

The Freedom of Identity/The Freedom of Non-Identity: Zhu Tianxin and Gao Xingjian on Language and Culture

Introduction

The awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to Gao Xingjian caught many by surprise. However controversial the award may have been, it has served to heighten interest in the field of Chinese literature and literary criticism. The fact that Gao is an exile living in France has particularly foregrounded the plight of China's many exiled intellectuals and artists. Among other things, the work of these exiles raises the question of Chinese identity and the use of Chinese language as a literary, critical and philosophical medium. The increasing presence of diaspora writers in literary discourse, both in their homelands and in greater China (Taiwan, Hong Kong, PRC) has also contributed to the debate over culture, language and identity in an era of increased international communication.

What is the relationship between culture, identity and language? How has that relationship evolved as globalization redefines the meaning of national or cultural boundaries? These are the questions to which this paper is directed. In order to draw the issues of language and identity — cultural and personal — into sharper focus I have chosen two contemporary writers from two different kinds of Chinese environment: the exiled mainland Chinese writer, Gao Xingjian, and the Taiwanese writer, Zhu Tianxin. On surface inspection, Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin do not seem to have a great deal in common. They are both contemporary writers of fiction and prose. They write in Chinese. But they are the product of very different cultural environments and have had very different experiences as writers and as individuals. Gao Xingjian was very much identified with the post-Cultural Revolution modernist/avant-garde movement in China. His writing soon led him into disfavour with state literary organs inside China and he eventually sought refuge in France,

renouncing his Chinese citizenship and party membership after the Tianan'men massacre. He continues to live and write in France where he has enjoyed some success as a playwright and director of both Chinese and French-language plays. Zhu Tianxin, on the other hand, is primarily known for her short stories. She began publishing while still in high school, and has continued to develop into a well-respected literary figure. As a second-generation Taiwanese of mainland extraction, her work has often been identified with the experience of non-native Taiwanese immigrants in contemporary Taiwan.

As I shall attempt to show, Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin share a number of traits as individuals and writers, but what makes them useful points of comparison for my purposes here is their dissimilarity. It is because they are from such disparate cultural and personal backgrounds that the unifying quality of the use of the Chinese language appears most fragile and problematic. Gao Xingjian has written much about language use and the issue of Chinese-language literature in the modern world. His plays and fictional prose also provide insight into how his ideas translate into practice. Zhu Tianxin, by contrast, does not often engage in critical writing on literary topics, so we must rely almost entirely on a direct appreciation of her short stories in order to ascertain her language-use strategies. For both of these writers, language use is related not only to cultural heritage and personal identity, but also to their vision of themselves as writers of Chinese in the context of a globalized modern world.

I have begun by examining the ways in which two Chinese writers construct their identities, as Chinese, and as writers. I first looked at the broad dialectic between cultural belonging and exilic non-identity. Here it was necessary to look at how the two individuals understand the constructs of nation and national culture. It is evident that Zhu and Gao reflect upon history, collective and personal, in different ways when seeking to clarify their identity and cultural placement. The relationship of subjective experience to the mythologies of national culture is very much of concern to both writers. In view of the fact that neither writer has any interest in assuming a position as a representative of Chinese culture, it was necessary to consider where they *do* position themselves. How does their relationship to Chinese culture (abstractly understood) or their immediate cultural environment (concretely understood) affect their choice of subject matter and mode of discourse? In other words, how does the dialectic between identity and non-identity play itself out in their writing? Finally, using Gao and Zhu as two contrasting examples of the modern Chinese writers, I have

asked what insights their work affords us into the conjunction of culture, identity and language in the contemporary Chinese experience?

Exile and Identity

Gao Xingjian lives in France as an exile in the classic understanding of the word "exile." He chose to renounce his Chinese citizenship after the Tian'anmen massacre in June of 1989. Even before his emigration to the West, however, he had faced harsh criticism from state authorities inside China and on occasion felt it expedient to flee official scrutiny and seek refuge in rural southern China. In a very real sense he was an exile before leaving his native land.

We may apply the term "exile" to Zhu Tianxin only in the figurative sense. She was born and grew up in Taiwan and continues to reside there today. Her exilic condition derives from her ancestry and from recent Taiwanese history. Zhu Tianxin's father, Zhu Xining,¹ was one of those who followed the Nationalist (KMT) army in retreat from mainland China in the wake of defeat by Chinese Communist Party-led forces in 1949. Even though her mother was a native Taiwanese (ethnically Hakka), Zhu grew in an environment which was very much divorced from that of "native" Taiwanese. It is her identity as a "mainlander" (*waishen ren*,² literally, "person from another province") which has placed Zhu outside of the mainstream of Taiwanese culture. Her writing often reflects a strong sense of alienation and foreignness.³ In the cases of both Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin, themes of exile and marginality figure importantly in their work.

