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The Paintings of Gao Xingjian

My paintings can be viewed as landscape, but more than anything, it is a reflection of my mindscape. At times, there is the notion of attaining to inner peace. I yearn to depict my inner mindscape; this is simply all it is, although “simple” in this sense can appear to be a paradox. This is my only desire, but yet what results from this one source is a stunning mixture of complexities, of emotive responses open for the viewers’ discernment and interpretation.¹

Gao Xingjian (born in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, China in 1940) has lived in Paris in self-exile since 1987. When he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, the selection committee noted that he had been selected “for an œuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama.” The committee’s press release summarizes Gao Xingjian’s work: “In the writing of Gao Xingjian literature is born anew from the struggle of the individual to survive the history of the masses. He is a perspicacious skeptic who makes no claim to be able to explain the world. He asserts that he has found freedom only in writing.”² Gao Xingjian’s self-exile is in part due to the censoring of his work by the Chinese government. Although critics often cite his novels and short stories as the main justification for his Nobel Prize in Literature, he has also excelled in writing and directing plays and in making photographs, films, and paintings.

In a dialog with Gao Xingjian in 1998, Noël Dutrait asked, “You have said that, thanks to [*Lingshan (Soul Mountain)* [Taiwan, 1990)], you have come to terms with nostalgia for your homeland. In your latest . . . novel, *Yige ren de shenjing* [*One Man’s Bible* (Taiwan, 1999)], why do you come back to the subject of China and its most recent history?” Gao Xingjian answered:

When I finished writing [*Soul Mountain*] in France, I thought I had finished with nostalgia for my homeland, a nostalgia that becomes a heavy burden for exiled Chinese writers in the West. One of the end results of living in exile is that it enables the artist to conserve his creative force, but he or she must then face up to a new reality. That

is why I turned my attention towards subjects that concern life in the West; in the five plays that I have written since that moment,³ the Chinese background has gradually become blurred. I am profoundly convinced that a man who has left his homeland, so called, can not only live, but also continue to work creatively. It is only afterwards that he can look back to examine the painful experience he may have lived through in his own country. I thought I had established enough distance to come to terms with that experience but, in fact, it was not so. I have worked on three successive versions of the manuscript, and spent three years, to succeed at last in destroying this tumor in the midst of all those memories that I had striven to forget. This was the necessary condition for literary creation: art does not consist in airing one's grievances and, if one cannot take pleasure in the creative process, it is better not to venture into such sensitive areas. If I did go back into my past to write this novel [*One Man's Bible*], it was also to seek relief for hidden suffering and to enrich my interior life, so that later on I might write something even better.⁴

Looking at his paintings and films, reading his writings, and thinking of his self-exile, I often think of the story "How Wang-Fo was Saved" from Marguerite Yourcenar's *Oriental Tales*. Wang-Fo is an imaginary character, an aging artist, who, along with his disciple, is captured by an angry emperor who feels threatened by the power, truth, and beauty of Wang-Fo's art. The emperor says:

You lied, Wang-Fo, you old imposter. The world is nothing but a mass of muddled colors thrown into the void by an insane painter, and smudged by your tears. The kingdom of Han is not the most beautiful of kingdoms, and I am not the Emperor. The only empire which is worth reigning over is that which you alone can enter, old Wang, by the road of One Thousand Curves and Ten Thousand Colors. You alone reign peacefully over mountains covered in snow that cannot melt, and over fields of daffodils that cannot die. And that is why, Wang-Fo, I have imagined a punishment for you, for you whose enchantment has given me the disgust of everything I own, and the desire for everything I shall never possess.⁵

Wang-Fo is sentenced to have his eyes burned out and his hands cut off because in his paintings he created a world that the emperor feels is too beautiful to bear any resemblance to the "real" world. Before the sentence is carried out, though, he is forced by the emperor to finish an unfinished landscape painting. Wang-Fo inserts a boat into the picture and then he paints himself and his disciple into the boat and they row out of reality, out of danger, leaving the visionless emperor behind.⁶

