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# NO MORE HEROES? THE CHINESE NOBEL LAUREATES THAT WEREN'T<sup>1</sup>

**Gregory B. Lee**

**IETT, University of Lyon (Jean Moulin)**

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Nowhere else in the modern world, with perhaps the exception of Latin America, has the idea of the intellectual, in the French sense, that is the Dreyfusard, contestatory, politically committed, been taken more seriously than in China.

In the China of the twentieth-century, it has above all been the writer who has felt obliged to intervene in the political arena to defend and protect the weak, and then after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party, to demand and defend fundamental human rights.

But in the Western popular imaginary, China represented at first the Yellow Peril, then the Red Menace, or in the more refined and cultivated imaginary, the exotic, a Far East as object of Orientalist fantasy, and later a utopian, yet still exotic, version of communism for those disenchanted by the Soviet variety. For over a decade now, when China has not been simply reduced to a populist everyday Zen philosophy, a source of palliatives in a post-ideological, faithless West, the Chinese have been represented as collectively responsible for violating the rights of the Tibetans, and for the worst excesses of economic globalization (whose crusading Western origins are now conveniently engulfed by a collective Western Alzheimer's).

Chinese writers are little known in the West, we "know" above all the poets of the seventh to ninth centuries, translated from the nineteenth century onwards by Western sinologists, we

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<sup>1</sup>First delivered as a paper at the "Viva Pinter" conference (22-24 March 2007), Université de Lyon - Jean Moulin .

are aware also of certain contemporary writers who write directly in English or other Western languages, or who have found enthusiastic translators interested in their work.

A single Chinese-language writer, naturalized French, has received the Nobel Prize for literature: Gao Xingjian. Gao went into exile even before the events of Tian'anmen in 1989, and eschewed straightaway the position of the writer as representative of the community. He had this to say in 1990:

I dislike this whole business of patriotism and nationalism. I think that at this point in history it constitutes, if not a reactionary ideology then, a conservative tendency. In real political life patriotism is the most reactionary of watchwords. The Nazis favoured this sort of *nationalisme*; the Communist Party also uses it. Conservative, reactionary governments everywhere, use this kind of watchword to trick people. So the original sense of patriotism has vanished. In fact I think this kind of watchword frequently, whether consciously or unconsciously, is used to trick people. The same could be said for the so-called "People" [*renmin*]. In this play I've written [*Fugitives*] I express this viewpoint. Politicos who aim to achieve a certain objective often speak in the name of the People. I think Chinese intellectuals should no longer use these concepts to express themselves. An intellectual only represents himself; he's better off avoiding speaking for the collectivity, representing the People, representing the motherland, saving the nation. I think nobody can save anybody. I personally don't think I can save anybody. If I still write it's to show that I exist. But there's also a sense to it, and that is if the Chinese intellectual can shake off this kind of blind nationalism, patriotism, jingoism, chauvinism that would be a liberation.... I think the Chinese intellectual needs an *indépendance absolue* [total independence], mentally, *spirituellement*, he needs a detached, independent attitude. I think Chinese intellectuals are not sufficiently mature. Why do they keep on going down the same old road, constantly engaging in revolution? It's precisely because the Chinese intellectual isn't mature enough.... He needs to engage in independent reflection, a reflection which would include Chinese politics and Chinese culture, a reflection on the current conditions faced by humanity. This is his first duty. Of course, you can also participate in the movement for democracy, I'm not against that, I think that needs to be done. But I don't feel the need to do that in the name of a group, I feel that would be a form of suicide for a writer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Recorded interview between the author and Gao Xingjian, 11 May 1990; translated by the author.

But Gao's willingness to discuss politics, even in this negative, anti-nationalist vein, disappeared straight after Gao had been ennobled, when he refused to talk about political matters completely.

A Chinese writer who has not, yet, received the Nobel Prize, but who has been "nominated" several times, is Bei Dao. Bei Dao, or Zhao Zhenkai, belongs to the Red Guard generation who fell foul of the Cultural Revolution and whose initial Maoist idealism turned rapidly to disillusion. A decade younger than Gao, Bei Dao and his peers, despite being offspring of the urban elite, were denied the university education from which Gao had benefited.

