

Through the Gauze Curtain: Glimpses of Cultural Revolution in Gao Xingjian's *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather*

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Abstract

Globalization and the emergence of Culture Studies have problematized modern Chinese literature in current academic discourse. Modern Chinese literature shares a strained yet potent relationship with politics. In the politically charged literary scene, deviance from the prescribed literary guidelines amounts to dissent. Personal style and imaginative perception, the pursuit of the literary art for its own sake, were deemed unessential in the production of fine literature in twentieth century China. Gao Xingjian's brand of individual aesthetics contravened the normative literary guidelines prescribed by the Chinese government and upheld the "voice of the individual". The first ethnic Chinese to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000, his works challenged the dictums on one's creativity and individuality imposed by the ruling ideology. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) provides a stimulating background for his collection of short stories, *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* (2004). This paper attempts to trace the effects of the Cultural Revolution in his apparently apolitical work of fiction.

Keywords- *Chinese literature, Cultural Revolution, Politics, Chinese Culture*

The first ethnic Chinese Nobel Laureate in Literature, Gao Xingjian has remarked in his Nobel Acceptance speech that, "literature is not concerned with politics but is purely a matter of the individual". However, like many other writers of his age, Xingjian could not escape the terrifying insanity of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The nexus between politics and literature forms a redundant pattern throughout Chinese literary history. Twentieth century, particularly, witnessed the roping in of literature as an ideological tool to disseminate political propaganda. Kirk A. Denton in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writing on Literature 1893-1945* concurs:

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Throughout the modern period aestheticism provided a realm in which those weary of the vicissitudes of politics could seek asylum. But in the context of the tradition of “literature conveying the Dao” and the heavy politicization of literature in China throughout the modern period, aestheticism was necessarily, in spite of itself, a political statement. (Denton 54)

It was in May 1942 that Mao Zedong delivered his famous “Talks on Literature and Art” (popularly known as the “Yan’an Talks”), which were to be the guidelines of the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) policy towards literature. Mao’s opening declaration at the inaugural session was: “This meeting has been called today for the purpose of fitting art and literature to perform faithfully functions of a component part of the revolutionary machine as a whole.” Gopal Mittal in his article, “*Yenan and the Palace Gates*”, identifies five features of post-Yan’an literature. Chinese writers were expected to:-

1. Accept the Communist ideology.
2. “Enter into” the life of the workers, peasants and soldiers.
3. Undergo ideological reform and re-education.
4. Give their works a form prescribed by the Party.
5. Work on subjects designated by the Party. (Priestley 44)

The debate on the relationship between literature and politics continued deep into the communist regime of China. Sometimes this issue was used by different factions of the CPC in power struggles. At times it was raised by the CPC itself when it was apprehensive of socio-political dissent ensuing from literature. Two such major political movements were:- The Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

The Cultural Revolution was a complex socio-political event that involved debates over culture and art, educational reforms, economic policies, the nature of political institutions, and, ultimately, the proper road to socialism in China. The purported goals of the revolution were to eradicate the remains of the so-called bourgeois ideas and customs and to recapture the revolutionary zeal of early Chinese Communism. The Party, which had hitherto been the agent of struggle, was now to be the target. Red Guards (a mass organization of Beijing students with *red-class* background into military groups) were designated by Mao Zedong as the vanguard in place of the party. In this way, Mao established a line of communication between himself and the masses that bypassed the party effectively sidelining his critics. In June 1966, nearly all Chinese schools and universities were closed

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as students devoted themselves full-time to Red Guard activities. Joined by groups of workers, peasants, and demobilized soldiers, Red Guards took to the streets in pro-Maoist, sometimes violent, demonstrations. They made intellectuals, writers, bureaucrats, party officials and urban workers their chief targets. During the Red Terror, the Red Guards subjected students and party workers belonging to the ordinary and bad-classes to humiliating struggle meetings, and sometimes, to physical abuse. Mao in his directive urged the destruction of the “four olds”: the “old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the exploiting classes”. The Destroy-the-Four-Olds Movement took the campaign out of the schools and into the streets. Bands of Red Guards roamed the countryside, vandalizing museums, knocking down old temples, ransacking bad-class homes to confiscate revisionist literature.

However, having apparently decided that the Red Guards were no longer leading the Cultural Revolution in the right direction, Mao shifted his support to the ordinary and bad-class students. These students immediately formed separate factions known as Rebel Red Guards. The Rebels turned the focus of the movement away from the bad classes and aimed the attack at top-level government and party leaders, a group that included many of the parents of the original Red Guard. The movement was now polarized into two factions with each faction believing that they were the only true defenders of the Maoist line: the opposing faction was the enemy to be overthrown at all costs. Eventually, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had to step in to establish firm control. The Rebel Red Guards, because of their suspicious class background, suffered in the campaign to “investigate class enemies” that marked the last phase of the Cultural Revolution. Many of them were sent to remote villages to undergo reform through labour. By its close, the Cultural Revolution had undergone so many twists and turns that almost every participating group had suffered.

HE Zhaotian in his article “Postsocialist History and the Paradigmatic shifts in Chinese literary and cultural criticisms”, notes that “Chinese literary theory and criticism between 1949 and 1976 can be characterized by a continuous attempt to graft Soviet-style Marxist aesthetics onto China and radicalise it” (Zhaotian 127). This aesthetic vision together with Maoist discourse stunted the creative impulse of the writer/individual: “Through the state’s monopoly of resources and even use of violence, this view was made the only legitimate voice in public. This scarring experience, combining political taboos and aesthetic taboos, left a permanent imprint on the collective memory of Chinese literary production” (Zhaotin 127).