The theme of exile, self-exile, and creativity can be found all throughout China's history (from Qu Yuan [ca. 339–278 BCE] to Su Shi [1037–1101 CE]) and indeed throughout human history (from Ovid and Virgil to James Joyce and

Vladimir Nabokov). Indeed, one of Gao Xingjian's predecessors as an artist in exile would be Su Shi, one of China's best-known cultural heroes and a towering figure in the arts. Su Shi was in exile in Huangzhou, a remote place, far from the capital of China, when he composed these poems, which are preserved in beautiful calligraphy from the poet's own hand (now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei):

Since coming to Huangzhou,
 Three Cold-Food Festivals have come and gone.
 Each year I wish to linger with spring,
 But Spring admits no delay for departure.
 This year I again suffered from bitter rain,
 Two months of autumn's dreary weather.
 Lying in bed, I smell the crab-apple blossoms,
 Mud splatters their rouge and snow.
 In darkness, they were carried off,
 Truly, there may be a strong man [stealing them away] in the middle of the night.
 How does it differ from the sickly youth,
 Up from his sickbed, his hair already white?

Spring flood is coming up to my door,
 But the rain shows no sign of letting up.
 My small house is like a fishing boat,
 Blurred in misty waters and clouds.
 My empty kitchen has only cooked vegetables,
 The cracked stove has only burned and wet reeds.
 How did I know it's the Cold-Food Festival?
 I see scraps of paper [money] in crow's beak.
 The sovereign's gate is nine layers deep,
 The grave mounds [of my family] lie thousands of miles away.
 I'd also lament [the fate of my country] at the end of the road,
 But [my mind is like] the dead ashes, it can't be ignited by fanning.⁷

One cannot separate Gao Xingjian's self-exile and his art; exile is the principal, if not the only, source of his art. And even as he has enjoyed the freedom to create in his self-exile, he has continued to draw on his earlier experience of living in China and his understanding of Chinese cultural tradition. Gao Xingjian often reflects on his life as a writer in self-exile and has found his self-exile liberating. In a dialog with Yang Lian, a Chinese poet now in exile in England, Gao Xingjian commented:

To put it another way: to write is to complete the self. With writings outside China, it's not only the language that changes but objectives also

change, even the way material is handled. After *Soul Mountain* was finished in September 1989, I felt as though I'd got over a "China complex." The background to *Soul Mountain* was all in China, and completing it was like coming to a full stop: it ended my nostalgia for China. It was actually just for myself—a way that prevented me from turning into a loner far from home. Everything was inside me. This "self-completion" was extremely fulfilling. After I had experienced it, I can honestly say that I hardly ever dreamed about China again, whereas previously, in my dreams, there was so much "China" in the background and in my subconscious. Now, it's of immense benefit to my psychology, an exiled writer not belonging to any "country" and roaming the world. What's so bad about that?⁸

Gao Xingjian's paintings and films provide us with the opportunity to examine the reconciliation and synthesis of Chinese and Euro-American aesthetics as well as such important theoretical issues as transnationalism and global aesthetics. We now live in an increasingly globalized world and one of the issues confronting many of us, whether we are scholars or just art lovers, is the identity of artistic origins. Styles, as well as sites of production and distribution (including exhibition and publication), are no longer bound by national traditions, a phenomenon particularly evident with Gao Xingjian. One of the foremost unresolved questions for modern Chinese painting is the identity of Chinese painting. Do we define it by style, spirit, tradition, technique, or medium? As the distinguished art historian Mayching Kao reported at the conclusion of an international symposium on twentieth-century Chinese painting held in Hong Kong in 1984, "To some scholars and artists, Chinese painting means painting in the Chinese style and the Chinese medium. To others, it also includes imported styles and media such as oils, watercolors, gouache and even acrylic, more often labeled collectively as Western-style painting since their introduction into China in the last years of the Qing Dynasty."⁹ Once Chinese-born and educated artists have decided to leave China and work in Europe or America, their perspectives have frequently changed. For instance, Huang Yongping (born in 1954 in China), who has lived in Germany for the past two decades, has declared,

