

MA JIAN AND GAO XINGJIAN:
INTELLECTUAL NOMADISM AND EXILIC
CONSCIOUSNESS IN SINOPHONE LITERATURE

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It's part of morality not to be at home in one's home...
For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from the Damaged Life*

Even though literary creation may touch upon politics and society, I think it is more accurate to say it is 'to flee', not to 'intervene', so as to resist the pressure of society on oneself and to release one's spirit. Thus I think it is best for the writer to stay on the margins of society so that he can silently observe and reflect, and then immerse himself in this cold literature.

Gao Xingjian, "Cold Literature"

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, many intellectuals, students and artists have left China and headed to the West for a different kind of life. This intellectual migration reached a peak in the months following June 1989, when the Tiananmen democratic movement was crushed amidst bloodshed. Student leaders, public intellectuals, dissident writers and artists fled to Hong Kong, Australia, Europe and North America to escape the ensuing political persecution. In the years that followed, thousands of Chinese overseas students and scholars were granted political refugee status in the West. The result was the biggest intellectual diaspora in modern Chinese history.

This mass diaspora of intellectuals has been vocalized through many forms of life narrative and literary works. Most noticeable has been the sudden flourishing of personal memoirs and autobiographical histories in English by Chinese writers, ranging from Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* and Wu Ningkun's *A Single Tear* to Shen Tong's

Almost a Revolution. These publications have benefited from extensive support in the media and academia as well as broad public attention from both foreigners and overseas Chinese communities. In the literary field, a new wave of diaspora literature appeared and a Chinese literary exile community was formed on the peripheries of the Chinese cultural linguistic center. In particular, a historically situated and politically engaged exile literature gained full expression. With the effective advocacy of prominent literary figures such as Bei Dao, Gao Xingjian, and Liu Zaifu, and with university campuses and academic conferences offering themselves as bases, and literary anthologies and journals such as *Today* and *Tendency* providing sites for public expression, this literary exile community is reminiscent of a Chinese Samizdat/Tamizdat movement.¹

In the new millennium, while many literary exiles have returned to China or given up their creative writing completely, others have turned their once-temporary exile into a permanent existential state. Writers and poets such as Gao Xingjian, Bei Dao, Yang Lian and Ma Jian find that living abroad not only provides them with a creative space sheltered from political censorship and the more beguiling temptations of the market, but also gives them an alternative perspective on literature, identity and their homeland.² Through their transnational existence and writing, these Chinese writers have been able to live out the contested and paradoxical relationships between the individual and the state, between personal writing and national trauma, and between political engagement and intellectual alienation, and have provided new evidence for the emergent phenomenon of Sinophone literature, “literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China, as distinguished from ‘Chinese literature’—literature from China” (Shih 29).

This paper examines the exilic experience and nomadic discourse in the lives and works of Gao Xingjian and Ma Jian, two prominent literary figures who have lived outside China since the late 1980s. Since his emigration to France in 1987, Gao Xingjian has adopted Paris as his home and travels all over the world to promote his works. However, he has consciously stayed away from Mainland China and on various occasions has expressed his determination to live as a member of the diaspora. Despite his persistent advocacy of an apolitical “cold literature,” the controversy surrounding the Nobel Prize for Literature that he received in 2000 put Gao Xingjian in the international spotlight as one of the most “political” writers in world literature. Ma Jian, a younger writer, also left China for Hong Kong in 1987 and continued his flight in 1997 when Hong Kong returned to Chinese control. He spent a couple of years as a sojourner in Germany, then moved with his British partner to the UK and settled there. His few short visits to China (including one on the eve of the June 4, 1989 events) gave him more of a sense of repulsion rather than a feeling of belonging or returning home, and his recent literary works, often published simultaneously in Chinese and English or other languages, have become increasingly politically engaged and controversial.

While these two authors write primarily in Chinese, their works are still banned

in mainland China, and their influence in world literature has been enlarged through translation of their works. Their exilic writing provides new source material for the study of literary exile and nomadism at the turn of the 21st century. However, previous study of these two writers, especially Gao Xingjian, has largely been conducted in the context of political dissidence and exilic writing against the Chinese Communist Party-State. This constrains, to a large degree, the possibility of exploring the broader meanings of their writing beyond the political dimension, a pigeonhole which, at least in Gao's case, he strongly resists being assigned to. One of the most evident omissions resulting from this narrow political reading is the universal nomadic experience and discourse in their writing, which suspects and challenges *any* forms of power formation and hegemonies, not just those in China. This nomadic discourse, in my opinion, distinguishes the work of these two writers from mainstream contemporary Chinese literature and constitutes their unique contribution to world literature.

