

Soul Mountain and Gao Xingjian

Translating a westernised Chinese Novel ^[1]

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概要

尽管在翻译《灵山》之前对高行健并不是非常了解，开始翻译后我意识到，高行健的思想深受“五·四”一代知识精英、文化革命和文革后中国的“尼采”热影响。中国从清末民初开始，就大量翻译国外的学术著作和文学作品。中国现代知识分子或多或少都受到西方某些思想家的影响。如果说文学是用高级的语言形式来表达一个人的心理和他对周围现实的感受的话，那么，在《灵山》中，作者就是试图用尼采的观点来分析文革中的事与人，用文学形式来表现文革中那种已经失去自我的人，或自认为是超人的人的心理状态。他以文学形式来表达自己对过去和现在、过去的我和现在的我、心理与现实的看法。

Although I am deeply involved in literary translation, I am by no means a professional translator; so in this talk you will hear nothing about translation theory. Yet it might be interesting for you to hear the reflections of someone who had not thought about her approach to translation until after having translated some rather lengthy books. Today I would like to share my thoughts with you about translating Gao Xingjian's writings, about translation in Australia, and about my own background that has trained me to translate Chinese literature.

As most of you here are studying translation courses at a postgraduate level, let us first consider the significance of translation in Australia. There is, of course, a rapidly growing demand for professional translators of documents with the continuing immigration intake from all parts of the world, and as economic and political links are forged with other nations of the world. Literary translation, however, is a different matter. In Australian bookshops translated books are seldom to be found except perhaps in specialist shops; they are generally not a significant part of the mainstream book market. This is a pity, because in the bookshops throughout Europe and Asia you will find a wide range of translated works. For example, popular writings in any language are, soon after publication, also available in various European languages, as well as in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese. However, in the major English-language book markets of the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, this is generally not the case. [2]

When English-language translations are published they tend not to generate large sales, and in the market-driven book industry this probably accounts for the small number of translations being published. Of course, there are exceptions, as in the case of some Japanese and Latin American writers.

Also, when it was announced that Gao Xingjian had won the Nobel Prize in October 2000, his *Soul Mountain* made the ten best sellers list of *The Australian* for three months, and large numbers were sold all over the world. The fact that in the three months prior to the Nobel announcement the book had sold 5000 copies is very unusual for a translated book in Australia. We have two professional literary translators in Australia with strong international reputations: Patricia Clancy who is based in Melbourne, and also Julie Rose who was based in Hong Kong for a long time but is now, I think, back in Sydney. Both have translated a large number of books from French into English that make very interesting reading, but these cannot be found on the shelves of the big bookshops.

I would now like to turn briefly to the early translation of Chinese writings into European languages in the early nineteenth century. Prior to that, there had been adaptations and popular translations of various Chinese texts from the late-eighteenth century, as European scholars were curious to learn about this totally alien civilisation. Academic translations into French of Confucian and Daoist texts came into being after the establishment in 1814 of the first Chair of Sinology in the whole of Europe at Collège de France in Paris. In the 1870s classical Chinese texts also came to be published in German translation, and in 1876 James Legge was appointed to the Chair of Chinese Language and Literature at Oxford University, where he continued to publish his translations of Chinese classical texts. However, from the mid-nineteenth century interest in translating Chinese writings began to wane in tandem with the rise of European and English industrial capitalism and their ensuing colonial ambitions in China.

After repeated military failures against the industrialised nations of the West and Japan, China finally acknowledged the urgent need to modernise at the beginning of the twentieth century. To learn the secret to the wealth and power of the West translations were necessary, and these began in earnest mostly via Japanese translations. At the time large numbers of Chinese students began flocking to Japan to learn about the science and technology of the West. Japan was geographically closer than Europe, and the cultural gap was not as wide: the Japanese ate rice and written Japanese at the time used Chinese characters. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there were 6,000 to 10,000 Chinese students in Japan at various times, and they rubbed shoulders there with many political refugees who had fled the authorities on the Chinese mainland. The reason for translations had a specific purpose, it was to help China modernise so that it would be able to deal with the challenge of the economic and military might of the modern industrialised West and Japan.

