

# reviews

## **The Spiritual Road is a Hard Road to Walk: Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible***

Translated by Mabel Lee: A Political Primer

Mark Major

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

This review considers *One Man's Bible* by Gao Xingjian, as translated by Mabel Lee. It looks at: an addressee's influence; events that took place during the Cultural Revolution in China (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s); and subsequent disillusionment.

### **Finding Oneself in Another: In Oneself, Finding Another**

*One Man's Bible* seems addressed to Margarethe, a character the author conceives himself as sleeping with early on in the novel. Meeting and spending a few days with him in Hong Kong prior to the territory's handover to Mainland China in 1997, she questions him (or listens to him talking) about his time as a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s), when he was working as 'a low-level editor' (158) in the city of Beijing. He reflects on personal events leading up to the Cultural Revolution (from his childhood), on his experiences during the Cultural Revolution, and on the disillusionment he suffered in its wake and with which he, as apparent author of the novel, is still trying to come to terms. The novel is not only descriptive, for instance, of violent interpersonal conflicts that took place during the Cultural Revolution, but also self-exploratory, with occasional recourse to dreams and narration that seems dream-like (due to the uncertainty of its contextualisation) as the author tries to understand (and, yes, to an extent, justify) his and others' actions during the Cultural Revolution. For the first third of the novel, chapters

outlining his relationship with Margarethe alternate with chapters in which he reflects on his experiences in China and, especially, during the Cultural Revolution. Margarethe listens, and occasionally draws out what he has to say: “Go on with your story.” She breaks the silence’ (95). After she leaves, returning to Europe, he retains her in his thoughts. On the day she departs, he accompanies her to the airport, later considering:

You have grown used to talking with her, and the words of your inner mind, when you are talking to yourself, always address her, what you want to say is for her to hear. She has deeply penetrated your feelings and thoughts. When you took possession of her body, she took possession of both your body and mind.(133)

As he wanders around Hong Kong, he thinks of Margarethe, hearing her voice:

Her deep throaty voice, her voluptuousness, her frankness, were tangible and, just like her strong body, aroused your lust, inducing memories with the aftertaste of pain, but filling those memories with a sensuousness that made them bearable. Her voice continued to excite you, and it was as if she were chatting softly right next to you, giving you her warmth and the fragrance of her body. Through her, your repressed lust was released, and recounting your memories to her brought both pain and joy. You needed to talk endlessly with her as you searched for those memories, and, while you were talking, a profusion of small forgotten details kept surfacing with increased clarity. (135-6)

He sees a gathering of worshippers with a portrait of Christ, and – with a touch of hubris insofar as he makes the comparison in the first place – he distinguishes himself from Christ, then considers once more Margarethe’s influence on his thoughts:

In any case, you are not Christ and do not have to sacrifice yourself to enlighten the world. Moreover, there is no chance of your being resurrected, so what is important is for you to live properly in this present world.

Once again, you are plunged into the darkness evoked by the sound of her voice. As if in a dream, with one foot heavy and one light, you stagger about in broad daylight through this noisy crowd while fresh and old memories weave together.

You say Margarethe—speaking to her in your mind—the story of the new people is terrifying, but you no longer need to wash your heart and change your face to cleanse your errors and misdeeds. The pristine kingdom of that brand-new society was nothing but a huge fraud. People did not understand, were confused, could not explain their own actions—that is, living human beings—were subjected to interrogation about themselves to such an extent that they lost the very basis for their existence.

What you want to say is that Margarethe does not need to purify herself, there is no need for her to repent, and, moreover, rebirth is impossible. She is, she is just like you! (137)

He realises Maragarthe is someone he can identify with and continues walking, seemingly possessed by her spirit or shadow<sup>1</sup>:

You should catch up on some sleep but are reluctant to go back to the hotel. She still pervades your senses (138)

You go down to the street and come to a movie theater, and, without finding out what is playing, you buy a ticket and go in. You need to be alone in the darkness, to be engrossed in your thoughts about her. (138)

Margarethe, you are calling out to a real woman, this is not just the sound of your inner mind. She has aroused your past, and it stands before your eyes. She is already fused with your memories, and you can't help wanting to retrieve both your fresh and almost forgotten memories. (139)

And later on in the novel:

You must live happily and fully. Oh, Margarethe! You're thinking of her again, it was she who got you to write this damn book that made you so wretched and miserable. (301)

### **Enter Politics: Recollections of the Cultural Revolution**

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<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of the novel, he uses the phrase 'spirt or shadow' (406, 408) to refer to the influence of Mao Zedong.