128 I therefore propose to read Gao and Ma's writings in the light of the recent theoretical development of the concept of nomadism as both experience and aesthetics (Aldea). Based on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "de-territorialization" and "nomadic traveling," feminist and post-colonial studies have found that nomadism is "both a theoretical option as well as an existential condition" (Braidotti 22) in discussing the post-modern subject and experience. Rosi Braidotti in particular identifies nomadism as "the kind of consciousness that resists setting into socially coded modes of thought and behavior" (26) and therefore provides useful alternative figurations in negotiating with many different linguistic and cultural affiliations in the post-modern globalized world. The intricate relationship between nomadism, intellectual tradition and writing is also frequently exploited and expressed by critics and writers such as Said (in his Reith lecture "Intellectual Exile", 1993) and Rushdie (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992), and has inspired much emergent scholarship on exilic literature and literary nomadism (Miller; Kleespies; Harrington).

It is in within this theoretical conception of literary nomadism that I will discuss the image of the wanderer and the nomadic thought represented by Gao and Ma. Using Gao Xingjian's autobiographical novels *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*, 1990) and *One Man's Bible* (*Yi geren de shengjing*, 1999), and Ma Jian's *Red Dust* (*Hongchen*, 2001) a travel journal, and *Beijing Coma* (*Routu*, 2009) a novel, as my primary texts, I will particularly focus on the nomadic experience and the aesthetic construct of the wanderer in these autobiographical and fictional writings as a basis for deciphering a new relationship between the Chinese intellectual and the state in the 1980s and 1990s. I will first demonstrate how in their autobiographical writing the experience of internal migration and intellectual alienation becomes embodied in the image of a wanderer in the Chinese wilderness. By examining the spatial and symbolic construction of this "wilderness," in *Soul Mountain* and *Red Dust*, I argue that for these writers, nomadic consciousness and intellectual alienation germinated long before their physical departure from China. I will then use Gao's novel *One Man's Bible* to trace the route of this emergent intellectual nomadism on both historical

and global dimensions. I argue that Mao's totalitarianism, and especially the political and intellectual suppression of the Cultural Revolution, has exerted a long-term traumatic impact on Chinese intellectuals, both psychologically as well as spiritually. This haunting experience provides the central theme of the vast majority of contemporary Chinese exilic literature, and is internalized into intensities and affective forces shaping the nomadic subject. Finally, I will discuss the nomadic vision of body and existential strangeness in Ma Jian's novel *Beijing Coma*. I contend that Ma Jian's literary discourse combines political commitment with intellectual nomadism and presents the individual body as a frontier for de-territorialization from "living Maoism" or any form of "micro-fascism" (Deleuze and Guattari 214) that still endures to the present.

1. TWO WANDERERS FROM THE 1980S: *RED DUST* AND *SOUL MOUNTAIN*

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The old bus is a city reject. After shaking in it for twelve hours on the potholed highway since early morning, you arrive in this mountain town in the South. In the bus station, which is littered with ice-block wrappers and sugar cane scraps, you stand with your backpack and a bag and look around for a while...You can't explain why you are here. It happened that you were on a train and this person mentioned a place called Lingshan. (Gao, *Soul Mountain* 9-10)

I board the steam train to Urumqi and watch the red walls of Beijing slip away. This time I am not travelling as a Party journalist on assignment to the provinces. I have left my job and packed a change of clothes, a notebook, two bars of soap, a water bottle, a torch, a compass, two hundred yuan, a wad of rice coupons, my camera and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. My old life recedes into the distance and my heart races with the train as we rattle towards China's far west. (Ma, *Red Dust* 61)