The 1911 Revolution overthrew the Manchu imperial government, and saw the establishment of the Republic of China in the following year. Chinese political refugees and students alike returned en masse, hoping that they would be able to contribute to China's modernisation effort. However, when World War I erupted and the attention of Europe was diverted to fighting the war there, Japan began its military thrust into China. In 1915, backed with warships, Japan presented China with its "Twenty-one Demands" to which China was compelled to accede. For patriotic Chinese this was a time of passionate but impotent protest, a time of intense feelings of national shame and humiliation. But worse was to come. World War I ended, and a Chinese delegation attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, only to find out that

China had been sold out by the so-called democracies of the West. China had sent labourers to support the war effort of the Allies, but a secret pact made by the Allies had handed over German territories in China's Shandong Province to Japan. This news inflamed patriotic Chinese youth to take organised political action, but the mass student march through the streets of Beijing (known then as Peking) on 4 May 1919 to urge the Government not to sign the Paris Peace Treaty led instead to a government crackdown and the arrest, beating and imprisonment of students.

An intellectual revolution had been fomenting since 1915 that was later named the May Fourth Movement, after the student march of 1919. Feeling betrayed by their elders because the traditional Confucian culture that they promoted had led to China's inability to deal with the modern world, young Chinese intellectuals seized the mantle of authority from their elders. They extolled the strong individual, believing that if the nation consisted of strong individuals who were in charge of their own destinies then the Chinese nation would be strong. That was the theory. The ideological support underlying this thinking came from the notion of the Superman that had been espoused by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was well known to Chinese intellectuals because they had arrived in large numbers in Japan at the height of a Nietzsche craze in the Japanese intellectual world. A few years later, in the May Fourth period, the first Nietzsche craze developed in China. Essays about Nietzsche, and translations of Nietzsche's writings came to be published in the Chinese avant-garde magazines that mushroomed at the time. The prologue and a number of the essays from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* were published from this time into the

1930s. His writings had enormous appeal for Chinese, partly because the style is reminiscent of the Daoist text, Zhuangzi. In any case, young Chinese intellectuals and all college students knew the name of Nietzsche and had read a few essays from his work Zarathustra.

Armed with a superficial knowledge of Nietzsche's Superman, young writers at the time thought of themselves as heroes whose writings would help China modernise. A new literature came into being at this time: it was written in the modern language, modelled after modern Western writings, and dealt with contemporary social issues. Some fine works were created in the years between 1919 and the 1930s, but by the mid-1920s many writers became utterly disheartened by China's political and social reality, and the escalation of Japan's territorial inroads in China. As a result many turned to communism as a solution for China's problems. China's new literature was permeated with Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. But rather than promoting individualism, Nietzsche's Superman in the Chinese context at the time was a strong individual, a political activist who would work to modernise China, even if it meant allowing one's individuality to be subsumed by a political party.

The Chinese Communist Party, established in 1921, grew in power and by the 1930s alone challenged the supremacy of the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party. However, when Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937 that would last until 1945, it temporarily united the two parties. The defeat of Japan, brought civil war that resulted in the Nationalist Government retreating to Taiwan and Mao Zedong declaring the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Mao Zedong believed that literature was important: it was

important as a tool for political propaganda. In 1942, he had established the guidelines for literary creation in Yan'an. These guidelines were implemented after the establishment of the People's Republic, and rigidly enforced during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which Chinese writers were singled out for persecution.

Born in 1940, during the Japanese invasion, it was in Mao Zedong's New China that Gao Xingjian received his formal education. He originally wanted to become a painter but realising that he would only be painting propaganda pictures he decided instead to study French literature at the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing. By the time he graduated, he was already a serious writer, but by that time books were also being progressively banned, until a total ban was put into place during the Cultural Revolution.