Zhu Tianxin as Exile: The Experience of Military Dependent Villages

When the defeated Nationalist forces fled the Chinese mainland to the safety of the recently repatriated island of Taiwan, they were faced with the problem of housing hundreds of thousands of dependent families who had followed them in flight. The solution, partially based upon the premise that Taiwan was only a temporary haven in which to regroup and recuperate

1 朱西甯

2 外省人.

3 See Shen, Zhang, and Yang Zhao, "Langman..." for discussions of various aspects of Zhu's sense of alienation.

before launching a counterattack to retake the mainland, was Military Dependent Villages.⁴ These villages were located around the island and divided according to the branch of the armed forces in which the father served. Since the villages were in theory only a temporary expedient, there was little or no attempt made to integrate them or their residents into the greater fabric of Taiwanese society. The political importance of the villages for the Nationalist government and the hermetic nature of their social life meant that children growing up in the Dependent Villages had a very different experience from that of their native Taiwanese counterparts.

Literature dealing with the *juancun* experience, directly or indirectly, has come to constitute its own literary sub-genre.⁵ Underlying most of this literature is a sense of loss, alienation and hope betrayed. First generation refugees were exiles in the more classic meaning of the word. They had roots elsewhere on the mainland and viewed Taiwan as only a place of sojourn.⁶ For the second generation children of mainland exiles Taiwan represented a much more complex set of feelings and experiences. Although technically “natives” of Taiwan, their childhoods were spent in an environment very much removed, physically, socially, linguistically and ideologically from the rest of Taiwanese society. When they grew to maturity and entered the mainstream of society, the contradictory state of being a native, yet having grown up apart, produced a crisis of identity in many former residents of *juancun*. They felt caught between two cultural worlds, that of mainland China, and that of Taiwan. Neither world was their true native place.

Zhu Tianxin is an articulate representative of the *juancun* generation. Her work since the publication of “I Remember...”⁷ has been much concerned with the dilemma of her liminal identity (Wang 9). In “Thinking of my brothers from the dependent’s village”⁸ she revisits the curious world of the dependent’s village and attempts to reconstruct the many conflicting memories of her childhood home. Since that world no longer has a physical existence, both the nostalgia and the sense of loss of identity are intensified.

4 Juancun 眷村.

5 See, for example, Qi.

6 See Hu.

7 *Wo jide...*

8 *Xiang wo juancun de xiongdimen*

Being a mainlander excludes Zhu Tianxin from the possibility of drawing her identity from the mainstream of Taiwanese experience. She admits: “...before they were about twenty and went to university or did their military service, many children from dependent villages ... did not have the experience of being ‘Taiwanese’” (“Thinking...” 85). “Thinking of my brothers...” is an attempt to understand just what kind of experience such people did have, and what that experience means for their sense of identity as adults living in contemporary Taiwan. In asking the question; “Where are all my brothers from the dependent village now?” Zhu is attempting to piece together a personal history, a story of herself, a story which is not easily located in the major flow of discourse on modern Taiwanese history. Qiu Guifen also notes that Zhu Tianxin is not to be found in the major accounts of Taiwanese literary history by Ye Shitao and Peng Ruijin (“Taiwan nüxing...” 17) and that this is indicative of her liminal positioning in the context of Taiwanese society and literary production. In this sense she suffers as much from “non-recognition” as from “non-identity” (Huang 269 seq.) That has the effect of making her an exile in her own country, an individual whose voice many consider not relevant to the corporate history of her native place.

Gao Xingjian in Exile

Zhu Tianxing’s exile is internal since she is a native of the place from which she feels estranged. In contrast, Gao Xingjian’s exile in France is an obvious case of political exile. Due to political conditions in mainland China, Gao is forced to live in a place where the cultural and linguistic environment is radically different from that of his native place. This naturally has consequences for the manner in which he experiences exile. Furthermore, his experience inside China has produced in him a significantly different relationship with his identity and his cultural heritage than Zhu has with hers.

In 1989 in the aftermath of the Tian’anmen massacre, Gao Xingjian, renounced his Chinese citizenship and sought political asylum in France. He was part of a major exodus of intellectuals and artists. A large number of Chinese nationals already living and working overseas also made the decision not to return to their homeland at that time. In Gao’s own reckoning, this was an unprecedented phenomenon in Chinese history, not because of the numbers involved, but because most of those who became exiles continued their careers abroad. This was in contrast to those who fled China in the period leading up to the Xinghai revolution in 1911. Those early exiles had a much deeper and singular connection to the motherland.

