About the Author:
Gao Xingjian (1940-present)

Gao Xingjian (born 1940) may live in voluntary exile from his native China, but his talents as an author and playwright are celebrated worldwide. He is the first Chinese-language author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. His distinctive plays and weighty novels address essential aspects of humanity—managing in most instances to transcend social and political constructs.

Gao was born January 4, 1940, in Ganzhou, a town in the Jiangxi province of eastern China. He remembers running from encroaching Japanese forces, and coping with the destruction that resulted from the tireless civil war that lifted Mao Zedong’s Communist regime to power in 1949. Both his parents were westernized liberals. His father, a bank official, and his mother, an amateur actress in a local YMCA troupe, supported his artistic and theatrical efforts. He practiced writing, painting, and the violin. Gao wrote his first adventure story when he was ten, and kept a journal—a practice encouraged by his mother that he continued into his adulthood.

Gao spent his formative school years studying in People's Republic learning institutions, and at seventeen he enrolled in the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. He received a degree in French and literature from that institution in 1962, and began working as a translator for the state-sanctioned Chinese Writer's Association and the journal China Reconstructs. During Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), however, Gao was sent to the Chinese countryside as part of a cultural "rehabilitation" program for artists and intellectuals. He labored on a farm and taught in some underdeveloped, rural regions.

During China's Cultural Revolution, Gao wrote secretly. His wife, ashamed of his socially dangerous status as an intellectual—scorned him, and reported the political nature of his writing to the authorities, as was expected of her by custom. Their marriage ended, and Gao was forced to incinerate all his early work—novel manuscripts, plays and scholarly articles—to avoid arrest. Finally, around 1979, Gao was permitted to begin publishing his writing and traveling to such destinations as France and Italy.

Socialist realism—optimistic depictions of peasant life—dominated Chinese art and literature in Mao's time, and Gao's early book, Preliminary Exploration Into the Techniques of Modern Fiction, created significant political unrest with its pessimistic realism. The government condemned that piece, and much of Gao's
other works, while closely watching Gao himself. He was the resident playwright for the Beijing People's Art Theatre from 1981 to 1987, producing *The Alarm Signal* (Juedui zinghao) and *Bus Stop* (Chezhan) in 1982 and 1983, respectively.

Authorities condemned *Bus Stop*—a dialogue among people waiting for a bus that takes ten years to arrive—after only ten performances as "the most pernicious text written since the creation of the People's Republic." The government argued that the play projected a criticism of the Communist Party's (represented by the bus) inability to deliver the people at a destination of prosperity (the city) for a period of ten years (the approximate reign of Mao's Cultural Revolution). Gao refused the demands of authorities that he apologize publicly.

In 1985, Gao wrote and produced another play, *Wild Man* (Ye ren). *New York Times* critic Sarah Lyall said Gao's plays "combined modernist techniques with elements from traditional Chinese theatre—shadow plays, ancient masked drama, and traditional dance and music . . . much of his work can be read as a celebration of the individual's struggle against the masses." Gao's next play, *The Other Shore* (L'autre rive) (1986), was also banned, and the event marked the last time his work was produced or performed in his native country. The authorities categorized Gao's work as "spiritual pollution" and forbade it.

Gao then suffered a misdiagnosis of terminal lung cancer which, once apologetic doctors rescinded it, infused the writer with a new—found appreciation for life. Upon hearing rumors that he was to be sent back to a re—education camp, Gao set out on a walking tour of the south—western Sichuan province of China that lasted roughly ten months and took him from the source of the Yangtze river, to its coastal end. In 1987, China turned politically toward anti—liberalism, and banned Gao from traveling as a writer. He circumvented the restriction by traveling to France as a painter, where he remained in Paris as a political refugee.

He began writing in French, a language he now writes and speaks fluently, and created a niche as a major literary avant—garde figure. Gao, who became a French citizen in 1998, is also respected as an ink—wash artist whose pieces he have been shown internationally in more than thirty exhibitions. He also designs and creates the cover art for his own publications. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, Gao officially withdrew from the Chinese Communist Party and verbally denounced his country's actions. He wrote a play that year, titled *The Fugitives*, which openly criticized the Tiananmen event, and as a result the Chinese government banned all of Gao's works from ever being performed or produced within China.
Gao continued to write plays—*Dialogue and Rebuttal* (Dialoguer–interloquer) in 1992, *The Sleepwalker* (Le Somnambule) in 1994, and one novel, *Ink Paintings*, in 1995. G.C.F. Fong translated a collection of his plays and released it in 1999. It included *The Other Shore, Between Life and Death, Dialogue and Rebuttal, Nocturnal Wanderer*, and *Weekend Quartet*. Beginning in 1982, Gao worked to translate the experiences from his walking tour and channel them into a novel that chronicles the main character's external and internal journey. The result was the 1990 release of *Soul Mountain*.

One reviewer for the British newspaper *The Economist* said *Soul Mountain* "redraws the physical, spiritual and emotional map of China," and that Gao's government should "be thankful, not cross" at the writer. On October 12, 2000, Gao won the Nobel Prize for literature for what the prize committee identified as "an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama." The Chinese Writer's Association, Gao's former employer, responded by calling the author's work "very, very average" and saying that choosing Gao was "a political maneuver and a criticism of the regime."

Despite the controversial nature of most of his work, Gao maintains that he is not a politically motivated writer. He considers "literary creation to be a kind of challenge against society waged by an individual's existence, even though this challenge may be insignificant, it is at least a gesture." In 2002, critics lauded Gao's fictionalized autobiographical novel, *One Man's Bible*, translated by Mabel Lee. Jason Picone praised the way Gao's "narrator moves from a first–person voice to a second–and a third . . . [conveying] the schizophrenia of the Cultural Revolution, during which the narrator had to articulate beliefs that were not his own in order to survive, all the while preserving his own thoughts and moral integrity deep in his mind." Another reviewer called the stylistic effect "a cadenced movement between the modes of essay, vision and story."

Gao drew a significant following through his efforts to balance the issues of the Self and the Other. In his 2000 Nobel lecture, Gao said, "Literature transcends national boundaries—through translations it transcends languages and then specific social customs and inter–human relationships created by geographical location and history—to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature." The author, who lives in Bagnolet, France, said he "always had this obsession with writing. It's what caused my suffering and misfortune in China, but I'm not about to stop. Even during the most difficult times in China, I carried on writing secretly, without thinking that one day I would get published."
Although some critics have argued that there are Chinese–language writers more skillful than Gao, his own contributions, when combined with his translations of surrealist poets and playwrights,—place him at the forefront of efforts to bring modern cultural elements to China's canons. Whether he is seen as a dissident, or a dreamer—reviewer Sylvia Li–Chun Lin observed that Gao has essentially "witnessed the erasure of his name from the literary scene and the national collective memory of China"—Gao does not regret his choice. Discussing why he lives in exile, Gao responded, "I say what I want to say . . . if I have chosen to live in exile, it is to be able to express myself freely without constraints." Lyall called him "one of the very few Chinese writers to reach beyond China into the broader world, and back inside himself"—an accomplishment that has secured him a place among the world's most respected writers.