Let me now tell you a bit about my background, and how I came to meet Gao Xingjian. I began undergraduate Chinese at the University of Sydney in 1957. I was born in Australia, spoke Cantonese, and I could write my name and about 100 Chinese characters but that was it. I had been interested in Chinese history from the time I was a high school student. At that time, students without a Chinese-language education had to study Chinese for five years in order to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree. In our very first year we had to study classical Chinese texts and this meant looking up the dictionary for every single character. I found it painful, and used to ask my professor (Professor A. R. Davis) why we had to do all this classical Chinese.

He told me it was good for me. I was not entirely convinced, but I did enjoy what I read. My main objection was that I did

not like looking up the dictionary, but that probably made me memorise characters more quickly. Most of our courses involved the translation of original literary texts and discussions of those texts from a historical and literary perspective. My undergraduate Chinese courses included the reading of selections from Mengzi, Lunyu, Zhuangzi, Shiji, Zizhi tongjian, Tang poetry, Song lyrics, Neo-Confucian philosophical texts, and some of Zhu Ziqing's essays. All this time I had little interest in literature, I was interested in China's intellectual history and I eventually wrote my Ph.D. on late-Qing economic thought.

Soon after obtaining my Ph.D. I secured an appointment at the University of Sydney to teach modern Chinese language, literature and history at all levels. I had studied few modern authors in my undergraduate years, but while carrying out research for my Ph.D. I systematically read through many shelves of May Fourth writers, as well as anything available about them. In my teaching, I would select pieces for translation that I liked and that were written in a language that I liked; I also compiled vocabulary lists for students so that they would not need to spend too much time looking up the dictionary, and have more time for appreciating the texts. I selected fine literary texts for translation in class, and provided the historical contexts for these.

Dr Hong Lijian taught my Chinese Year IV honours course on nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual history for a couple of years. I had taught that course for many years and the writers studied ranged from Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, Hu Shi to Liu Zaifu. Dr Hong read Liu Xiaobo's writings with the students. Because of my interest in history I was always concerned with putting literary texts into a

historical context so that students would be encouraged to understand more about China while at the same time being constantly exposed to good literary style. This was the basic strategy I adopted in all of my teaching. I kept selecting new authors, or new pieces by the same authors, so I was always interested and excited by what I was teaching. Importantly, I was continuing to learn and to develop my thinking about Chinese history and literature.

Suddenly, the Cultural Revolution in China ended in 1976, and many Chinese students started arriving in Australia. From the early 1980s the Australian government actively encouraged large numbers of students to come here to study English, and a significant number of outstanding students such as Dr Hong Lijian won Ph.D. scholarships. In 1988 I met a Chinese poet called Yang Lian: he was one of many Chinese writers who came to Sydney, and probably Melbourne as well, from the mid-1980s. Most of them had come to the notice of Westerners because they had encountered trouble with the authorities. Even though the Cultural Revolution had ended and China had cautiously opened up to foreign influences there were still cycles of repression when the authorities would clamp down on writers for writings that diverged from the socialist-realist traditions set in place since the founding of the People's Republic of China. In 1983, during the Oppose Spiritual Pollution Campaign, Yang Lian and a number of other writers were banned from publishing for several months.

Yang Lian's visit, jointly sponsored by the Spoleto Festival and the Department of Foreign Affairs, allowed him and his partner YoYo to travel to Melbourne, Canberra, the Northern Territory and finally to Sydney. Dr David Kelly, my former Ph.D. student who was working in Canberra phoned to ask if I

wanted to meet Yang Lian when he came to Sydney. I told him that I had taught some of his poems in class and that I liked them, but that as I was very busy I did not particularly want to meet him. Later in Sydney the poet John Tranter asked if I would act as interpreter at a dinner he and his wife Lyn were hosting for Yang Lian and YoYo. Strangely, with Yang Lian's limited English, he in fact was able to communicate with John Tranter about various esoteric aspects of poetry, and I was barely needed.