Their existence had no meaning without China. As Gao puts it, "...their native land was always in their dreams and they never accepted their exile" ("Wenxue de kunjing..." 120). The intimation that it makes little difference to Gao and his fellow exiles whether they are in China or abroad should not be taken at face value. There is no question that China has changed over the course of the last century, as has the world in general. Internationalization and mass media may mean that exile has lost some of its sting, yet it is clear that Gao Xingjian was far from unaffected by his "unhousing." In an interview with fellow exiled writer Yang Lian ("Liuwang..."), Gao speaks extensively about the difference between being located physically in China and being located outside the country. In the course of one exchange Yang and Gao consider the realities of writers with no audience. They are very aware that by being located in the West (the cultural West in the case of Australia where Yang resides) and being out of favor with Beijing, they no longer have a large readership. That being the case, why do they still write? Gao's response is that the writing is a purely individual process and that the presence or absence of an audience is not of consequence ("Liuwang..." 165-74). He also reiterates the theme that exile is a positive state in that it liberates the individual from the pressures of national ideologies and political control (Ma). Considering the level of state interference in artistic matters in mainland China, it is not difficult to appreciate this point.

The absence of a concerned and interested audience, the inability to communicate easily with those in the host country, these are the negative aspects of exile, they are what contribute to making exile yet another form of prison (Said 54). Yet there are positive aspects to exile. One of those is precisely the fact of the exiled writer's marginal positioning and his/her privilege of observing life without becoming entangled in it.⁹ Gao Xingjian is aware of this privilege and claims that whether one is living as an exile in a foreign country, or simply living on the edges of one's native culture, marginality is a prerequisite for sincere creativity. In his "Parisian Notebook,"¹⁰ written during the first year after his arrival in France, he states; "In exactly the same way that literature is not a mirror of society, the writer is not society's conscience. He is only one who flees to the margins of society, an outsider, an observer, watching over it with his cold

9 For discussions of the virtues of marginality see Said and also hooks 149.

10 Bali Suibi.

eyes." ("Bali suibi" 22). Gao's concept of a "cold literature"¹¹ is also largely based on this vision of a marginal positioning. What "cold literature" signifies is a literature removed from the political and ideological cauldron of everyday life. A literature that serves the ends of only the writer and refuses to be pulled into the service of non-literary myth-making or propaganda. "...Cold literature is a kind of literature that flees in order to preserve itself, it is a kind of literature which is not assassinated by society, but which seeks spiritual salvation" ("Wo zhuzhang..." 18). In this passage one could replace the word "literature" with the word "writer" and discover Gao's ideal model for the exiled writer himself.

Identity and Culture

Even those who choose to, or are forced to live on the margins must have some sense of who they are. They must have a subjective standpoint from which to view the world around them. That subjective standpoint must necessarily be constructed with reference to a cultural environment. Where do Zhu Tianxin and Gao Xingjian belong, culturally, and what does cultural belonging mean to them? Neither have any difficulty with the idea that they are Chinese writers. They write in Chinese. They were born and raised in cultural environments that are identifiably Chinese. But how those environments are "Chinese" and how Zhu and Gao see their Chineseness is a highly complex matter.

In negative terms, neither writer admits to any interest in being a representative of the "Great Tradition" of Chinese literature and culture. Gao is very explicit in this regard. He is adamant that he has no responsibility to China or Chinese culture in general, not to mention Chinese literature in particular. He states: "I have already sorted out for myself the positives and negatives of traditional Chinese culture. The most important thing for a writer is to transcend, to create something. There is no need to sell the cultural products of my motherland in order to make a living" ("Preface" 11). This is a theme which Gao reiterates many times. So far as he is concerned, he is secure in his identity as a Chinese writer, but that does not mean that he feels any responsibility to identify with any centrally defined concept of Chineseness. In answer to the theoretical question; "Where is my Chinese consciousness?" he borrows a phrase from an exiled Polish writer and responds; "It is inside of me" ("Liuwang..." 165). He accepts no commission as a spokesman for any group or ideology; national or otherwise. He feels that no writer should

11 leng de wenxue 冷的文學

submit to such imposition. In an interview with the Taiwanese critic Long Yingtai Gao stresses that, far from trying to represent his people, he “works hard to avoid having the label of [Chinese] culture placed upon [his] back” (Long Feb.16).

At the same time, Gao recognizes that some literature, including his own, will reflect a strong national culture. Much of his prose fiction may, in fact be considered an articulation of his Chinese identity. That articulation began well before he left mainland China, particularly with the writing of “Spirit Mountain.”¹² A great deal of the material for “Spirit Mountain” was gathered while Gao was living in internal exile, seeking refuge from political harassment by government agencies in Beijing. Many view it as fundamentally an account of exile.¹³ It may just as easily be seen as an exercise in “root seeking”¹⁴, an attempt to recover an identity from the remnants of China’s cultural and historic past.¹⁵ Gao admits that he is interested in traditional Chinese culture, and his motive in writing “Spirit Mountain” had to do with a desire to write a “cultural history” of China, as opposed to mainstream “political histories.”