It is no coincidence that both Gao Xingjian and Ma Jian chose the form of travel literature for *Soul Mountain* and *Red Dust*, one fictional, one factual, to recount their experiences of the 1980s. Written between 1982 and 1987, *Soul Mountain* is loosely based on a real five-month journey in 1983, during which Gao travelled over 15,000 kilometres through China. The journey resulted from Gao's sense of personal crisis after one of his experimental plays was banned and soon afterwards he was wrongly diagnosed with cancer. During this journey, Gao's search for a primitive forest in China's South West turns into a spiritual pilgrimage or quest for some kind of inner revelation. Similarly, *Red Dust*, written in the late 1990s and early 2000s after Ma Jian left Hong Kong to settle in the UK, also looks back at the China of the early to mid-1980s. The autobiographical plot describes Ma quitting his job as a photographer journalist at the All-China Worker's Union and embarking on an "illegal journey" to seek spiritual freedom.³ It is no surprise that in both books, the year 1983

is experienced as a time of spiritual departure. The “anti-spiritual pollution campaign” was inaugurated in that year, and once again a political witch hunt targeted Chinese intellectuals, especially writers and artists who had expressed their critical views too openly or simply engaged in individualistic lifestyles that jarred with the moral guardians of society. Both Gao Xingjian and Ma Jian came under direct attack in Beijing, and flight was their chosen solution. This flight from the political center in search of an alternative unfettered landscape subsequently became the dominant image and central theme of *Soul Mountain* and *Red Dust*. Read together, these two works serve as precious historical documents for the emergence of a nomadic consciousness and nomadic lifestyle among some Chinese intellectuals and artists during the immediate post-Mao period, a precursor to the spread of the intellectual diaspora overseas in the late 1980s.

By nomadic consciousness and lifestyle, I refer to the ideological and intellectual disengagement and alienation felt by Chinese intellectuals, writers and artists who were no longer able to be at home in their normal community as state employees. Consequently they sought alternative intellectual sources and a spiritual homeland in their imaginations. Though most of them were still physically situated within China in the early 1980s, they sought different ways to escape and withdraw spiritually from mainstream Chinese society. From the mass translation and introduction of Western philosophy, literature, and radical sociopolitical thought to underground writing and publishing, adopting a free-wheeling lifestyle, and developing clandestine social networks and gatherings, these intellectuals expressed their alienation from the political system, state surveillance and narrow social conventions which disillusioned and repelled them.⁴

Red Dust starts by painting a stark picture of the unbalanced power relationship between intellectuals as individuals and the all-seeing state. Even cultural activities are viewed as a form of rebellion or challenge to the state’s hegemony: “In China, where politics is the only religion, people can only find their so-called way in life along narrowly prescribed paths. For me, art is an escape from this: it relieves the boredom and makes life seem slightly more bearable” (*Red Dust* 40). The narrator’s rebellion and protest takes the form of “illegal” social gatherings of bohemian young artists and writers in Ma Jian’s cramped residence at 53 Nanxiao Lane. They exchange misty poetry, display their experimental art works, make heated comments on political and cultural affairs, drink, dance, and listen to “unwholesome” music, all under the neighborhood committee’s watchful eyes and frequent harassment by public security officers. Ma Jian, then a photographer journalist employed by the All-China Worker’s Union, finds his identity slipping away from his own understanding, as everyone around him sees him in a different light: “...my painter friends think I am a diehard conservative; my writer friends think I am a man of a loose morals. In Jushilin Temple I am a quiet disciple; in the propaganda department I am a decadent youth. Women call me a cynical artist; the police call me a hooligan” (*Red Dust* 41).

The social pressure gradually closes in and Ma finds himself besieged from all

directions. In his work unit, his “lax and freewheeling lifestyle and liberal attitudes” make him an obvious target in the “anti-spiritual pollution campaign,” and following denunciation by his boss, which results in his colleagues shunning him, he is forced to write a self-criticism and is repeatedly taken into detention and interrogated by the public security bureau. This overpowering persecution eventually penetrates the most private sphere of his life, when his wife leaves him and forbids him to visit their daughter, as he is a “dangerous political criminal.” Eventually, Ma declares, “I had nothing left and no one to hang on to” (*Red Dust* 55). Ma finally decides to take to the road and become a wandering spirit freed from any state and public commitments: “Beijing felt like a prison when I escaped. I wanted to go as far away as possible, scatter myself across the wilds, spend all my new-found freedom. I needed to empty my mind” (*Red Dust* 58).

Here “the essential strangeness of alienation from emotion and from social life” (Wolff 5) is clearly experienced as a form of passive resistance to a seriously demeaning power with which no individual has the means to struggle, a micro-fascism or “scattered hegemony” (Grewal and Kaplan). The one way out is an “intrinsic de-territorialization” (Harrington 8), that is, refusing any center and fleeing from all power formations.

