

Eyes on the Prize

Lovell, Julia. 2006. *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 248 pages, ISBN 978 0 8248 3018 2.

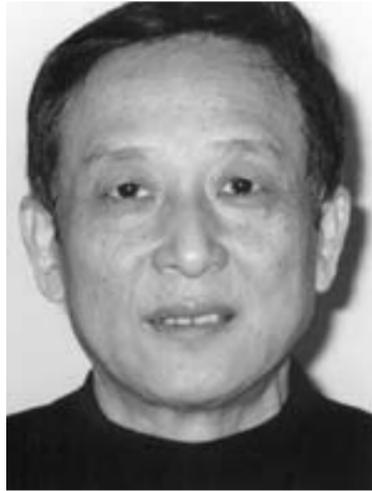
Kerry Brown

Back in the mid-1990's, I was based in Inner Mongolia in China. In a medium-sized book shop in a small provincial town, I remember coming across a multi-volume edition of the main works of all of those awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, translated into Chinese. The series fascinated me because, even with the English version supplied, I was unable to work out who many of the Laureates were. Julie Lovell's study of China's particular experience of aspiring to, and winning, Nobel Prizes, makes clear that, especially in the field of Literature, the decisions of the Stockholm-based committee have sometimes been palpably political – choosing Winston Churchill as Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1953 – or deliberately strategic. Exiled playwright and novelist Gao Xingjian was awarded the prize in 2000. As Lovell explains, he ticked a number of useful boxes: he was Chinese; wrote experimental, obscure literature; he was an émigré and had attracted a small but devoted band of academic followers in the West who vouched for his intellectual authenticity. Despite his relative obscurity, Gao Xingjian was to become China's first, and so far only, winner of the Prize.

'Nobel Prize fever'

'The Politics of Cultural Capital' captures an interesting cluster of issues, and it is surprising it has taken this long for someone to look at the subject more closely. The Nobel Prize, in whichever discipline it is awarded, is in some sense an expression of Western commendation, and perhaps even an imposition of Western standards and ideals. But its allure has been reciprocated. Since the 1950s, six ethnic Chinese have received Prizes, however, all of them were based abroad. As a result, there's been a sustained attempt in China over the last two decades to campaign for and secure Nobel Prizes for mainland scientists, economists and artists, (what Lovell calls 'Nobel Prize fever'). This odd synergy between the Nobel Committee, (implicitly representative of Western cultural values), and the PRC (half loathing, half desiring this recognition from outside), captures many of the paradoxes of modernism in China. The recurring issue of how much China can, in its transformation and reconstruction, 'use foreigners for China's good' (*weizhong liwai*). Finding the balance between maintaining elements intrinsic to its own identity while also exploiting the advantages of foreign-inspired modernisation without being overwhelmed by them. The tension between these competing urges has run throughout China's history in the last two centuries.

Gao Xingjian, while being most definitely Chinese (despite now being a resident of France, he lived in China till he was 47) was certainly not what the Chinese cultural apparatchiks and leaders had in mind during their years of lobbying as a suitable recipient. They would have desired someone like the great Qian Zhongshu, or Ba Jin, or



Gao Xingjian, China's first, and so far only, Nobel Prize winner.

more recent writers like Wang Meng. An obscure, exiled writer and painter whose most significant work in China had been a Beckettian performance art piece about people waiting for a bus in Beijing that never turns up, (*Bus Stop*, 1981), was certainly not what they felt represented the best their literary culture had to offer. The *People's Daily* greeted the announcement of the prize in 2000 with a snuffy 'this is politically motivated' statement. To this day, Gao's works are not available in mainland China and his profile there is minimal. It would be interesting to see if an updated version of that series I came across in the mid-1990's has a gap covering Gao's period.