In “Spirit Mountain” Gao seeks the roots of ancient Shu culture, the culture of the “Songs of the South”¹⁶ and the tragic hero Qu Yuan.¹⁷ It is a culture distinct from northern Han culture. Gao’s sophisticated understanding of Chinese history and cultural development allow him to separate out the vestiges of Shu culture from the dominant Han culture. The exercise is perhaps best seen as a search for alternatives to the orthodox historical accounts that deal mostly with political developments. Those accounts foreground mainstream Confucian culture and trivialize

12 “Spirit Mountain” (Lingshan 靈山) was completed after Gao took up residence in France, but he had been in the process of writing it for several years before he left China. See “Wenxue yu xuanxue...”

13 For example Noel Dutrait, “Preface.” 3.

14 *xungen* 尋根.

15 Although Gao himself denies this. See Chen.

16 Chuci 楚詞.

17 For a good account of the “Songs of the South” and the legend of Qu Yuan 屈原 see Hawkes, David. *Ch'u Tz'u, The Songs of the South*.

subordinate traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism and folk culture in general.

For our purposes here the significance of “Spirit Mountain” is that it demonstrates Gao Xingjian’s interest in his own cultural heritage. It also positions him in relationship to “mainstream” Chinese culture. While the narration itself is heavily laden with accounts of the central subject’s romantic and sexual involvements, there is ample evidence that Gao researched the material for the book with a distinctly scholastic curiosity. He wishes to find an historical truth which had been obscured for many years by the heavy veil of political orthodoxy, Confucian and later Marxist-Maoist. He is aware that Chinese culture is incomparably varied, temporally, regionally, and socially. But ideological manipulation, whether it be Marxist-Maoist or Confucian, has the effect and intent of erasing variation and presenting traditional culture as a homogeneous, monolithic entity. “Spirit Mountain” presents a China with which Gao feels greater identity. It is a China which is unaccounted for in standard histories, but one which is vital and filled with subjective meaning for Gao Xingjian. By finding identity in this alternative China, he can place himself outside of the mainstream, separate himself from centres of authority, but at the same time provide himself with cultural substance and a source of subjective identity.

One of the most important elements of Gao’s literary credo is his conviction that literature is fundamentally an individual pursuit. Such a conviction forcefully excludes the notion that literature inevitably has a political or ideological meaning or value. One of the most thorough statements of his thinking in this regard is found in his essay “Having No Ideology.”¹⁸ There he states; “Literary creation has always been the product of an individual writer’s inspiration. It has very little to do with ideology” (“Meiyou zhuyi” 3). Any ideology is by its nature normative. It imposes a particular mode of thought and behaviour on those who subscribe to it, thus depriving individuals of the ability to explore their own unique experience. For Gao, as for all who refuse to be content with predigested interpretations of life and its meaning, literature is a medium through which to question social norms and assumptions. He states; “For me, literary creation is an individual’s struggle with society. It doesn’t matter how insignificant the struggle may be, it is still [an expression of] a kind of attitude” (“Meiyou zhuyi” 4). For Gao, that individual attitude is critical to

18 “Meiyou zhuyi.”

his understanding of himself and his relationship to society. Far from wishing to promote any ideology or group aspiration, his creative impulse drives him towards the periphery of society. There, outside of the cultural and social mainstream he may find the space within which to pursue his own personal struggle with the paradoxes of existence and society.

There is no doubt that Gao's championing of literature as individual expression is the product of his experience as an intellectual living in the deeply ideological and heavily controlled intellectual environment of mainland China. His aversion to the ideological and political interference imposed upon him and other intellectuals in China is very evident in his other major novel, "One Man's Bible."¹⁹ It is also responsible for his search for alternative cultural traditions in China. Aside from "Spirit Mountain," plays such as "Snow in August,"²⁰ "Account of the Classic of Mountains of Seas,"²¹ "City of Darkness,"²² and "The Other Shore,"²³ explore non-Confucian historical and intellectual traditions and are, in one way or another, an attempt to find alternative ways of thought and action within the context of the Chinese cultural heritage. This quest began while he was still resident in China, and continues as he works in exile. For this reason, we do not see any radical change of theme in his post-exilic work.

Gao denies that exile has had a significant effect on his sense of cultural identity, or on his ability to maintain contact with his roots. Nonetheless, exile has forced him to view his work slightly differently. He is aware that he now has a Western audience and that his relationship to that audience demands a different stance as a writer. For example, he has indicated that he sees "Snow in August" as an attempt to introduce Chan Buddhist thought to Westerners. This is clearly an admission that he is now living in a foreign environment and has a role to play as a spokesperson for his cultural heritage (Long Feb. 17). The meaning of his search for cultural alternatives in non-Confucian traditions such as Taoism and Chan has also changed accordingly.

