

Some were seen as symbols of national achievement (bamboo and bricks), others – such as objects sent from Hong Kong – were associated with the enemy. Third, several chapters challenge the perceptions that China was a complete autarky or that its connections were limited to the confines of the socialist bloc. In reality, China was part of a global system; its international relations influenced people's everyday lives, from screenings of foreign films to food shortages exacerbated by the export of grain.

In addition to the variety of subjects covered, the richness of the book – and the pleasure derived from reading it – lies in the wide range of sources used: Party publications, popular media, general magazines, professional journals, comic books, technical manuals, as well as guidebooks, texts written by intellectuals, propaganda posters, films or customs regulations. The reader travels from rural to urban China, from construction sites to restaurant kitchens, from cinemas to car factories. This book confirms how important it is for historical research to draw on a wide variety of sources to capture the depth of everyday life.

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Calling for a New Renaissance

Gao Xingjian (edited by Mabel Lee; translated by Mabel Lee and Yan Qian).
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Calling for a New Renaissance, an edited collection of Gao Xingjian's recent essays, lectures and conversations with audiences in different cities including Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, Paris, Singapore, Milan and Hong Kong, can be considered as his attempt to expand his artistic vision of being without isms (*meiyou zhuyi*) into one that is universally shared by all writers and artists.

The book is organized into three main sections as “Why a new Renaissance?”; “Transmedia explorations”; and “The making of a new Renaissance man.” These section titles give the impression that Gao Xingjian is providing some sort of grand manifesto to revive the European High Renaissance for the purpose of “chart[ing] a path forward for humanity in the perplexing times of the present” (p. 27). However, Gao is aware that the rapid globalization of capitalism since the 20th century means a new Renaissance cannot be a carbon copy of the Renaissance that was largely limited to Western Europe between the 14th and the 17th centuries. Instead, the cultural work as part of Gao's conception of a 21st-century new Renaissance should carry on the innovative spirit of Renaissance figures like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, and push even further the boundaries of location, language, and most importantly, forms of expression (pp. 97–99). And the first step forward is an intimate “calling” for all writers and artists to continuously introspect about the conditions of artistic expression in any society, community and organization.

In the foreword, Jianmei Liu describes Gao Xingjian's intellectual treatises, including being without isms, as being analogous to “a modern Zhuangzi” who rejects “extreme ‘either/or’ mentality” and transcends all “worldly constraints, regulations, and limitations” (p. 2). As such, Gao's absolute state of spiritual freedom informs his entire body of work, which is characterized by formalistic



explorations of “in-between” expressions, such as the intermedial experimentation of “cine-poems” (p. 4). I would further add that the essence of being without isms is a never-ending pursuit of artistic freedom. Gao is constantly observant of the obstacles in realizing an expression that is not shaped by political, social, cultural and commercial forces. As Liu Zaifu reflects in the epilogue, Gao’s creative work provokes “an ‘awareness’ in readers that awakens their own similar experiences that thus transforms into conscious awareness” (p. 213).

Gao Xingjian observes that “the predicament of human life and the predicament of writers and literature are closely linked” (p. 32). Specifically, contemporary society is experiencing both an environmental crisis (global warming) and a spiritual crisis (commodification of the mind). However, if all writers can express themselves without the limitations of political and commercial influences, they will become part of “the next cycle of renaissance in literature and the arts” that provides inspiration for the aversion of such global calamities (p. 46). Gao’s actions appear to be inconsistent with his own proclamations, having accepted some politically charged funding and numerous honours throughout his career, including the Nobel Prize in Literature. But it is important to note that being without isms is fundamentally a frame of mind. As Gao remarks, although everyone lives within the confines of society, a writer can choose to “roam the skies freely like a heavenly horse in the spiritual realm” (p. 101). A writer can opt for literature and art that “transcends political utility and the political correctness of party or faction; it rejects the various ideologies that have proliferated since the twentieth century; and it certainly does not welcome the trendy tastes of mass consumerist culture concocted by the market” (p. 97).

Of particular significance is Gao Xingjian’s emphasis on an alternative approach towards creative production, one that focuses on acknowledging, rather than rejecting, previous norms and conventions. With reference to the long and turbulent 20th century, Gao observes how art has been dominated by Hegelian thinking, especially with its emphasis on struggling against the past. This has resulted in the rise of ideologies based on “interrogating and negating tradition,” and “the endless stream of anti-art, anti-drama, anti-painting, anti-novel, and eventually so-called metafiction” (pp. 149–150). Readers need to be reminded that Gao too has a tendency of vehemently criticizing the key ideas of major Western thinkers in an unsubstantiated manner. In his Nobel lecture, Gao described Friedrich Nietzsche as a “very egotistic philosopher,” whose notion of the *Übermensch* is responsible for “the blackest records in the history of humankind” (*The Case for Literature*, Yale University Press, 2007). If both Nietzsche and Hegel resist uniform readings, it appears more productive for Gao to focus on specific uses and abuses of Nietzschean and Hegelian ideas. Nevertheless, as a survivor of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Gao maintains that art should not be dominated by philosophy or ideology, especially one that considers that “the only mechanism for change is to overthrow the old” (p. 150). Instead of a negation of negation, Gao argues that art should be based on “learning and relearning” (p. 151).

The potential audience for *Calling for a New Renaissance* is not limited to Gao Xingjian scholars and world literature studies critics. While Gao’s main focus is the awakening of writers and artists to adopt a vision of being without isms he notes the importance of an “accommodating and tolerant” society (p. 92). In recent years, Gao has also directly and indirectly called for Taiwan to lead a “cultural renaissance” (*wenyi fuxing*) on the global stage. In a video message for opening ceremony of the newly established Gao Xingjian Centre at National Taiwan Normal University, Gao remarked that “if ancient Greece had given birth to Western civilization, why can’t Taiwan call for a new cycle of cultural renaissance?” (National Taiwan Normal University, 2021, translation my own). However, given the growing tensions between Taiwan, China and the West, is Gao’s call already too late for a world that is distracted by geopolitical matters? I imagine *Calling for a New Renaissance* can serve as a useful case study for courses in Chinese studies, Taiwan studies and International Relations.