Bei Dao in his dissident poetry evoked those who died in the struggle for liberty of expression in the Tian'anmen Incident of 1976 that followed mass mourning and demonstrations in the wake of the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, who for the intellectual classes represented a now missing, liberalizing influence with the Communist hierarchy. In February 1989, Bei Dao launched a petition calling for the release of democracy activist Wei Jingsheng who had been incarcerated ten years earlier; the arrest of Wei Jingsheng having served as a warning to others that the Peking Spring of 1979 that Deng Xiaoping had not only tolerated but exploited to reinforce his grip on state power was now over. Bei Dao's petition, signed by 33 intellectuals, mainly writers, is now forgotten, just as the other acts and words of those demanding greater democracy in the 1980s. Indeed, the 1980s may be seen as the last stand of the intellectual, before the rise in the 1990s of the ubiquitous *homo economicus*.

Bei Dao has spent two decades out of China. Credence in his Nobel possibilities have waned and sinological interest has been displaced onto others. But Bei Dao has continued to embody a certain idea of the writer as public intellectual, speaking out in favour of civil

liberties and demanding the release of political prisoners. Bei Dao and his like-minded writers and scientists have also spoken out over the past twenty years against policies harmful to China's and the world's environment, thus giving the lie to the generalization that the Chinese are unconcerned with the question. Before its construction, he consistently spoke out against the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangzi River.

In September 1991, Bei Dao who, after his enforced exile following the events of 1989, had been living in Scandinavia, was invited by the Grupo de los Cien, an international environmental group of writers, artists, and scientists, to speak at a seminar in Mexico organized by the Mexican writer Homero de Aridjis. Bei Dao, whom I had known since the mid-1980s, knowing that I had some Spanish, asked me to accompany him. Bei Dao was to make a speech on the Three Gorges project which was meeting stiff resistance from dissident Chinese scientists at that moment in time.

It was planned that after the seminar we would visit another Nobel Prize winner, Octavio Paz and his American translator Eliot Weinburger. But there was a visa problem, not because of the Mexicans, but the Swedes. Bei Dao had the status of political refugee at the time, and his temporary travel document was about to expire. The necessary paperwork could not be done in time and the trip was cancelled. The text that I had translated for Bei Dao was pronounced at the seminar by a third party. In his speech, Bei Dao evoked the writers and scientists who were still resident in China and yet opposed the massive Yangzi engineering project that had been the dream of Mao Zedong:

Numerous are those who are obliged to keep silent, I therefore have a responsibility to represent them, to repeat their opinions, their concerns, their warnings.

It was neither the first nor the last time that Bei Dao had experienced difficulties over travel papers, and such problems were for Bei Dao and others like him a recurrent and painful reminder of the precarious fragility of their quotidian existence. During the 1980s, Bei Dao held a US "green card", and a document provided by the French authorities. Finally, after he had been refused the right to enter China in 2002 to visit his father who was fatally ill, Bei Dao acquired a US passport. His troubles, however, were far from over. Having been offered a post at Hong Kong's Chinese University in 2007, and having abandoned the position he occupied at an American university, and moved to the former British colony, he learned that the Peking authorities had vetoed his nomination as Professor of Poetry. He found himself once more homeless, jobless and penalized for his beliefs and his record.<sup>3</sup>

Bei Dao's activism, and the personal sacrifice it has entailed, accords well with our own notion of the combative intellectual. But is such a show of dissidence and courage alien to China before its invasion by the West? In fact, China has a long history of dissidence, and the habitual Western representation of China as immobile and anchored in a Confucian "tradition" of obedience ignores the existence of a counter-current of dissent whose history is as at least as long as that of Confucianism.