Furthermore, Gao is faced with the problem of all exiles, that of

maintaining contact with his cultural roots. In a lecture given in 1987, before his exile, Gao Xingjian was able to maintain that, unlike American blacks, or American-born Chinese he, as a mainland Chinese writer, had no need to seek his literary roots, they were right at his feet. ("Chidao de..."¹¹⁵) After renouncing his Chinese citizenship and taking up residence in France that natural connection with his roots has been severed. He no longer has the ability to experience China directly, physically and emotionally. Whether he is willing to admit it or not, exile forces him to re-evaluate his cultural positioning and the meaning of his cultural identity. He is no longer an outsider in his own country, he is an outsider in a country that is very foreign and may not even be especially interested in his cultural heritage. His recent experimental plays, such as "Four Weekend Performances"²⁴ which are not directly concerned with Chinese culture in any specific manner may be an indication of the non-culturally determined mode in which Gao wishes to work in future.

For Zhu Tianxin the question of relationship to the theoretical construct of "motherland" (fatherland?) and traditional culture is phrased rather differently. Unlike Gao, who has engaged in quasi-scholastic research in order to define alternative streams of Chinese cultural reality and to find ways in which to separate himself from the ideologically based cultural monolith represented by the communist state, Zhu had cultural distinctiveness thrust upon her. We have already noted the manner in which her upbringing in the culturally separate world of a Military Dependent Village fundamentally denied Zhu a "Taiwanese" experience as a child. As Huang Jingshu has demonstrated, there is another source of the young Zhu's cultural alienation in later life. As a child, Zhu Tianxin was nurtured by classical Chinese philosophy and literature. The mythology of the "Civilization of Rites and Music"²⁵ was conveyed to her and her sisters by her father, but especially by the aging scholar, Hu Lancheng,²⁶ a friend of the family (Huang 239-40). Hu was steeped in the wisdom of the Chinese classics and was able to weave together a vision of "Great China" using sources drawn diversely from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. This vision imprinted on Zhu Tianxin and her sisters a sense of heritage not easily accessible to native Taiwanese peers whose connection with that

19 *Yige rende shengjing*.

20 *Bayue xue*.

21 *Shanhaijing zhuan*.

22 *Mingcheng*.

23 *Bi'an*.

24 *Zhoumo sichongzou*.

25 禮樂文明.

26 胡蘭誠.

heritage was disturbed by the Japanese colonial period. It also had the effect of blinding her to the realities of Taiwanese society and culture.

Zhu Tianxing grew up in, and began her creative life firmly in the thrall of the mythology of classical Chinese heritage and its supposed guardian, the Nationalist Party of China (KMT). However, in the 1970's she and her family moved from the Dependent Village into urban Taipei. In 1976 she entered university. These physical relocations meant that she was confronted with realities that led her to question and eventually abandon her faith in the elegant constructs of Hu Lancheng's "Civilization of Rites and Music" (Huang 243-44). On the one hand, her study of history forced her to recognize that the idea of "Great China" was based upon a gross simplification of the realities of history. On the other hand, the post-colonial rhetoric of Taiwanese nativism placed her relationship to the KMT in a negative and unattractive light. She came to resent the manner in which she had been used by the KMT and felt embarrassment at the manner in which she had allowed herself to be duped ("Xiari yanyun").

Zhu has no desire to erase that era from her personal history ("Xiari yanyun") even though, as Qiu Guifen points out, it is the source of misunderstanding on the part of Taiwanese nativists who have difficulty accepting her complex relationship to Taiwan and its history ("Taiwan nüxing..." 17-18). Neither is she willing or able to let go of her mainland identity and blend into the mainstream of Taiwanese-ness as defined by proponents of the nativist movement.²⁷ In her more mature work since the publication of "I Remember..." in 1989, she has engaged in an ever more sophisticated process of writing her own history of self and place. In many ways her personal identity and her identity as a writer has grown ever more circumscribed and marginalized with time. But this has in many respects brought maturity and depth to her work.

Identity and Non-Identity

Following different paths, Zhu Tianxin and Gao Xingjian have arrived at an understanding of themselves as individuals standing apart from society and from the cultural environments in which they reside. Yet they both find a positioning at the margins — a non-identity with the group — conducive to their function as observers and commentators. There are philosophical as well as cultural ramifications to their sense of non-identity, but there seems no question that both writers find non-identity to be liberating.

27 See Yang Zhao "Liangwei qunxu." Yang criticizes Zhu for being overly cynical and not being willing to commit to any new ideology or world view, like, for example, the nativist world view which he now favours.

