article by Iizuka Yutori, p. 131). These critics all seem to find in it a salutary distancing from the self, but without defining exactly how, beyond the formal procedures themselves, all these doublings and shifts in viewpoint contribute towards a better understanding of self and others.
- 7 Gao's play with shifting personae is certainly very subtle, even to the point of supporting contradictory interpretations. For example, does it enable the author of *One Man's Bible* to ensure that "he would not slip into a sense of victimhood", as Mabel Lee writes (p. 20), or does the paradoxical disappearance of the first person "I" work to bring out a more ambiguous self who assumes no positions, of either guilt or innocence, and always follows a line of retreat while still retaining his superior gaze on the world from a higher position? The series of characters representing a man alone, from the "silent man" in *The Bus Stop* to the patriarchal Huineng in *Snow in August*, which attracts the attention of several of the contributors, also gives rise to ambiguity, insofar as the exceptional quality of these characters' superior lucidity tends to undermine the very status of the ordinary individual which the author defends elsewhere in his work.
- 8 The article by Gilbert Fong puts forward some interesting interpretations, by pointing to the different phases in Gao's past life in China (in a rather incomplete way, however), and by showing how his art developed in response to the "demands" or expectations of his foreign readership. Actually, a more complete biographical study would probably be needed to throw light on Gao's political evolution, and to assess the impact of exile on his artistic creation. Likewise, there is still a need for closer scrutiny of the renewal of the Chinese language which this writer has been credited with on several occasions, and of the links, at least in his early works, between his reputedly unclassifiable opus (a

description which is justified in many respects) and some other contemporary literary trends, such as the "return to roots".