Against the totalitarianism of the Chinese empire, which conceived of itself not as 'China' but as the World, against the idea that Man could conquer and master Nature, there was the everyday existence of the cultivated individual, the *literatus*, who was often a disgraced functionary banished from the court, such as the poet Su Dongpo (Su Shi; 1036-1101) sent into exile more than once for expressing openly his criticisms of the government. Su Dongpo, as many dissidents to this day, was an avid reader of Zhuangzi, the Taoist philosopher who lived 2,300 years ago.

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<sup>3</sup> A year later Bei Dao was allowed a work permit and took up his poet, but his position remains precarious.

The stereotypical impression of Taoism as a sort of obscurantist oriental wisdom has been regurgitated with much eloquence by such post-modern public intellectuals such as Maffesoli. But, Zhuangzi's reflections were based on a meticulous and scrupulous observation of the environment and of natural processes. Moreover, Zhuangzi despised bureaucratic government and was a mordant and lucid critic of the simplistic political philosophy of Confucius. For over two millennia Taoism has inspired those who have resisted totalizing power, and the writings of Zhuangzi remain instructive manuals for those who are interested in the ecological future of our planet.

In the culture of the modern Chinese dissident, we can trace a convergence of the idea of the intellectual *à la Zola* and the, conscious or sub-conscious, heritage of Zhuangzi, already so modern two thousand years ago.

At the Viva Pinter conference in Lyon, I was asked to discuss what the Nobel Prize represented for the Chinese, as if it represented something else for the Westerner. But, in fact, what the Nobel Prize symbolizes for the Chinese is what it represents for the rest of the world. There are years when the Nobel Prize is attributed to a writer who has consecrated her or his life to building up a literary corpus, often as a hermit-like individualist, and then there are years when the prize is discerned to those who have denounced collective injustice, who have promoted what George Orwell named so perspicaciously "common decency", that is the minimum that separates us from barbarity.

When Gao Xingjian was awarded the Nobel Prize some saw it as long-awaited recognition of the achievements of a modern Chinese literature crafted and constructed over the twentieth century on the foundations of a north Chinese vernacular. Others saw it as a piquant slighting of the Chinese government, for Gao was a writer who had chosen to distance himself from

China. And yet Gao was no militant dissident acting for a common cause, but rather someone who refused political commitment and collective action. Thus, many were those who were disappointed that the first Nobel Prize bestowed on a Chinese-language writer should have been awarded to Gao Xingjian.

The government would have preferred a writer resident in China, the dissidents would have preferred someone more politically prominent and committed. But would such a choice have been possible? I think that, without flattering the Chinese authorities, and without attempting to please Chinese dissidents, the essential cultural, social and political role of the Chinese writer in twentieth-century China would have been recognized had the prize been offered to Ba Jin, grand old man of modern Chinese letters, and outstanding political idealist who died at the age of a hundred in 2006.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Ba Jin had been seduced by anarchist thought; a tendency as strong as communism in China, as it had been in Europe before the nineteenth-century triumph of Marxism. Ba Jin had written the novel *Family*, denouncing the Confucian feudal family order in which the patriarch condemned the young to a crippling obedience. The novel was the key to the intellectual awakening and politicization of China's urban youth. Ba Jin continued to fight injustice all his life, and during the 1980s defended non-orthodox writers, and questioned the anti-humanist policies of the authorities; he also spoke out in favour of the young poets who published in samizdat reviews. Ba Jin, just as René Char whose centenary has just been celebrated, is one of those who deserved the Nobel Prize. They deserved it not for having put literature at the service of politics, but for having enmeshed, as did Pinter, the logic of the humanist with that of the modern writer.



The Viva Pinter conference and associated events in Lyon in the early spring of 2007, honoured not only Harold Pinter, but also those writers, holders of the Nobel Prize such as Orhan Pamuk, or not, who practice a certain humanist idea of the position and responsibility of the writer.

Recently, the French historian Michel Winock wrote that "the Dreyfusard model" of the intellectual was now obsolete. If that is so, where, beyond the mirage of spectacular politics, will the world look for the symbolic voices of reason, ready to demand and defend democratic rights and human dignity that Pinter, Pamuk, and Bei Dao have thus far embodied?