In my opinion, the mutual influences among different cultures are very important. "West," "East," "self," and "other" are not fixed concepts that never change. On the contrary, these concepts can be displaced. When I was in China, I was more interested in the West than I am now, in the sense that I regarded it as a source for the "other," a source of imagination; on the contrary, I am talking more about Chinese thoughts now. This is probably due to the fact that now I am living in a Western context. On the one hand, "to beat the West with the East" represents an opposition to West-centrism; on the other hand, "to beat

the East with the West” is to oppose a return to pure nationalism. Of course, this kind of shift in focus often stems from a change of context.¹⁰

Gao Xingjian’s paintings, like his plays and films, exemplify the tremendous challenges as well as the endless possibilities for artists born in China but working mostly outside China as they negotiate the issue of cultural and artistic identity. His art draws attention to mobility in subjectivity and to the contested nature of subjectivity in the processes of mobility in an increasingly globalized society.

To understand and appreciate Gao Xingjian’s art, getting a sense of the cultural and art historical contexts in which Gao Xingjian has lived is useful. The turbulent story of his native land, as the historian Jonathan Spence has outlined in his book *The Search for Modern China*, is made up of overlapping cycles of collapse and reconsolidation, of revolution and evolution, of conquest and movements for progress.¹¹ Just as many intellectuals advocated reforms in the social and political arenas, so they also espoused changes in calligraphy and painting. Two main approaches to new Chinese painting emerged in modern China. One was the eclecticism offered by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), an influential Confucian scholar, an advocate of moral, economic, and political reform, and a central figure in the failed Hundred-Day Reform. Kang Youwei and many of his contemporaries based their reforms on the idea that Chinese learning should remain the essence, but Western learning should be used for practical development (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*). In art, therefore, they advocated combining traditional Chinese and Western styles without abandoning the essence of Chinese tradition, whatever that essence might be.

The other approach, a total rejection of tradition, was propounded by Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), founder of the influential iconoclastic journal *Xinqingnian* [New youth], cofounder of the Chinese Communist Party, and one of the most important figures in the May Fourth Movement, a movement that ushered in a new era of modern Chinese cultural history. Chen Duxiu believed that traditional Confucianism and its vestiges were incompatible with a modern China. To build a modern China, as he put it, the basic task was to import the foundation of Western society, that is, the new belief in equality and human rights. One should be thoroughly aware of the incompatibility between Confucianism and the new belief, new society, and new state. In art, Chen Duxiu asserted, one should adopt Western realism to achieve new painting.

Neither Kang Youwei nor Chen Duxiu were trained, let alone accomplished, painters. Nevertheless, they set the tone for a debate on Chinese painting, still ongoing for several decades, which has embodied the general search for a modern Chinese identity. In the Republican period (1911–1949), traditional Chinese styles coexisted with a broad spectrum of Western-inspired styles in paintings, with little, if any, intervention from the authorities. After the founding of the People’s Republic, particularly in the 1950s and the 1960s, three approaches to

painting contended for official recognition and support in mainland China: conservative and traditional Chinese painting, Soviet-derived socialist realism, and a narrowly defined synthesis of Chinese and Western art. On the other hand, during the early 1960s, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, several modernist movements were launched and traditional painting was characterized as moribund. Ironically, these same modernists in Taiwan and Hong Kong came to blame the sad state of Chinese painting on the introduction of Western realism and perspective to China by Chen Duxiu, Xu Beihong (1895–1953), and many others. Xu Beihong, for example, was generally credited for introducing a Western neoclassical academic style that contributed tremendously to the establishment of the Soviet-derived “social realism” in Chinese painting in the decades after 1949.¹²