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The “wilds” in Ma Jian’s *Red Dust* comprise an immense living space of grass-roots China situated on the periphery: “the West” and “the South.” Ma Jian treads his path from Western region rural Gansu and Qinghai, through towns in Sichuan and Guizhou, and then down to the booming land of the new economy in Shenzhen and Guangzhou and finally to the border provinces of Yunnan and Tibet. Along the way, he experiences examples of nature’s extreme beauty and also cruelty, meets the people who live on the margins of the state and at the very bottom of its power structure, and feels the impending social changes and popular movements that will turn the Communist regime on its head. This “other” place is presented as open spaces that have no routine, no fixed identities or conventional relationships; it is a site for Ma Jian to reposition himself in relation to the state, the people and “a country in ferment.” One revealing detail repeated several times in the book is that Ma has to use fake official documents to “prove” his legal identity and seek accommodation along the road. In other words, he is an illegal drifter who has left the center and become one who mocks power, a fugitive from the state. Frequently comparing this journey with his previous purposeful trips as a government journalist, Ma sees this self-inflicted exile as an aimless, spontaneous and distancing “inward journey.” He finds that this nomadic feeling of homelessness and wandering is simply a more obvious example of a much broader collective state of intellectual alienation, a sense of internal exile that he shares with like-minded friends scattered all over China.

A flight into the wilderness is also the main plot of *Soul Mountain*, only this flight is given more historical and metaphorical significance. The title of the novel suggests that contemporary intellectuals are sojourning pilgrims without theological content, searching for their own soul mountain (within themselves). In the novel,

Soul Mountain is located in a place far from human activities, and the search for Soul Mountain is expressed as an existential desire to return to nature: “Life for me once again has a wonderful freshness. I should have left those contaminated surroundings long ago and returned to nature for this authentic life” (*Soul Mountain* 21). Many scholars have also observed that in *Soul Mountain*, environmental destruction is examined against the backdrop of the hegemonic domination of an orthodox culture over other Chinese traditions. Gao “makes the link between the disappearing forests and disappearing cultures explicit,” Moran claims. “The hillsides denuded of forest are symbols of the way in which the Maoist revolution and socialist modernization eliminates the cultural space for the survival of myth, mystery, and folk culture” (Moran 220). Jeffrey Kinkley points out that Gao Xingjian’s literary vision of *Soul Mountain* shares much in common with the works of Shen Congwen and Qu Yuan, not just because they all describe China’s southern frontier and its alternative cultural tradition (the lore of non-Han ethnic groups, folk songs, native religions, shamanism), but more in the sense that their works represent a questioning and criticism of “a bureaucratic and oppressive Chinese north” from a position of “internal self-exile” (Kinkley 142).

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Gao’s novel thus presents another kind of “wandering,” not just physical but also spiritual and metaphysical. The route of this nomadic subject is embodied in two intertwined and mirrored journeys between “I” and “you.” While the former’s adventure through a natural reserve in search of a “primeval forest” and “wild Man” has some realistic traits, the latter’s quest for Soul Mountain in the mythical landscape of Southwestern China, with its non-Han folk cultures and customs, is more metaphorically located. The symbolic meaning of Soul Mountain is thus related to both the search for cultural roots and self-discovery.

The metaphysical journey toward self-understanding is embodied in Gao’s extreme experimentation with the form of the novel. In order to capture the highly fluid existence of selves and subjectivities, Gao gives the autobiographical narrator three forms or perspectives represented by the pronouns “You,” “I” and “He,” and structures this internal journey through the dialectical relationships between these different subjectivities—with “you” appearing in odd-numbered chapters and “I” in even-numbered chapters, and “he” appearing only towards the end of the book.⁵ And throughout the narrative, there are many places where the autobiographical protagonist/narrator “I” engages in dialogues with his other selves, pondering on self-identity, relationships, reality and fiction, such as this lengthy passage in chapter 52:

You know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my loneliness. You know that this loneliness of mine is incurable, that no-one can save me and that I can only talk with myself as the partner of my conversation.

In this lengthy soliloquy you are the object of what I relate, a myself who listens intently to me—you are simply my shadow.

As I listen intently to myself, which is you, I let you create a she, because you are like me—you also cannot bear the loneliness and have to find a partner for your

conversation...

