

## Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* A Citation

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### Gao Xingjian

The 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2000 was a memorable day. This day broke a century-old spell that seemed to put the Nobel Prize for Literature beyond the reach of Chinese writers, and the world resounded with the news of the award being bestowed on the Chinese-born Gao Xingjian. The news took the literary world by storm, to the tremor of many expectant hearts.

Mr Gao Xingjian was born in 1940 in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, his family being originally from Taizhou, Jiangsu Province. His father worked in a bank and his mother was an actress until her marriage. The young Gao Xingjian, under family influence, began his artistic pursuits at a very young age. He took to the stage at age five and began writing his diaries at eight, when he developed an enthusiasm for the theatre and an interest in using his own experience in dramatic scripts. In 1957 he was admitted to the French Department of the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages. He organized amateur drama groups while an undergraduate and, in taking on the multiple roles of playwright, director and actor, gave the first indication of his artistic versatility. He graduated in 1962 and was assigned translation work at the Foreign Languages Press. In 1978, he paid his first visit to Paris as an interpreter for a delegation of Chinese writers.

*Juedui xin hao (Absolute Signal)*, an experimental play by Mr Gao, was premiered at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1982. This was followed by productions by ten art troupes throughout the country which attracted considerable attention at the time. In 1983 he travelled extensively in the southwest region of China on a route covering some 15,000 kilometers. It was on this long journey that the idea for his epic novel *Ling Shan (Soul Mountain)* began to take shape. He published a collection of medium and short stories called *You zhi gezi jiao hongchuner (A Pigeon Called Little Red Beak)* in 1984, and in the same year his play *Chezhan (Bus Stop)* was performed in Yugoslavia. In 1985, his large-scale work for the stage, *Yeran (Wilderness Man)*, had its premiere in Beijing. In 1986 he published his experimental play *Bi'an (The Other Shore)* in *Shiyue (October)*, a Beijing-based literary journal. He was invited to visit Germany to exhibit his painting work the following year, and from Germany he went to France. In 1988, he published his *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zuiqiu (In Search of a Modern Form of Drama)*. In the same year *Yeran* was performed in Hamburg in Germany and *Chezhan* in Britain. In 1989 the play *Mingcheng (Nether City)* was staged as a dance drama in Hong Kong. Since the 1980s Gao Xingjian has written 18 plays for the stage, and these have been performed repeatedly in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Italy, Austria, Sweden, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, Japan, Australia, and African countries such as the Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin, to much critical acclaim. He has been living in France since 1990, where he occupies himself in writing and painting.

On first reading the works of Gao Xingjian, many people will be lost in his innovative linguistic structure and mode of expression. As a matter of fact what one encounters is a *language flow* that is unique to the Chinese language. The Chinese language is very different from European



languages. It does not have tense, it does not seek clarity, and there is no defined grammatical framework. In the absence of a restrictive linguistic logic, the writer is free to express himself. Anything that is expressed within a defined linguistic convention, that which is subject to an established language structure, is supposed to be "processed", and an expression that is closer to reality is what is referred to as *language flow*. *Language flow* is a free mode of expression derived from the Chinese language structure. The writer who practises this mode of expression creates a *cold literature*, by which he seeks to deconstruct himself and view the world in a self-restrained, clear-minded, and extremely rational manner. He delineates the deepest and most concealed aspects of life, and ruthlessly uncovers the goodness and weaknesses of humanity for the reader or the audience. Whether in drama, fiction, literary criticism or painting, Gao seeks to express himself in this Zen-imbued, entirely individualistic way, this being a most thorough and pure literary stance.