Gao Xingjian began his formal instruction in art when he attended the Jinling Middle School in Nanjing. His teacher, Yun Zongying, had studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where Xu Beihong’s fusion of Chinese traditional ink painting and Western neoclassicism was instrumental in shaping the national art curriculum for a long time. Gao Xingjian studied drawing and water-colors in the classroom and also studied oil painting privately in his teacher’s studio; his instruction in art continued for five years. When Gao Xingjian was ready to apply for colleges, he wanted to go the Central Academy of Fine Arts at the recommendation of his teacher. However, he was discouraged from applying to any art school by his mother, who reminded him that to be an artist was to live in poverty and to paint only propaganda posters for the state to promote their socialist paradise. Already a Francophile as a teenager, well read in both Chinese and Western literary classics, he ended up majoring in French at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Beijing.¹³

It is no longer possible to label Gao Xingjian as a Chinese artist, not because he is no longer a Chinese citizen or a resident of China, but because his art, though rooted in traditional Chinese art and culture, is truly global and speaks to audiences in different geographical locations. Indeed, Gao Xingjian himself is very much aware of his position in the contemporary world, evident in an explanation he gives concerning his idea about what he calls “Without Isms” (*meiyou zhuyi*):

Without Isms is neither nihilism nor eclecticism; nor is it egotism or solipsism. It opposes totalitarian dictatorship but also opposes the inflation of the self to God or Superman. It hates seeing other people trampled on like dog shit. Without Isms detests politics and does not take part in politics, but is not opposed to other people who do. If people want to get involved in politics, let them go right ahead. What Without Isms opposes is the foisting of a particular brand of politics on to the individual by means of abstract collective names such as “the people”, “the race” or “the nation”.¹⁴

I am reminded of what the French Algerian writer Albert Camus said in *The Rebel*: “What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a

renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion."¹⁵

Gao Xingjian's self-exile was, interestingly enough, an impetus to his increasing attention to painting as an important part of his creative activities. As he told the poet Mei Xin during an interview in Taipei in 1995, it all began when he brought some of his paintings to give to friends in Germany in 1985, when he was invited there by the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD or German Academic Exchange Service) for a six-month visit as a writer. He hung the paintings to fill the empty walls of his three-room apartment. Friends who visited him saw the paintings and were so impressed with them that they arranged a show at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. The paintings were well received by the public and art critics in Berlin, and he sold enough of them to let him live well in China for the rest of his life. He suddenly realized that he could support himself financially by painting, and that he no longer needed to publish his writings in China to make a living. However, the Chinese government's Chinese Writers Association continued to interfere with his work. In 1987, a French institution in theater invited Gao Xingjian to visit France, but the Chinese government would not issue him the passport. It was only after the writer Wang Meng, who had recently been appointed as the Minister of Culture, intervened that the passport was finally issued. On the plane leaving China, Gao Xingjian became very uneasy about his future in China. He eventually settled in Paris. After the June 4 Incident at Tiananmen in 1989, Gao Xingjian at last declared his intention to leave his homeland.¹⁶

Gao Xingjian's many ideas on art in general and painting in particular can be found in several essays written in Chinese:

1. July 14, 1995: "Dui huihua de sikao" [Thoughts on painting];¹⁷
2. May 1999: "Ling yizhong meixue" [Another kind of aesthetics];¹⁸
3. October 24, 2007: "Yishujia de meixue" [The aesthetics of the artist];¹⁹
4. April 2010: "Mei zai dangxia," translated by Spencer Groves as "Beauty Is in the Moment."²⁰

These extensive writings on art, either from the viewpoint of a practicing artist ("The Aesthetics of the Artist") or from the position of a critic ("Another Kind of Aesthetics"), provide us with insights into Gao Xingjian's artistic intentions and his struggle to arrive at a personal style that embodies his inner vision as a contemporary Chinese artist in self-exile.