In your Spiritual traveling, you wander all over the world together with me following my own thought. The more we travel, the closer we become, until unavoidably you and I merge and are inseparable. At this point there is a need to step back and to create some gap. That gap is he. He is the back of you after you have turned around and left me...

Fiction is different from philosophy because it is the product of sensory perceptions. If a futile self-made signifier is saturated in a solution of lust and at a particular time transforms into a living cell capable of multiplying and growing, it is much more interesting than games of intellect. Furthermore, it is the same as life and does not have an ultimate goal. (*Soul Mountain* 340-44)

Through these dialogues between multiple forms of self, the narrator, a nomadic subject, while travelling afar to find peace and a home in the natural world, is also “roaming discursively” through his own internal landscape. And by the end, these two journeys, external and inward, merge in the realization that *Soul Mountain* is only as real as the imagination, just as the ultimate meaning of fiction need not refer to an external reality but is primarily self-reflective.⁶ “For authors who lack ‘original sites’ or any notion of a center, writing can be a way to inscribe a personal territory” (Braidotti 5). In this light, Gao’s return to self and fictionality is the ultimate rejection of socialist realism in literature, where the outside world dominates and takes precedence over private desires and freedom of imagination: “In those contaminated surroundings I was taught that life was the source of literature, that literature had to be faithful to life. Faithful to real life! My mistake was that I had alienated myself from life and ended up turning my back on real life” (*Soul Mountain* 21).

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Soul Mountain’s departure from socialist realism through the highly reflective mind of its multi-subject narrator is one of the most powerful encapsulations of the “Subjectivity of Literature” (*wenxue de zhutixing*), part of the 1980s intellectual project of “re-establishing human subjectivity” (*chongjian ren de zhutixing*).⁷ As Xu Jilin argues, the theme of the New Enlightenment Movement in the 1980s was to liberate human beings from various kinds of social and ideological confinement and constraints, among which the state is seen as the major suppressor of individuals (Xu 26-29). In the humanistic discourse of the 1980s, the human individual may transgress the nation, state, class and other social relationships, but still possesses universal humanity, autonomy and unlimited creative potential. In this light, the wanderers or drifters in *Soul Mountain* and *Red Dust* are a self-image of Chinese intellectuals: abstract, liberated, humanist individuals who are breaking free and on the road, and their state of nomadic wandering and internal exile was typical of the 1980s mode of intellectual consciousness.

2. FUGITIVE FROM THE STATE: THE NOMADIC DISCOURSE IN *ONE MAN’S BIBLE*

1989 marked the end of an era for a whole generation of Chinese intellectuals, and the

individual nomadic wandering represented by *Soul Mountain* and *Red Dust* turned into a mass movement of political exiles overseas. In the aftermath of Tiananmen, many Chinese writers in exile did not merely focus on their own immediate experiences of fleeing from China but chose to expand their horizons to the traumatic events of recent history which had been suppressed or (self)-censored when they were in China. The literary journals *Today* and *Tendency* began to archive China's underground literature since the 1960s, and memoirs about the political campaigns of the Maoist regime in both Chinese and English became a popular, sometimes bestselling, genre. Such writings were evidence of an underlying need to reflect on the situation faced by the Chinese intellectual diaspora, and to answer the question "How did we get here?" *One Man's Bible*, the first novel that Gao Xingjian produced after leaving China, is among the most profound of these works in tracing the historical roots of the intellectual nomadism of the 1980s and 90s.

134 Like *Soul Mountain*, *One Man's Bible* adopts an autobiographical approach in writing down the spiritual journey of a generation of Chinese exiles. But the novel travels further than *Soul Mountain* in revealing both the historical trajectory that lies behind that journey and its present consequences. The narrator/protagonist "you" is a playwright who left China after the Cultural Revolution. He frequently flies all over the world to stage his plays and seems to lead an itinerant and nomadic lifestyle. Refusing to identify home with a place, neither the origin nor destination, making love with the women he encounters along the road is the only emotional commitment he is prepared to give. However, on one of these trips, he meets a German Jewish woman, Margarita, who forces the narrator to face up to his past in China as well as his moral responsibility to record it. Despite his frequent complaints about the futility of writing, the narrator "you" nevertheless writes down his traumatic experiences of mass violence and class struggle during the Maoist Cultural Revolution. The book is thus in part a meta-fictional reflection on the ethics of writing, and the narrative alternates between recounting the past experiences where "he" tries to survive repeated political campaigns, and the present, where the narrator reflects upon the impact of these experiences, both on his writing and on his identity:

Your writing is not in the cause of pure literature, but neither are you a fighter using your pen as a weapon to promote truth...You know you are certainly not the embodiment of truth, and you write simply to indicate that a sort of life, worse than a quagmire, more real than an imaginary hell, more terrifying than Judgment Day, has, in fact, existed. Furthermore, it is very likely that when people have forgotten about it, it will make a comeback, and people who have never gone crazy will go crazy, and people who have never been oppressed will oppress or be oppressed...