Non-identity frees the individual to engage his/her environment directly, as a human being, not as a Chinese, or a mainland, or a Taiwanese, or native of any given place. Gao Xingjian recognizes the necessity of such a placement. He knows that the weight of the Chinese cultural heritage can be crushing to those who cannot distance themselves far enough from it. Dwelling upon one's cultural identity obscures the universals of human nature and experience which good literature must strive to convey (Long Feb. 17). It also impedes the entry of Chinese literature into dialogue with the rest of the world (Long Feb. 16). Gao already espoused such a view while still resident in Mainland China. Now, being exiled and cut off from his native place, it is a position that presents itself all the more urgently. His concept of a "cold literature" is based upon the belief that a writer is most effective if he/she adopts the stance of an uninvolved observer, someone who has no ideological or cultural axe to grind. As he says; "I also feel that a writer does best to position himself/herself on the margins of society. This facilitates calm observation and introspection. Only then can they concentrate on this kind of cold literature" ("Lengde wenxue" 17). Cold literature is literature of non-identity and non-participation. It is a means of resisting the pressures which society may apply to the individual. It refuses to be the tool of any ideology or group.

In her recent work, aside from exploring her own personal history, Zhu Tianxin has developed a role as social commentator; an "anthropologist of city dwellers," as Huang Jinshu posits (270-75). She has written several short stories dealing with the lives of others who live on the margins of Taiwanese society. Her position as literary social scientist requires that Zhu maintain a degree of distanced objectivity. Her identity as a mainland is only the first stage of her distancing mechanism. It has been her loss of faith in cultural and political mythologies which has been most central to her independence as an intellectual and a writer. That loss of faith has apparently superseded her feelings of cultural alienation as the major source of her sense of non-belonging (Wang 21-23). Thus one might say that her non-identity has shifted from being largely culturally defined, to being largely intellectually defined.

In Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin we find two authors who prefer a stance of social and ideological non-identity for in that way they are then not bound to speak for any particular group or any particular set of ideas. The manner in which they both proceed from this basic position of non-identity is quite different, however. Gao Xingjian is most interested in exploring the universals of the human condition. He wishes to focus upon the individual in his/her struggle with society and existence in the general,

abstracted sense. This is most evident in his plays, many of which assume no cultural backgrounding at all. His feeling is apparently that culture is naturally inside of a writer and will make itself felt regardless of the subject material, but that is not the main motive for writing:

You don't want to be clearly conscious of a cultural background. Why? Because that cultural background is naturally in you. ...If a cultural background has, in fact, permeated your cultural conditioning, you let it come out. That is, of course, not important. What is important is the communication of the universals of human nature at the deepest level.... (Gao, qtd. in Long Feb. 17)

Working from this perspective, Gao feels that exile and separation from his Chinese cultural roots is perhaps not of critical importance. He is Chinese. He possesses a natural, inherent Chinese identity which he carries with him wherever he goes. So long as his subject matter is not contemporary Chinese society or something directly related to it, his ability to write is not compromised. His exile in France assures him a standpoint of non-identity and the creative freedom that he desires.

In her work since *I Remember...* Zhu Tianxin has moved in a direction counter to that of Gao Xingjian. She has become very much interested in the people and places of her native Taipei. This does not imply that she has found identity in Taipei and its people. Quite the opposite, she apparently feels a sense of strong alienation from the social and cultural mainstream. In her alienation she projects a certain resentment, since she clearly believes that Taipei, which has been her home since her adolescence, should provide her the security of identity and belonging. Yet, as is eloquently and extensively demonstrated in *Ancient Capital*,²⁸ it does not. The Taipei with which Zhu feels strong identity, the Taipei of her youth and adolescence, has been physically erased by modern rebuilding programs and the machinery of international commercialism.²⁹

The people of Taipei whom Zhu chooses to depict in her short stories are not people with whom she necessarily identifies, but they are people who have drawn her curiosity and sympathy. Very often she chooses those who live on the margins of urban society; misfits, non-participants, and invisible minorities (Teng). From her positioning as an outside observer Zhu is able to bring the reader a non-judgemental yet concerned vision of

society's lesser lights. At the same time, while seeking to observe, she works very hard to enter the emotional and cultural space of her subjects. She tries to minimize the interference of her own subjective viewpoint and draw as close as possible to the people she deals with. Such an approach, of course, does not preclude engagement with the "universals of the human condition" which Gao Xingjian prioritizes, but it has a very different starting point. Zhu is interested in particulars first; cultural, social, and emotional particulars. Her work is valuable because of the fact that it deals with a specific cultural setting, not because it transcends cultural settings. Zhu still requires a position of non-identity for her work, but her manner of non-identity contrasts strongly with Gao's.