Not long after, Yang Lian visited my home. Unknown to me, he had noticed many bottles of Chinese liquor in my dining room, and asked what I was doing for the Chinese New Year. I told him I did not celebrate Chinese New Year. Undaunted, he suggested that perhaps a Chinese New Year party should be held in my house. As most of his friends were in fact my former students, I agreed on the condition that he and YoYo invited the guests. We ended up with about eighty guests in my small terrace house in Glebe. That was the first of many such parties. At one of these parties he asked if I would translate some of his recent poems so that he could hand out copies at his poetry readings in Australia and New Zealand. I told him I was not a translator and pointed out that he already had a translator, Professor John Minford. Yang Lian said that John was too busy because he had just taken up the Chair of Chinese at Auckland University. (He has now recently been appointed Professor of Chinese at the Australian National University.) So I translated and published Yang Lian's *Masks and Crocodile* as a volume in the University of Sydney East Asian Series.

Yang Lian travelled to New Zealand in March or April of 1989, and was there when the military crackdown on student

protesters in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, occurred on 4 June 1989. He was traumatised, as were many others throughout the world. Some months later, Yang Lian told me that it was important for him to publish a book of poems to commemorate the first anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre. I ended up translating a second book of his poems. English versions of Yang Lian's *Masks and Crocodile* and *The Dead in Exile* were both published in 1991. [3]

It was through Yang Lian that I met Gao Xingjian. Yang Lian had received a D.A.A.D. writer's fellowship and was living in Berlin in 1991, and we arranged to meet in Paris. I had completed the translation of a third book of his poems, his major work entitled *Yi* that was based on the *Book of Changes*. One day he suggested that we pay a visit to Gao Xingjian. I had only read a couple of Gao Xingjian's plays, but was happy to meet him. Gao Xingjian spoke about his novel *Soul Mountain* that had just been published; it was a novel he started writing in China in 1982 and completed in 1989. He described some of the incidents in the novel, and the sort of experimentation he had carried out in writing the novel. Suddenly, I asked if he had a translator, and if he wanted me. He was taken aback, and I too was surprised by my question. I had never translated a work of fiction, yet here I was offering to translate this 563-page novel. There was no talk of a contract or an agreement, until after we had been offered a contract from the publisher many years later.

I became the founding Head of the School of Asian Studies in mid-1991, so it meant that I was not able to start on the translation of *Soul Mountain* until 1993 when my appointment as Head ended. For eighteen months, I had spent all of my time at meetings and writing letters to argue for funds from the

Faculty to support the teaching of Korean, Indonesian, Hindi and Sanskrit with only very little success. I in fact found it easier to raise funds from overseas bodies, such as the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation in Taiwan for Classical Chinese Studies and the Korea Foundation for Korean Studies.

When I completed my translation of *Soul Mountain*, it was forwarded to HarperCollins (Australia) through Lyn Tranter who ran Australian Literary Management. I wanted a commercial press for the novel, because I wanted royalties for the poor struggling writer whose novel I had translated. The reader's report from HarperCollins said that while it was not a perfect novel it was one that would win prizes. Interestingly, while I was translating *Soul Mountain* I felt as if my mission was to translate it, and I was conscious of it being a very special book. Despite the very favourable reader's report, the manuscript sat at the publisher's for many months. However, both Lyn and I did not want to chase the publisher: somehow we did not want to jinx ourselves. Gao Xingjian came to Sydney for the launch of *Soul Mountain* in early July 2000. In the interim we had been trying without success to find publishers for the novel in the US and UK. Four months later in early October when it was announced that Gao Xingjian had won the Nobel Prize, American readers were amazed that it was only in Australia that *Soul Mountain* was available. US and UK editions of *Soul Mountain* came out by the end of 2000, and we were also offered contracts for Gao Xingjian's second novel *One Man's Bible*. It was as if Gao Xingjian had won gold and that I had been sprinkled with gold dust.

In the foregoing I have talked about myself and translation, the circumstances in which I came to translate Gao Xingjian's novels, as well as providing a historical context for

considering Gao Xingjian and his novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*. Now to return to Gao Xingjian.