The author refers to 'that great catastrophe known as the Cultural Revolution' (151) and asks 'who could have foreseen the calamities and spiritual impoverishment this Cultural Revolution would bring?' (221). During the Cultural Revolution (beginning in the mid-1960s and carried on for around a decade), under the influence of Mao, according to the author, those wishing to demonstrate loyalty to the Party firstly tried to identify others as 'rightist' and then isolated them through criticism and (occasionally violent) punishment. At his workplace, after the son of a man ostracised is beaten up as he is trying to verbally defend his father and his father is, in turn, beaten up, the author's characterisation of himself in the past decides some sort of response is in order: 'Squashed in the crowd, he witnessed in silence what had happened, and in his heart he chose to rebel' (154). That night, he writes a poster and puts it up in his workplace; there is something heroic in his actions; some sort of heroic conception is guiding his actions:

The masses had to heroically speak out to overturn the verdicts on people branded as anti-Party.

In the empty corridor of the building, some old posters rustled in a draught; this sense of loneliness was probably necessary to support heroic action. (155)

At the same time, he realises putting up a poster defending those branded as anti-Party is somewhat of a gamble:

The impulse for justice sprang from a sense of tragedy, and he had been thrust into the gambling den, although at the time it was hard to say whether he wanted to gamble. In any case, he thought he had seen an opening and there was something of gambling with life in being a hero. (155)

In acting this way, he views himself as a hero and a savior:

As he trudged along the road crunching the ice, he felt as if he had a divine mission to save the world. (156)

After reading his poster, several others in the same workplace contact him and together they form a faction of new Red Guards to oppose the old Red Guards who have been harassing colleagues for supposedly being anti-Party; all this supposedly under the aegis of Mao Zedong, in accordance with whom the old Red Guards also claim to be acting. One of the members of the new Red

Guards states at their initial meeting: 'Those present today are core members of the Red Guard of our Mao Zedong's Thought!' (157). In their workplace, they find some support:

He was up early, and went to work not expecting to see poster responses pasted everywhere upstairs and downstairs. Suddenly, hero or not, he was indeed a fighter who was in the limelight. [...] Old Mrs. Huang, under investigation at the time, held his hand and would not let go. Tears streaming down her face, she said, "You have spoken the thoughts in the minds of the masses. You people are Mao Zedong's true Red Guards!" [...] No one knew that they were only five hastily assembled youths, and their suddenly becoming an unstoppable force was due to the fact that they also wore red armbands on their sleeves. [...] He, a low-level editor, had, in fact, become a prominent figure in this workplace building with its huge hierarchy of grades, and it was as if he was the leader. (158)

Between the two factions of Red Guards in the workplace, conflict continues. At a meeting to find culpability for wrongful investigations, the ostracised man and his son are manhandled again, the two factions of Red Guards face off on the brink of fighting one another, and the Party secretary (Wu Tao), who on the dais had been making a report on his actions in the recent past, finds himself turned upon and deposed:

The two groups confronted one another, each shouting slogans and on the brink of fighting. The meeting was a total shambles.

"Comrades, Red Guard comrades, Red Guard comrades on both sides, please go back to your seats—"

Wu was tapping the microphone but nobody took notice, and the cadres of the political department were too afraid to intervene. Everyone at the meeting was standing up and feverish with excitement. He was on the dais and somehow had grabbed the microphone from Wu's hand and was shouting into it, "If Wu Tao won't capitulate then let him be destroyed!"

The meeting instantly responded in agreement, and he took the opportunity to declare, "The Party committee no longer has authority to hold such meetings to intimidate the masses; if

meetings are to be held, they must be convened by us, the revolutionary masses!"

Below the dais everyone was clapping. He had ended the stalemate in the confrontation between the Red Guards and seemed to have become the leader needed by the unruly masses. (179)

However, the supremacy experienced by his faction (the new Red Guards or 'rebels') is temporary:

in February, after the New Year, the old Red Guards and some political cadres again organized a corps to oppose the seizure of power and smashed the workplace broadcasting station that was controlled by the rebels. The first armed conflict broke out between the two sides, and there were some injuries, but he was not present at the time. (194)

Eventually, the army is called in, and, after a long while and subsequent investigations, the Cultural Revolution as experienced in his workplace draws to a close.