Language and Identity

Writers may choose to place themselves outside of a society or culture, but they must still make use of a language in order to create literature. Since language is the product of a culture, language use is in itself an act of cultural identity. In a newspaper article published during Gao Xingjian's visit to Taiwan in February of 2001, Li Ruiteng questions whether any writer using Chinese language as a medium can transcend cultural identity altogether. Li discusses the relationship of an author to his/her cultural heritage. He notes that Gao himself feels that "cultural identity is a fictional concept" and that as a writer he has the "freedom of non-identity." Li comments that Zhu Tianxin has also developed similar themes recently. But Gao Xingjian's belief that literature can and should transcend definitions based upon ethnicity, nationality, or geography inevitably runs into the problem of language. Li rightly points out that language is never a neutral medium. It inevitably carries a certain cultural weighting.

Since Zhu Tianxin does not extend non-identity to mean a transcendence over culturally specific material, her use of language would appear to be somewhat less problematic than Gao Xingjian's. Her early work may have reflected a preference for a language drawn from literary sources, but Zhu's later work has tended to rely more heavily on the vernacular usage of her subjects. This is a self-conscious choice on her part. There is the option of creating greater distance from her subjects by writing in the persona of an outside observer. If she were to choose that mode, she would definitely place herself in the stance of a social scientist. However, in actual practice, her preference is to enter the emotional and social space of those she depicts and write as she hears people speak. She makes use of the speech patterns and usage of her subjects. This implies that her language will be highly specific, very much determined by the mannerisms of

28 "Gudu."

29 See Wang for the best discussion of *Gudu* and Zhu's sense of alienation.

micro-social groups she describes, whether urban housewives or middle-aged businessmen. While the use of vernacular has the virtue of allowing Zhu a higher level of mimesis, it also has the unfortunate effect of distancing those unfamiliar with the places and people she writes of.

Zhu's writing is very "Taiwan" and especially very "Taipei." Those who have never spent time in Taipei will miss much of the nuance and allusory reference in her writing. This is not a shortcoming of her work, it is a virtue, if a paradoxical virtue. The use of vernacular has been a characteristic of national literatures for centuries. And always the dilemma is the same: The more vernacular the writing style, the more limited the readership. The more standard, the less "authentic" it is in cultural terms. Her respect for the traditions of Chinese prose writing means that Zhu Tianxin does not push the envelope to extremes in this respect, but she clearly feels that careful use of vernacular allows her to achieve a higher level of realism.

Gao Xingjian has written much about language and language use. Since his writerly stance and choice of subject matter are significantly different from Zhu Tianxin, we should not be surprised to find that his ideas related to Chinese language use and development do not obviously match Zhu's practice. Gao Xingjian is a Chinese writer who faces the world at large. He looks beyond regional boundaries and national cultures towards the international community. Even before he fled into exile, he was proposing that the only road forward for Chinese language and literature was to enter the mainstream of world literature ("Chidao de..." 116-17). Since taking up residence in France, Gao has developed this theme of convergence. He endeavours to situate himself at the point of confluence of Eastern and Western culture ("Preface" 13). In his writing he makes use of language which he has gathered from a variety of locales in China, but it is in many cases self-consciously devoid of any reference to a specific place or time.

In contrast to Li Ruiteng's concerns about the non-neutral qualities of language, Gao does not view his desire to transcend national or ethnic culture as compromised in any way by language use. In his essay "On Having no 'isms,'"³⁰ he states the opinion that for any writer, language is **the** critical thing, but it can only be used effectively once cultural consciousness has been overcome:

When a writer is able to escape from ethnic and national consciousness and face the world purely as an individual, he has a responsibility only to the language with he uses to write with. Then language art may even be taken as primary. "How to say" unconsciously comes to replace "what to say." (6)

Giving language such primacy leads Gao to experiment with non-rational, Chanesque dialogue in his plays. In such pieces as "Snow in August," language is literally not the medium of meaning, it deliberately breaks any direct connection of meaning. It is no more than a set of signs which point in the direction of meaning (Zhao).

At the same time, Gao is occupied in a more conventional way with the development of Chinese as a language which is more expressive of modern realities. He feels that modern Chinese has met with a crisis in the form of heavy Westernization, lexical impoverishment, improper use of grammar and style, and a loss of the sense of the musicality of the four tones ("Wenxue de kunjing" 126). In response, Gao works to make use of colloquialisms and local dialectic variation to enrich the language. ("Liuwang..." 162). He is also an avid reader of classical Chinese, and claims to draw much inspiration from late Ming Dynasty writers such as Feng Menglong. ("Wenxue yu xuanxue..." 192). These efforts reinforce, rather than weaken, the connections between language and culture. But "culture" here must not be mistaken for any one specific local culture. It is Chinese culture in a general sense. It is a composite made up of elements from many local cultures and traditions.