It is best not to strive to make yourself despair, so why go on describing all this misery? You are distressed, but even if you wanted to, you can't stop. You must have this release, it has become an affliction, and the reason, you suspect, is because you yourself have the need.

...You have written this book for yourself, this book of fleeing, your *One Man's Bible*...
(*One Man's Bible* 195-98)

Fleeing (taowang) undoubtedly is a dominant trope in *One Man's Bible*, and the character is marked by “perpetual geographic displacement and movement.” In fact the plot of the novel can be summarized as the protagonist’s autonomous movement from place to place, both in the past as “he” and in the present as “you.” And these two sets of movements, while contrasting in content, also illuminate each other with their cause and effect.

The novel begins in Hong Kong in 1997, a significant place and time for understanding the relationship between exile, nomadism and the State in this novel. Even though Hong Kong has for a long time been represented as a place of exit to freedom and a land of free speech, contrasting with the repressive Mainland, the second-person narrator, a Chinese political refugee with a French passport, now feels anxious about the approaching shadow of the Chinese state: “You present your documents on checking into this big hotel, bought by the mainland government, so your name has been entered into the computer...On hearing your Beijing accent, the supervisor and the girl at the desk look embarrassed...it is their duty to keep tabs on what guests are doing, now that the proprietor is the government, so this episode of lovemaking in the nude that you have just indulged in will certainly have been videotaped” (*One Man's Bible* 9-10). Perhaps it is this penetration by the State into the narrator’s inner center of privacy, whether real or imagined, that triggers his suppressed memories of similar violations by the State in the past. The symbolic meaning of Hong Kong as a threatened cosmopolitan city under the looming shadow of the Chinese state is also reinforced by other characters that the narrator meets, a floating crowd who all seem to be planning another emigration with the coming of Chinese rule in 1997.

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It is not surprising that the narrator’s remembrance of the past takes place mainly in Hong Kong, in this border city where the thin line between “here” and “there,” present and past, is so easily crossed, a place where the transition of power back to China has only strengthened the ambiguity of its identity.

The first set of movements from the past occurs during the Cultural Revolution, and is characterized by “his” constant flight from entrapment by public struggle sessions and mass campaigns to purify China from bad class elements. “He” first recalls living in Beijing, the center of power of the state’s surveillance mechanism, and working in a state institute. Unwisely, he becomes involved in factional struggles, but he is soon terrified by the destructive potential of these political campaigns, and he tries to withdraw from society and protect himself from his enemies. At first he does this by destroying all his letters and diaries, then he seeks to avoid the struggle sessions by wandering about in the suburbs or visiting relatives for extended periods. Later, he volunteers to leave Beijing and join the work unit’s May Seventh Cadre School in the countryside, to escape from the impending “purification of class ranks.” However, he soon has to flee again when another “purification” campaign follows him to the Cadre School:

Luckily, he got wind of the hunting dogs closing in on the horizon. By this time, he

already knew how the political hunt operated....With the arrival of the newcomers, hostility was reignited and replaced that bit of friendly solidarity that had developed. The old company, platoon, squad units, were dismantled and reorganized, and a branch of the Party was reestablished with cadres appointed by the Army control commission in Beijing. He had to watch for a chance to break through their siege and escape before the hunt closed in. (*One Man's Bible* 305)

136 This time “he” decides to completely sever his connection with the state by going to a farming village to settle down permanently and transfer his official status into that of a “peasant” (nongmin)—in China, the peasants are also the lowest class in the social hierarchy with a fixed identity marked by the household registration system that restricts their movement, in spite of the Party/State paying lip service to them by claiming that peasant-farmers and workers are the masters of the country. With the help of a local friend and protection from a high ranking local official who is also exiled from Beijing, he is finally able to find some peace of mind, and occasionally to indulge his wandering thoughts in an isolated mountain village: “From now on, he was a peasant, relying on his strength to feed himself. He had to learn everything about farm life...and he no longer expected that they would still issue him a salary” (*One Man's Bible* 315). After he fails to build a family by marrying a girl he meets on one of his wandering trips, because the class struggle of the Cultural Revolution has turned them into suspicious strangers and political enemies, he resorts to a lonely existence seeking consolation in his secret writing.