During the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian was sent to a re-education camp where he burned several kilos of his manuscripts for fear of persecution. His writings clearly promoted freedom

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of expression, not just for the writer but also for the readers of fiction. His single-minded pursuit of these goals for the individual was a fierce reaction to the gross distortions of human thinking and behavior he had witnessed during the Cultural Revolution. Xingjian's short story collection *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* (2004) contains six stories: "The Temple", "In the Park", "Cramp", "The Accident", "Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather" and "In an Instant". These stories are generally about individual experiences seen in relation to larger contexts. Precisely detailed and delicately suggestive, they do not set out to tell a story. There is no proper plot as these stories are crafted more to evoke emotions than to tell a tale.

In "The Temple", the unnamed narrator and his new bride take leave from work for a honeymoon trip and impulsively stop over at a local town. Though the two are blissfully happy, they find the town's inhabitants and its Temple of Perfect Benevolence vaguely disquieting. The narrator's muted allusion to the Cultural Revolution—"It all felt so different from the time when we were graduates sent to work in the countryside" (9)—may explain their unease. The narrator keeps reiterating the fact that he and his bride "were truly happy". This may be due to his realization of his generation's unhappy state of affairs. Also, the emphasis on "were" suggests a different present. The narrator in a sweeping statement declares, "During those catastrophic years in this country, our families suffered through many misfortunes, and to some extent we still resented our generation's fate" (4). "The Temple" starts as a charming journey into the country with the newlyweds but quickly turns dark and melancholic.

"In the Park" is about a hushed meeting between two former lovers whose lives had diverged years before. The story, almost entirely in dialogue, conveys their nervous regret. In the blame game that follows, the man charges the woman for leaving him because of his father's tainted background. However, towards the end of the story the man says, "Neither of us is to blame. The mistakes of that era are to blame" (40). In the barrage of accusations and counter--accusations, suspicions and confessions that marked the Cultural Revolution years, many relationships were abruptly aborted.

"Cramp" describes the near-death experience of a lone swimmer at sea. The swimmer successfully makes it to the shore against all odds, turning danger into triumph. However, in the indifference of the life that swirls energetically around him, he does not find anybody to narrate his experiences to. His triumph, therefore, loses its significance. The lone swimmer can be regarded as representing the "individual" in his struggle to escape from the sea of "collective". The "individual" was successfully and systematically effaced during the revolutionary period and any expression of

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“individuality” was treated with reprimand and censure. Therefore, the lone swimmers triumph at sea is a highly challenging feat.

Xingjian explores the simultaneous enormity and anonymity of death in “The Accident”, when a man on a bicycle with an attached baby buggy rides, either carelessly or deliberately into a bus. The man is killed, but his young son survives. The story becomes in its telling all the possible stories inherent in various observers’ and bystanders’ partial accounts of what they have seen, and think they’ve seen. “The Accident” is a skilful demonstration of how a tragic death is a mosaic of different events based on point of view. The story is a critique on human apathy towards other people’s tragedy and loss. Xingjian provides us with insightful illustrations of the crowd behaviour which, with no qualms, transfers its sympathies from the dead man to the weeping driver. Interspersed in the report are covert attacks on the policies of the state: single-child norm, lax traffic management. The statement: “Traffic security personnel with red armbands have arrived and they are more savage than the police” (68) speaks volumes of the cruelty of the Red Guards.

In the title story “Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather”, Xingjian shows both the stillness and the movement of time, as a man sits watching a soccer game and thinking about his grandfather and his past. The past and present become intermingled, carrying us back to the man’s past in a village long gone. The story employs collages of memory and haunting daydreams to mourn the destruction of the narrator’s grandfather’s village. A “sparkling lake” has been paved over, and the river where the narrator and his grandfather used to fish has dried up. The narrator takes a trip down the memory lane and tries to recollect his childhood memories. He remembers how his grandfather’s shotgun, made of steel tubing, was confiscated as a lethal weapon during the book- burning era of the Cultural Revolution. The story can be considered as a paen to the past, challenging the Destroy-the-Old-Fours-movement.

“In an Instant” parades before a man sitting alone on beach the kaleidoscopic images of his childhood, youth, love life, and, perhaps his own impending death. Unlike the other stories, this story does not contain any allusions to the Cultural Revolution. This may be attributed to the fact that “In an Instant” was written in Paris in 1990, a year after his self-exile. Xingjian strongly believed at this point of time that his nostalgia for China had ended. However, he was wrong as he returns to it in his *One Man’s Bible* (2000), which was written to reveal, “... how the Cultural Revolution, the most radical manifestation of the Communist revolution in a century, first, and before making man an object of sacrifice, transformed him into a servant.”

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The Cultural Revolution had a colossal impact on the lives of the people. Chinese youth, whether they belonged to the conservative or rebel Red Guard factions, realized that they had been used as instruments in a power struggle between top-level politicians. Many of those who were its most active participants see it as a turning point in their lives, marking both their peak of idealism and faith and the beginning of their disaffection with the political system that had shaped them.

The Cultural Revolution impinged not only on the life of the individual, but also had drastic impact on the familial and societal structure. It resulted in the break up of several families as many youngsters were sent to work in the countryside or to undergo reform through labour. China's rigid one-child norm systematically effaced many kinship relationships (e.g.: brother-sister, uncle-nephew, aunt-niece etc). There were also many instances of the children complaining against their own parents to earn brownie-points from the officials. An atmosphere of acute mistrust permeated into the society. It was a common practice to incriminate friends and family members in the emotionally draining "confession sessions" organised by the party. Disrespect for tradition, irreverence for things past became widespread among people.

It is imprudent to compare or rationalise tyrannies; every tyranny is absolute and ultimately inconceivable for those who have not experienced its terror. The motives behind the Cultural Revolution, as a historical and political event, can be analysed, but the implications for those that were swept into its wave of collective madness are beyond comprehension.

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