Literature, more than the sciences, was an area of particular aspiration, but also

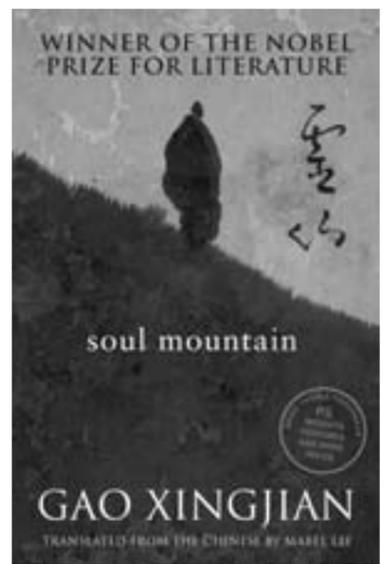
very specific problems, between China and the West. Lovell gives a very good overview of the huge differences in understanding on both sides. The consensus in the West, at least until very recently, was simple: Chinese classical literature, of course, contained some of the great works of human culture. But in the last half century, its literary products have been a 'busted flush', poleaxed by Maoist realism, and politico-literary constraints. This perception has been compounded by the generally lamentable quality of translations available in the West. There is nothing on a par with the excellent products published in Japan, (by, among others, Kodansha Press), disseminating the best that contemporary Japanese culture can offer. For many years the best Westerners could expect from China were yellowed, bulky, stolid tomes issued from the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. These lengthy attempts to articulate a Chinese cultural position, (in the hope of it being seen as credible by Westerners), more often than not ended up with works that came across as slightly bastardised – neither Chinese nor Western – using narrative devices and techniques from one culture and characterisation and context from another. This was hardly helped by a ten year shut down during the Cultural Revolution in which hardly anything was published. In the 1980s, the great market reforms introduced a similar phenomenon in literature – follow the market, go where the money can be made, (witness the honourably

unprincipled career of Wang Shuo), and keep well clear of politics.

A celebration of obscurity

Lovell looks too at the careers of those Chinese writers who left China and tried to articulate positions in exile. People like Bei Dao and Yang Lian and the Misty Poets. While they certainly found an audience of sorts, as Yang Lian noted, they ended up being branded wholly on their being exiles, expected to produce further proof of the unending horror of the Beijing regime for their western audience; commodifying and promoting their own pain to get on. This limited the ways in which they were received, and meant that they worked within a straight-jacket that was placed on them as soon as they were seen as Chinese poets working outside China.

The constellation of competing problems, and desires and ambitions was unlikely to have a good ending. In fact, the Committee's choice of Gao Xingjian in 2000 was probably less political than it might at first appear. Gao was someone who celebrated his obscurity (creating his own ideology of 'Not I-ism'), took few public positions on political issues, and whose main work, *Soul Mountain*, (first published in English in 2001) was primarily a narrative of self-exploration – what Lovell amusingly calls a 'spermatic tour' of modern China; more introspection than declaration of a political manifesto. He had a devoted but small following in Europe, had not been part of any distinctly 'exiled' groups, and was unconnected to any



Soul Mountain, more introspection than declaration of a political manifesto.

prominent dissident. Choosing poet Bei Dao, perhaps, or other higher profile exiled writers would have sparked even more umbrage from the cultural apparatchiks in Beijing. Gao Xingjian simply baffled most people inside and outside China.

There was an extra dimension to all of this, and though Lovell doesn't deal with it in any detail, it impacted on the whole issue of awarding the Nobel Prize to China. That was the internal workings of the Nobel Committee itself, where only one of the members, Goran Malmqvist, was a Chinese specialist. Lovell alludes to the fact that in the last few years, the Committee have almost been seeking out 'non-Western' recipients. But there is a big question mark about how much these decisions are almost gestural, or based on any general principles of literary judgement. In its early years, the Committee sought for works which affirmed 'universal values'. That meant ignoring writers like James Joyce, Joseph Conrad and Henry James for a swathe of others whose names are now hardly remembered. Such 'universal values' have more complex currency these days, and in trying to accommodate other cultures the Committee has been pushed into making some maverick choices. There is also the final question of just how meaningful these prizes ever are. That, however, should be the subject of another study.

Lovell has picked a good pressure point between Chinese and non-Chinese understanding. Like the awarding of the 2008 Olympics to Beijing, the symbolic import of a Nobel Prize and the 'cultural capital' it brought was to be judged worthy of a long hard campaign. While the Olympics seem to have paid off, (we will have to wait until the summer of 2008 to see if it really is the case), the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded in 2000 put paid, at least temporarily, to aspirations in that direction. The bigger question remains: just how far, in the 21st century, the PRC can translate its immense economic growth and soft power into hard power and a positive cultural influence that is recognised and understood outside of China. That involves the issues of nation branding that most other nations are also grappling with. <



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