Gao Xingjian majored in French Literature at the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing. After graduating in 1962, he was assigned work as an editor and writer at the Foreign Languages Press. As an undergraduate student at the Foreign Languages Institute, he was already an obsessive writer, but as what he wrote did not conform to Mao's guidelines for literature, he kept what he wrote secret. When the Cultural Revolution broke out he burned a suitcase of plays, short stories, poems, essays and a novella that he had written, rather than risk having them found by rampaging Red Guards and used as evidence against him.

When the Cultural Revolution ended, Gao Xingjian was amongst a cohort of writers who came forward to challenge the socialist-realist guidelines that had been rigidly enforced for over a decade. He was forty years of age when finally he was able to see his first essays and short stories published in literary magazines. His *Preliminary Explorations into the Art of Modern Fiction* (1981) was widely read and reprinted in 1982; it was the first detailed book in China to discuss the techniques of modern Western narrative fiction. Contradicting Mao's literary guidelines, he audaciously suggested that writings that sought to educate the reader were ineffectual. The book contravened Mao Zedong's guidelines for literature, that called for the characters of fiction and plays to be clearly "good" or "bad". The "good" characters were to provide models for the masses to emulate, and if anyone was seen to be behaving like the "bad" characters, they were immediately to be reported to the authorities.

Having lost more than twenty years of his creative life, Gao Xingjian was intent on recapturing those lost years, and his short stories and academic essays on European writers began to appear regularly in publications. However, it was his play *Absolute Signal* that would cause a sensation when it was staged in 1982 in Beijing. The play is about a planned train robbery that is aborted when the key players have a change of heart. The members of the audience were therefore required to make up their own minds as to whether these characters were “good” or “bad”. Gao Xingjian’s interest is in exploring the psychology of the characters, and he makes no attempt to pronounce moral judgements on them. *Absolute Signal* was staged ten times as “experimental theatre” and, as such, performances were restricted to literary and art circles; public performances followed. His second play *Bus Stop* was also staged ten times in 1983 as “experimental theatre”, but was then closed down by the authorities.

Power struggles in the highest echelons of national politics had allowed for the unleashing of the Oppose Spiritual Pollution Campaign, and Gao Xingjian was amongst the first casualties. His *Bus Stop* and *Preliminary Explorations into the Art of Modern Fiction* were banned, and his name was circulated on a blacklist that barred the publication of his works. Around the same time, he was diagnosed with lung cancer, although a few weeks later it was confirmed that a wrong diagnosis had been made. He had escaped death, but had to face the prospect of making self-criticisms for writing works that promoted the “literature of the decadent capitalist West”. Each of his colleagues had to present their views on the Oppose Spiritual Pollution Campaign. When it came to his turn, he was so agitated that he jumped up, smashed the glass he was holding onto the floor, and stormed out of the meeting. Before long he

heard that he would be sent to a prison camp in Qinghai to be “educated”. He did not wait to be “sent”, but instead boarded a train and went off to Sichuan Province, where he had spent some time during the Cultural Revolution. Keeping his whereabouts a secret, he spent the next five months wandering to the source of the Yangtze River and then leisurely following it down to the sea, until friends in Beijing advised him that it was safe for him to return to Beijing. The Oppose Spiritual Pollution Campaign had petered out, and in the following year he was able to publish again.

During his five-month absence from Beijing he was able to draft the large part of his novel *Soul Mountain*. In it he explored human relationships, society and history with the curiosity of an anthropologist and ethnographer. He wrote it with the lively artistry of a storyteller, a storyteller of modern times, who was informed by the techniques of both Chinese and European techniques of storytelling. *Soul Mountain* is an autobiographical novel, and by using the pronouns “you”, “I”, “he” and “she” as separate characters, he presents a multi-faceted objective portrayal of his subjective self. This was a novel he was driven to write, and he had written it for himself because he knew that he would not be able to publish it in China. It was eventually published in Taiwan, although pirated editions are now being sold in China.

Literary creation is a highly sophisticated level of translating one’s reality into language: one’s psychological reality and also the surrounding reality that one is able to perceive. During the Cultural Revolution Gao Xingjian was conscious of his self being annihilated; instead of expressing his own reality, he was acutely aware that, like everyone else, he had to say what Mao Zedong wanted him to say. To fail to do so would have

brought terrible consequences: being denounced and forced to write self-criticisms, beaten, imprisoned, and even executed.