*Ling Shan (Soul Mountain)*, Mr Gao's most representative work, runs to some 700 pages and is totally different from the conventional novel. There are neither plot nor episodes, and the characters do not carry discernible characteristics. The author shows a skilful use of personal pronouns to express variances in the angle of perception: the book opens with the self, the *I*; the second person, the *you*, is used for self-projection; the third person, the *he*, is used for reflections. Behind this complicated narrative mode lie rich contents which unreservedly explore, interpret and develop the unorthodox aspects of Chinese culture. Critics have said that "the author's delineation of psychological activities invokes oriental contemplation and various types of mythical thoughts, and is effective in both approaches." Mr Gao's pure language and mutative style also feature in his other novels such as *Yigeren di shengjing (One Man's Bible)*, and stage works including *Bi'an (The Other Shore)*, *Mingcheng (Nether City)*, *Shengsijie (Life and Death)*, *Duihua yu fanjie (Dialogue and Rebuttal)* and *Shanhaijing zhuan (Story of the Classic of Mountains and Seas)*.

Mr Gao has his own special views on the language of literature. He is profoundly learned in traditional Chinese literature, having studied the ancient classics, including works on philosophy, history or literature, from a very young age. With a solid classical background he deliberately chooses not to use conventional allusions and parallelisms to ensure that his language is free from cliches. He believes that while it is not difficult to write in the traditional literary style, it is a challenge to write in modern Chinese, in which the feelings of the living man have to be expressed in previously unattempted ways. A writer, true to form, must be able to carve out new paths for himself in the realm of creativity, as what have been trodden before is too full of his predecessors' footprints, and phraseology of a bygone age is no longer vivid and to the point. It thus follows that the writer should not bury himself in brown paper manuscripts, but should seek genuine feelings experienced during the course of his daily life. His true mettle is shown when he demonstrates a sensibility that transcends sensitivity, an achievement which requires the utmost effort.

Literature has no obligations to anyone. A writer writes not for fame or applause, but to express himself: "I express, therefore I am." Literature is a medium of emotional interflow. Deep feelings and genuine passions are sure to move, as the writer plucks a familiar cord in the heart of



his reader. Hence the language of the writer must be pure and refined, and not the cumbersome, rough-hewn verbiage that is often the result of indiscriminate westernisation. Mr Gao places great emphasis on the freshness of approach, precise language, and vivid forms of expression. In *Yigeren de shengjing* (*One Man's Bible*), he says: "You may fool around with yourself, but you must not fool around with language. I believe the same is true in music. Unnecessary embellishments are best deleted. .... Say only what you really have to say, otherwise remain silent." As a matter of practice Mr Gao would, before he puts pen to paper, record his fleeting and fragmentary thoughts on a tape-recorder and ponder them. It is only after repeated deliberation and careful weighing and evaluation that he finalizes his script, by which time there will be no superfluous language and his thoughts are now dressed in the most succinct manner. In addition, the spoken language also exerts deep influence on the works of Gao Xingjian, whether these be plays, novels or even treatises. Now this spoken language is not the daily idiom of the common man, but a refined, refreshing, precise form of expression, well punctuated with a musical rhythm, the end-result of words that have been reviewed at least 50 times by the author. And it is this kind of language that has opened a window to clarity and brightness in the layered mists of modern Chinese language.

Mr Gao's works show an adeptness in scrutinizing the western mind from a Chinese perspective. He is also apt to applying modern western techniques so as to expand the structure and contents of traditional Chinese fiction and drama. This integration of the east and the west, the ancient and the modern, explains the charm of his works. He is of the conviction that a marked distinction between Chinese and western cultures is unnecessary, and that art, in its highest form, transcends regional and national boundaries. At the highest level race, colour, religion and language all lose their relevance, and that is why he calls himself a citizen of the world. And it is exactly because of this that the French literary community opines that the award has been bestowed on him because "he has enriched French literature with Chinese language compositions." The Swedish Academy lauded his works for their "universal validity", and praised him for "the bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novels and drama". The success of Gao Xingjian, therefore, marks the triumph of the Chinese language, and shows that, when mastered by someone of superior intelligence and consummate skill, our language is full of life and never out of fashion. Works written in such a manner, when entrusted to expert translators, will indeed be resonant with the world's heartbeat, and partake of human universality.