### Hidden Meanings

He was criticized, luckily only at a class discussion, so it was not too serious. However, he had been taught a sound lesson: a person had to lie (142)

or speak with hidden meanings. When the punishment for speaking out is extreme, two alternatives are either to be quiet or to speak in very subtle (bordering on the subliminal) ways; to do so is ethically questionable and requires a deep understanding of culture by (a sharing of culture between) the speaker and his targeted audience (or a deep enough understanding of another person as may arise out of personal intimacy or, in this day and age, even online tracking and profiling). A relatively harmless (and humane) example of such communication is when he, surreptitiously in the night, leaves the May Seventh Cadre School he had been sent to to undergo reform-through-labor. In the dormitory, he tells the old man in the bed next to him that he is going to the lavatory:

He quietly told the old man he had diarrhea and was going to the lavatory. The underlying message was that should the night warden ask where he was, that was how to get rid of the man. (108)

Politically, however, as well as being ethically uncertain, such communication is dangerous. At a meeting at his workplace, a speaker says:

I just don't believe it! So many intellectuals have been crammed into this workplace of yours; can everyone assembled here really be so revolutionary? I'm not saying it's not good to have knowledge, I didn't say that. I'm talking about those two-faced counterrevolutionaries. In their writings, they use our revolutionary slogans, they put up the red flag to oppose the red flag, they say one thing, but mean something else! I reckon, they would not have the guts to openly jump out to present themselves as counterrevolutionaries. (51)

When the punishment for being deemed counterrevolutionary is violent, not having the guts to jump out is perhaps understandable. After the meeting, he realises some of his thinking might be counterrevolutionary and thus 'if he wanted to go on living he would have to wear a mask' (56). After being questioned on a discussion group he and some friends had held in a city park, he writes: 'all of you learned to wear a mask, and either extinguished your voice or else hid it deep at the bottom of your heart'(145); 'It was only after nine or ten o'clock in the evening, when you got back to your room and sat at your own desk by the light of your desk lamp, that you were able to lose yourself in reverie and write your own things: that was you'(81). When he visits a government office with a friend, he comes across some posters citing speeches of leaders that he reads as being full of 'hidden meanings':

Posters protesting against persecution and extracts of speeches by important officials covered the walls. The speeches of these Party Center leaders who had been newly appointed or had not yet fallen from power were full of malice and hidden meanings, and also contradicted one another. (161)

He senses 'hidden meanings' in speeches; various people are persecuted and doubts keep 'springing up in his mind':

From the leaders' speeches to various people organizations, he detected different views, hidden meanings. The many vehement

pronouncements changed continually, like pictures in a magic lantern. A day earlier, a leader could be interpreting Mao's newest directive, then, tomorrow or the day after, sure enough, the secret killing machine would fall on that leader, who would suddenly be transformed into an anti-Party criminal. His righteous indignation had cooled, and doubts kept springing up in his mind, (215)

### **In the Wake of the Cultural Revolution**

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, he turns to writing plays and fiction, and subsequently has works banned by the government. Eventually, he leaves China for a life abroad. Considering his actions during the Cultural Revolution, he expresses disillusionment:

Righteous indignation and political gambles, tragedy and farce, heroes and clowns, were created through people being manipulated. Blah! Blah! The high-sounding righteous words, discussion, and vilification, all proclaimed the words of the Party. People lost their own voices, became puppets, and could not escape the big hand behind, which controlled them.

Now, when you hear impassioned speeches, you secretly smile. Slogans calling for revolution and rebellion give you goose bumps, and as soon as heroes or fighters appear, you quickly step aside. (151)

Pronominally, he often separates himself at the moment of writing, in the narrational present, 'you', from himself during the Cultural Revolution, in the narrated past, 'he': 'You strive to collect memories. The reason he went crazy at that time was probably because the illusions he believed in had been shattered' (152). Now: 'You do not take on the sufferings of others, are not the savior of the world, you seek only to save yourself (147); 'You find retelling that period quite difficult, and for you now, he of that time is hard to comprehend' (148). As a final note, a reader may criticise parts of the novel for being lewd, and the novel as a whole for exhibiting a self-centredness – or unconcern for the reader: 'Your writing is only to bring pleasure and happiness to your life' (198). Moreover, when he writes about 'freedom', although admittedly the book is translated from Chinese and I am not sure what connotations the word may have in Chinese, he tends to idealise it, using a socially-unengaged understanding of 'freedom' that may be due to traumatic experiences that he



underwent during the Cultural Revolution that he now wishes to separate himself from. His ruminations on 'freedom' – abstract contemplations – run the risk of turning 'freedom' into one of the 'isms' he says he has now left behind (152). All in all, however, although at times disturbing, the book is well-written, albeit in translation, and is a fascinating view of the Cultural Revolution and the effects it had on one man and his social relationships.

Gao Xingjian. *One Man's Bible*. Translated from Chinese by Mabel Lee. London: Flamingo (HarperCollins), 2003.