During the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian had a visceral need to write in order to affirm his own existence. He was not able to confront what he had encountered during that decade until much later, when he was about to become a French citizen. In his second novel, *One Man's Bible* (1999), again an autobiographical novel, he is able to fully expunge what had been his urge to tell his story in fiction. In *One Man's Bible*, the character "you" is the fictional narrator of the present, and the character "he" refers to the fictional narrator during the Cultural Revolution. Gao's use of pronouns allows him the distance to coldly and clinically analyse his own psychology and actions both of the present and the past. He consciously wants to avoid adopting a victim mentality and slip into writing a dishonest account in order to exonerate him from complicity in the gross inhumanity of those times.

In Gao Xingjian's Nobel Lecture he indicts Nietzsche for the problems of the modern world, and in *One Man's Bible* he refers to Mao Zedong as the embodiment of Nietzsche's Superman: his ego had become so inflated that he wanted everyone to be like himself. When I queried him about which of Nietzsche's works he had read, he told me that he had read virtually all of Nietzsche's works. When the Cultural Revolution ended, a second Nietzsche craze erupted in China. It was much bigger than the Nietzsche craze of the May Fourth era, and there were over a hundred publications on Nietzsche as well as new translations of Nietzsche's works from the German originals. Gao Xingjian said that he had read all of Nietzsche's writings in the Hong Kong editions of the 1980s. My investigations reveal that these had been published in late

1986. This meant that he had read these works during the ten or so months before he left China for France at the end of 1987. He said that although he found Nietzsche's writings brilliant, overall he considered them to be bad.

Gao Xingjian had lived through the Cultural Revolution, and in *One Man's Bible* he recalls how, despite his aversion to it, he had been drawn into politics, and had taken part in a rebel Red Guard group. At the Foreign Languages Press where he worked, naturally most of his colleagues were educated and did not come from labourer or peasant family backgrounds. When Red Guards with the "correct" bloodlines began harassing certain older colleagues, he wrote posters in their defence and for this reason he was invited to join a rebel Red Guard group of which he was soon pushed into leading. He was a hero in the eyes of the old colleagues that he had defended, and because of his decisiveness also became a hero of this group of rebel Red Guards. However, he became aware that his hero status was causing him to act as was expected of him, that he was no longer in control of his own actions.

Gao takes further his analysis of the psychological impact of an individual's self-perception that he is a hero. In extreme cases of one's ego becoming bloated and out of control, one may think one is a Superman who can replace God and save the world. Mao Zedong was such a person, and he had succeeded in creating a multitude of "little heroes" or lesser Supermen to help him impose his will upon the population of China. Gao's analysis is informed by his reading of Nietzsche and on his reflections on the psychology of Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth era and of the post-Mao democracy movement of 1989 that had been inspired by intellectuals commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the

May Fourth Movement of 1919. Coincidentally, in both periods, a Nietzsche craze was raging in the Chinese intellectual world, and intellectuals believed that they were playing heroic roles in bringing democracy to China.

Notes:

[1] This is a revised version of the original presentation delivered at Monash University's Clayton Campus on 8 June 2006 by Mabel Lee Ph.D. FAHA, Honorary Associate Professor, School of Languages & Cultures, the University of Sydney. The author has translated the following works by Gao Xingjian: *Soul Mountain* (2000), *One Man's Bible* (2002), *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2004), and *The Case for Literature* (2006).

[2] The situation is likely to change, at least in the case of translations of Chinese writings, but it will take a few years to come to full fruition. Penguin (USA) announced last year that it would be working towards publishing ten contemporary Chinese titles in translation annually, and HarperCollins (USA) has just announced that it would be publishing Chinese titles in translation, beginning with five works of classical Chinese literature and a children's book.

[3] Yang Lian won the (Italian) Flaiano International Prize for Poetry in 1999.