Mr Gao acknowledges that his works written after the 1990s are all satisfactory as they have been composed in an unrestrained environment. He writes only to express himself and no longer for a living, hence there is no necessity or urgency involved. That way his writing all comes from the heart, and he himself becomes the driving force behind his efforts. Mr Gao writes in both Chinese and French. In the former language he writes with the facility and learning of a scholar but, while perfectly at home with the finest nuances, he cannot help feeling the burden that weighs on the traditional Chinese literati from time to time. French is not his first language, but it gives him an entirely new space in which to explore and to roam, with less historical burden. Hence he is doing very well in both pursuits.

Mr Gao is a modest individual who attaches no great importance to profit and fame. Despite



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that, accolades have come to him from the highest levels: in 1992 he was made a *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la France*. Since the award of the Nobel Prize, honours have come from more authorities. President Jacques Chirac of the French Republic, in showing his respect and appreciation, personally nominated Mr Gao for the award of the *French Legion d'Honneur* in December 2000. He was made an honorary citizen of many French cities including Marseilles, and the Beaumarchais Award was bestowed on him by the Beaumarchais Drama Foundation. Invitations to giving lectures have come in in great numbers from European and American institutions. The name of Gao Xingjian is now known throughout the world, but that has not distracted the author from his writing and painting projects up to the year 2004 have now been scheduled.

Mr Gao began his communication with the literary and educational community in Hong Kong in the mid 1980s. His works *Chezhan (Bus Stop)* and *Yeran (Wilderness Man)* were staged here from 1987 to 1990. In 1995, he was in Hong Kong again to direct a production of *Bi'an (The Other Shore)*. More recently he has published a number of important works through Hong Kong publishing houses, including *Meiyou Zhuyi (Without Isms)*, *Shanhaijing zhuan (Story of the Classics of Mountains and Seas)* by Cosmos Books and *Zhoumo Sichongzou (Weekend Quartet)* by New Era Press. In addition, the Ming Pao Publications Ltd has published *A Collection of Contemporary Chinese Literature: Gao Xingjian, A Collection of Plays by Gao Xingjian and Reasons for Literature*, as well as *A Discussion on the State of Gao Xingjian* by Liu Zaifu. His paintings were exhibited in Hong Kong a number of times and very well received by both art lovers and the general public.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong has had a long connection with Mr Gao, who has greatly supported the University's research efforts in literature and fine arts. In October 1993, Mr Gao gave the first Sin Wai Kin Lecture on Contemporary Chinese Culture at the invitation of the Institute of Chinese Studies, and his articles appeared frequently in its bimonthly journal *Twenty-First Century* published by the Institute. In December of the same year Mr Gao was on campus again to speak at the International Symposium on Contemporary Play-writing in the Chinese Language organised by Sir Run Run Shaw Hall, at which he explored the international purview of Chinese drama and the extension of cultural scopes. In 2000, the Chinese University Press published *The Other Shore*, a collection of plays translated into English by Professor Gilbert Fong, that being the first English translation of Gao's work into book form. In 2001 *Soul of Chaos - Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, a collection of critical essays on Mr Gao's works edited by Professor John K K Tam of the Department of English, was published by the Chinese University Press. The book has been hailed as a landmark reference work for Gao Xingjian studies by the renowned sinologist Professor Goran Malmqvist. In January 2001 Mr Gao visited the University for the third time and gave a public lecture on the language of literature. This was in the wake of the Nobel Prize announcement and attracted tremendous attention among the people of Hong Kong.

Mr Gao Xingjian is a novelist, playwright, director, painter and literary theorist. His talents are universally acknowledged and his outstanding achievements are there for all in the world to see. His literary output has been translated into over a dozen languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Greek, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian,



Japanese, Korean, Thai and others, thereby ushering Chinese language literature into the international Hall of Fame. Mr Vice-Chancellor, in consideration of his tremendous contribution to literature and the arts, may I present Mr Gao Xingjian for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.