Here we see an individual forced to take up a nomadic existence as a way to escape the gaze and surveillance of the other, and his flight expresses his ultimate refusal to participate in a militant and controlled society, or to become part of the power formation.

Parallel to these recollections of constant flight from state surveillance is the nomadic wandering state of the narrator “you” as a citizen of the world in the present. After Hong Kong, “you” travels to Stockholm, Sydney, New York and Toulon, France, wandering all over the world: “You are light, and float up as if you’re weightless. You wander from country to country, city to city, woman to woman, but don’t think of finding a place that is home. You drift along, engrossed in savoring the taste of the written language, and, like ejaculating, leave behind some traces of your life” (*One Man's Bible* 426).

There is a historical continuity of the past with the present in this permanent state of nomadic existence, a constant flight of a person without either origin or destination. In other words, the dissolution of the bond between the individual and the State continues into “de-territorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari) and nomadic traveling, that is, “dissolution of the notion of a center and consequently of originary sites or authentic identities of any kind” (Braidotti 26). The only difference is that in the past it was an enforced survival strategy, but now it has become a voluntary existential choice.

With these two parallel movements, Gao presents the mental trajectory of a

nomad, “a stranger” who “is an individual who has always experienced strangeness long before leaving home” (Braidotti 26). In this way, *One Man’s Bible* continues the “nomadic sentiment” of *Soul Mountain*, and renders it in a specific historical and political context. As He Guimei observed, when discussing the nature of humanistic discourse of the 1980s, “the constructed confrontation between individual and state, individual and class, individual and society, individual and culture (in the discourse of humanism) is not a material existence, instead it is an ideological discourse against socialist history” (He 79).

What connects the two sets of movements through different spaces and times in this novel are the moral dialogues and self-reflections on the meaning of writing and the relationship between writing and nomadism. Despite the fact that the narrator is forced to destroy all his writings, letters and diaries in order to survive in the crowd at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, his constant fear of betrayal through the years leads him to turn away from the crowd and give up the idea of building a home with others. It is then that he begins his secret “personal” writing, a writing which is for himself alone. Just as his constant flight ends up with himself alone, so writing becomes his only form of communication, and the only home available to him: “As you pity yourself, you must find a spirit that will allow you to endure the pain so that you can go on living to create a realm that is purely yours, that is beyond this pig’s pen of a reality. Or better still, to create a contemporary myth. By locating present reality in myth, finding meaning in writing, you are able to find balance between the struggle for survival and spiritual freedom” (*One Man’s Bible* 343).

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The meaning of writing is also discussed in the conversation between “you” and Margarita, who is the motivating force behind this book. The shared identities as diaspora of the narrator and this Jewish woman set up a historical parallel between the Cultural Revolution and the Holocaust, not only due to the atrocities against humanity that occurred during these movements, but even more because of their traumatic effect on the personal psyche. Just like Margarita, whose sado-masochism in relationships is the result of her childhood experience of sexual abuse, the narrator’s own past trauma of pervasive government surveillance and mind control has also left him, in Gary Xu’s words, “a moral masochist” (122). “He” writes in order to remember, yet this is not for social reasons, but as a kind of therapy that allows him to express the deep emotions associated with his past that have been repressed and ignored. At the same time, “he” is frequently plagued by doubts about the effectiveness of laying bare these scars from the past:

Margarita dragged you into the muddy mess of writing this worthless book; you were stuck, but you could not stop. No one would still be interested in these awful things, these sufferings that were considered completely meaningless even by you yourself. But she drew that yellow six-pointed star on every letter, constantly reminding you of her Jewish identity; what you tried to erase, in the meantime, was precisely this imprint of pain. (*One Man’s Bible* 186)⁸

Here, the narrator’s conflicting attitude towards writing about the past discloses the

most profound ethical and existential tension within all exile and exile narrative which has perhaps been best phrased by the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt: “To what extent do we remain obligated to the world even when we have been expelled from it or withdrawn from it?” (Arendt 22). This is also the difference between “he” and Margarita: one is an exile who still longs to return home and never forgets her Jewish past and identity, but the other is gradually turning into an eternal stranger, who lacks any “internal anchoring point” (Braidotti 26) and refuses the idea of a fixed home or identity, in other words, a nomad.