Another key to the art of Gao Xingjian's paintings and films is provided by literary works such as his novels, plays, and poems. For example, a poem, written in part to be incorporated into his film *Silhouette/Shadow*, is entitled, appropriately, "The Way of the Wandering Bird" ("L'Errance de l'oiseau"); it is clearly autobiographical, but at the same time it addresses the universal search for personal freedom:

If you are a bird
No more than a bird
With the wind's first breath
You fly away
With an eye round and wide
You observe through darkness this sacral place below
Beyond the swamp of misfortune
Wandering through the night
You listen to the whispering air and a beating heart
Aimless yet at ease

.....
You shed the burden of the past
Liberty is now at your wingtips
Hovering, you spiral as you desire
You dive then skim across the sky
This heavy old land starts to shift
Beginning to move and follow you
First like an undulating cloth
Then like a wall swelling
Perspective, an illusory obsession, disappear
So many unexpected marvels in a row

.....
Gliding above the moving mountains
Then over a lake in a miraculous spiral
This is how your spirit voyages
Between desert and sea, at the meeting of day and night
An immense eye leads you towards the unknown

And you are a bird
Having once seen what your eye had seen
You now plunge into meditation
To be revealed by a metaphysics of vision
That dispels all turmoil dredged by words
Your vision now so pure, so refined that even the distance
from near to far dissolves to infinity
What you desire to see yet dare not imagine
Blurred beyond perception
Suddenly you will reach

In a dazzling luminosity
Emptiness as much as plenitude
Merges eternity with its instant
Within a transparency of time
From shadows and cracks
A forgotten haze now leaks

All that you have never had—as ephemeral as unforeseen
 Yet the slightest distraction leaves you blind
 And you fall back into darkness
 Knowing too well you are not a bird
 Incapable of running from anguish
 That assails you endlessly
 Like the merciless din of everyday life

.....
 Here is the place protected from the last judgment
 And spared from the new utopia
 A place birds reserve for their sacrifice
 Before nature claims them once more
 So they may die in silence
 But how can one reach this immaculate ground
 And attain such serenity
 At the end of a life so torn and worn

And have you ever seen an aging bird
 Weak, pitiful or anxious
 Who complains, who whines
 Who betrays, who deceives
 Not to speak of one who begs for survival

Although he, faced with agony, has prepared his refuge
 Where he waits calmly for his life to end
 This holy site, you find it nowhere
 Known only to all the birds

.....²¹

The following excerpt from the closing chapters of his novel *One Man's Bible* (chapter 54) gives us a good idea of Gao Xingjian's view of life. Typical of many of Gao Xingjian's fictional writings, "you" in the excerpt can refer both to himself and to the protagonist:

You no longer live in other people's shadows, nor treat other people's shadows as imaginary enemies. You simply walked out of their shadows and stopped making up nonsense and fantasies. You are now in a vast expanse of emptiness and tranquility. You originally came into the world naked and without cares, there is no need to take anything away with you, and even if you wanted to, you wouldn't be able to. Your only fear is unknowable death.²²

Let us return to the broader art historical contexts for Gao Xingjian's paintings. As the art historian Gao Minglu has recently revealed, an underground group of artists who painted mostly in the largely banned Post-Impressionist style and

who called themselves the Wuming (No Name) Group can be traced back to 1959.²³ As Kuiyi Shen, Julia Andrews, and Willow Weilan Chang have recently argued in their fascinating exhibition *Blossoming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974–1985*, the stories of other groups such as the Xingxing (Stars) and the Caocao she (Grass Society) suggest the continuing efforts of artists outside the state-dictated art establishments to express themselves during and after the Cultural Revolution.²⁴