Gao Xingjian apparently follows the theory that the way forward for Chinese literary language is the maintenance of Mandarin (putonghua)³¹ as the standard lexical and grammatical frame, while continuously expanding the expressive range of that frame by incorporating elements drawn from dialects and local usage. Here he is much in agreement with many scholars and writers in Taiwan who have responded to a "Taiwanese language literature" movement by arguing for an enrichment of standard Mandarin rather than plunging into full dialectic literature (Lü). Without any direct evidence for support, I am willing to speculate that Zhu Tianxin would also support such an approach. The language that she uses in her short stories is precisely an "enriched" Mandarin which draws considerably from local usage. Like Gao, she is well versed in Classical Chinese and does not hesitate to make use of classical phrasing as a rhetorical device. The major difference between Zhu and Gao in this respect is that the former is very much a chronicler of a particular place in a particular time, the latter aspires

30 "Meiyou zhuyi"

31 普通話

to transcend time and place and deal with issues of universal human concern. Although she refuses to embrace it openly, Zhu Tianxin is Taipei, 1970-2000. Her language reflects Taipei and its citizens and may not be easily accessible to those with no knowledge of the city. Gao Xingjian hopes to address an international audience, an audience who may have little or no knowledge of Chinese culture in the most general sense.

Conclusion

In his essay "Extraterritorial" George Steiner examines the modern phenomenon of multi-lingual writers, many of whom have been exiles of one sort or another. He discusses the role which Latin once played as a "sacramental and cultural interlingual" in a Europe where the rise of local vernaculars signaled a loss of faith in traditional, centralized religious and cultural orthodoxy, and the increasing self-confidence of local cultures. He describes the language of figures such as Shakespeare, Montaigne and Luther as embodying "an extreme local strength, an assertion of specific, 'untranslatable' identity" (15). I believe that Chinese language literature is presently being pulled towards a similar polarity and that Zhu Tianxin and Gao Xingjian represent relatively moderate, but significant examples of the two poles.

Both Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin are exploring the meaning of "Chinese" identity and the potential of Chinese language as a medium for literature in the post-modern world. They have both experienced a loss of faith in Chinese cultural orthodoxy as it was presented to them. In Gao's case he has lost all interest in the state ideology of mainland China and also finds no attraction to the traditions of Confucian state orthodoxy. His literary quest leads him in two directions. On the one hand he explores China's alternative traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism and Southern regional culture. On the other hand, he addresses matters of universal human concern, philosophical dilemmas transcending national cultures. While accepting his essential Chineseness, he seeks a literary positioning between East and West. His desire is to return literature to its function as a means of individual expression, and he declines the imposition of any composite or group identity including "Chinese." He believes strongly in the entry of Chinese literature into international literary discourse. To do this it need not become more Westernized, but it does need to become more modern and outward-reaching. The language he employs is firmly rooted in his Chinese heritage, but it is not the expression of any single native place. Nor does he absolutely refuse influence from non-Chinese sources. His vision seems to be of an international Chinese language which

will be the medium of expression for Chinese writers who are fully integrated into the discourse of international literature.

Zhu Tianxin has left behind the mythology of the Great Tradition of classical China as it was portrayed to her in her childhood. She has not been able to replace that mythology with any modern ideology. Nor has she felt comfortable with the politics of the nativist movement in Taiwan. Being identified as a mainland writer, Zhu suffers not only from a self-derived sense of non-recognition, but also from the pain of not being recognized by proponents of post-colonial Taiwan nativism. However, like Gao, Zhu makes a virtue of her non-belonging by situating herself on the margins of her host society and engaging in a continuing analysis and critique of that society. The language she employs moves in an opposite direction from that of Gao's international Chinese. It seeks to reflect the language of very small groups of people in very specific socio-cultural environments. Those who wish to appreciate Zhu's work must make the effort to familiarize themselves with those environments and their linguistic peculiarities.

The loss of faith in ideology and in standard accounts of cultural tradition as represented by Gao Xingjian and Zhu Tianxin has consequences for Chinese language as a literary medium. So long as Chinese writers and intellectuals continue to question the validity of centralized orthodoxy and cultural values, we can only assume that Chinese-language literature will continue to spin away from traditional modalities in a variety of directions. Zhu Tianxin and Gao Xingjian represent two major possibilities for the future of Chinese writing. Zhu's work leads in the direction of ever more regionally and socially specific vernacular, while Gao seems to propose an internationalized "interlingual" Chinese which may facilitate the participation of Chinese writers in global literary and intellectual dialogue. In view of the enormous diversity of global Chinese culture, it is unlikely that one mode or the other will predominate. Rather, we can look forward to increased diversity and linguistic creativity of Chinese language writing in the future.

University of Manitoba/University of British Columbia

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