There is a long tradition of anti-traditionalism, iconoclasm, and unorthodoxy in Chinese history in general and art history in particular. And Gao Xingjian's art exemplifies this long tradition. One may cite the well-researched phenomenon called the "untrammeled style" (*yipin*, or *i-p'in*) from the middle of the Tang Dynasty (618–906), through the Song Dynasty (960–1279), to the "wild and unrestrained" Zhe School of the mid-Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), to the "fantasies and eccentrics" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Zhu Da (Bada Shanren), Shitao, Gao Fenghan, Li Shan, and others. As Shimada Shujiro concluded in his celebrated essay "Concerning the *I-p'in* Style of Painting," written more than a half-century ago: "The *i-p'in* style began by emancipating painting from the orthodox mode which 'conformed to the object in portraying form' through the use of firm, fine brushwork; it stood in direct opposition to that mode. Whenever there arose a dissatisfaction with orthodoxy in painting, whenever something new was sought outside the pale, in whatever period, something of an *i-p'in* nature was apt to be born."²⁵ Although Shimada's characterization of the divide between the orthodox and the untrammeled modes may appear to be oversimplifying, it is helpful to us when we try to put the new Chinese ink painting in proper art-historical contexts. There is a long tradition of artists reacting against prevailing style, whether it be orthodox religious painting in the eighth century, Socialist Realism in the late twentieth, or, perhaps, even international "festival styles" seen in twenty-first century biennials, all of which are historical backdrops to the ink paintings by Gao Xingjian.

Gao Xingjian's style of ink painting, generally speaking, belongs to the great Chinese literati tradition of *xieyi* (literally "writing the idea"); this style allows him to create subtle, intuitive settings and characters that move in the limits between figurative and abstract art. His paintings explore the expressive possibilities of ink and washes; the nuanced light and dark shadings, subtle washes, and textures in his paintings are both dramatic and refreshing.

Both *yipin* and *xieyi* are important aesthetic categories in Chinese culture that emphasize spontaneity, suggestiveness, and personal expression. Gao Xingjian has clearly subscribed to these artistic ideals and his outlook on life and art has been greatly inspired by such Daoist classics as *Zhuangzi* (compiled sometime 4th–2nd c. BCE) and Chan (Zen) Buddhist classics as *Liuzu tanjing* [The platform sūtra of the sixth patriarch].²⁶ Thus, to understand the Chinese tradition in which Gao Xingjian's art has developed, perhaps one can go back to the encounter between Huineng (d. 713), the main character in Gao Xingjian's play *Snow in*

August, and Shenxiu (605?–706). Shenxiu, rival of Huineng and leader of Chan's Northern (Gradualist) School, expressed his enlightenment in a poem that centered on the image of a mirror:

This body is the Bodhi-tree.
The mind is like a mirror bright;
Take heed to keep it always clean
And let not dust collect upon it.²⁷

Notice in the first line that it is not just our mind that is to be enlightened, but our whole being. Then in the second line Shenxiu invokes the mirror. But why a mirror? Because the functioning of a mirror closely parallels the right functioning of our minds. First there is the quiet passivity of the mirror. It seeks no images; it has no desires and goals. It reaches out to no experience, but waits patiently for the experience to come to it. Then, at least to the extent that it is a good mirror, it instantly and accurately reflects and gives back the experience. It does not distort, discriminate, or make distinctions. It returns the same unified and complete experience that it receives. Finally, the mirror does not grasp and try to preserve and retain the experience. The experience always remains free to be itself, to change, and to move on, never being constrained by the mirror. Huineng, while agreeing with most of Shenxiu's insight, could not, however, accept the most basic image. He wrote:

There is no Bodhi-tree.
Nor stand of mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?²⁸

With the function of the mirror image Huineng has no complaint; his complaint is with the image itself, for it suggested that the mind was some permanent and lasting entity. Just as the reality reflected by the mirror was impermanent, momentary, and passing, so too was the mind. It was no more substantial than the experience it perceived. This concern for the essence of reality rather than its verbalization and conceptualization is well seen in a story of Huangbo (d. 850) and his teacher Baizhang (720–814) recorded in the *Chuandeng lu* [Transmission of lamps], compiled ca. 1004 by Daoyuan. One day Baizhang asked Huangbo, "Where have you been?" The answer was that he had been at the foot of the Daxiong Mountain picking mushrooms. Baichang continued, "Have you seen any tigers?" Huangbo immediately roared like a tiger. Baizhang then picked up an axe as if to chop the tiger. Huangbo suddenly slapped Baizhang's face. Baizhang laughed heartily, and then said to the assembly at the temple, "At the foot of the Daxiong Mountain there is a tiger. You people should watch out. I have already been bitten today."²⁹