3. *CORPOREAL EARTH: THE BIRTH OF SELF*

138 Ma Jian gives his own answer to Hannah Arendt’s question by advocating a politically engaged exile literature. Claiming Chinese writers under the totalitarian regime have lost their independent mind and personality and fallen into a state of collective moral amnesia, he states the necessity of exile space for creativity and moral choice: “One can’t write in a totalitarian society unless one writes as a rebel. The only way left for such people to keep some moral conscience is to flee...all great writers must have a degree of unrighteousness which can only survive in a healthy and free society” (Ma, “Zhongguo wenzue de qeshi”). He thus sees exilic literature as the only possible site for producing Chinese literature with a true consciousness, in which “writers should write like poets, refusing compromise, ambiguity and cowardice. They should look for a culture of freedom, to resist the thought control which is the cruelest form of totalitarianism. They should unearth suppressed memories, and write compassionate and politically critical works in a time when thought and values are fading away” (*Beijing Coma* 346).

In his latest novel, *Beijing Coma*, of which the literal translation of its Chinese title is “corporeal earth” (*routu*), Ma Jian is clearly putting into practice this political statement. He sets the novel against the backdrop of the 1989 June Fourth Tiananmen Square massacre and its aftermath, and its publication was timed to coincide with successive anniversaries of this tragic event: the English version was published in mid-2008, and the Chinese edition came out in Hong Kong in 2009, right before the 20th anniversary. In contrast to the media sensation and frenzy of memoirs that were produced outside China right after Tiananmen, there are few fictional works (including cinematic works) in Chinese that directly deal with this subject. More often than not, as Michael Berry shows, those that do tend to use allegory and metaphor in which June Fourth becomes a “presenting absence”.⁹ In this light, *Beijing Coma* is the first Chinese literary work to confront the “unmentionable” history of the June Fourth Massacre so directly, so bluntly, and in such painstaking detail.

The title, *Beijing Coma*, refers to the plight of the narrator/protagonist Dai Wei, a Beijing University student who was shot in the head on the morning of June Fourth and has remained in a comatose state ever since. Lying immovable in his mother’s

dingy apartment in central Beijing, Dai's mind is nonetheless alert and active, remembering the past in minute detail while capturing the present unfolding around him with vivid senses. The story ends on the eve of the new millennium when Dai Wei seems to wake up from his coma, only to find that his mother has gone mad and their apartment has become a "tomb" about to be crushed by the bulldozers of a demolition company.

Unlike the aesthetic construction of space as movement in the previous works we discussed, here the dominant image is enclosed space, both the Tiananmen Square of Dai's memory and the apartment in which he is confined today. In his cumulative remembrance of the several months leading up to the fatal crackdown in 1989, he rarely strays from the Square occupied by the students, who gradually lost control and were eventually forced to retreat and flee. In Dai's memory, Tiananmen is the center of the students' factional fights and the target of encirclement by martial law troops from the distant suburbs, and he frequently associates this site with a trap or a graveyard: the guarded blockades; metal railings circling the monument; the hunger strikers' tents; and the minibus where the student leaders have their secret meetings all indicate isolation and enclosure: "After the government announced that the army would clear the Square...I felt as though we were trapped inside a wooden cabin, waiting for the wolves to turn up" (*Beijing Coma* 346). Dai's account of the clearing of the Square on the night of June 3 then turns the whole place into a giant tomb: "I looked at Tiananmen Gate and saw thousands of soldiers pouring out...The fires blazing in the distance looked like funeral pyres burning in a graveyard" (*Beijing Coma* 562).

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This dominant image of the trapped Tiananmen as a huge tomb parallels the image of another smelly and eroding enclosed space, the apartment of Dai Wei's mother where Dai has lain for ten years. This apartment, shared by Dai, a coma patient injured in the massacre, and his mother, an old woman who is gradually losing her mind, is a microcosm not only of the materially deprived state of ordinary Chinese people, left behind in the nation's march toward a "socialist market economy", but also of the constant oppressive political control and increasing social discontent that remain under the glossy surface of Chinese society today. As the "unconscious" narrator reveals, in this society children become disillusioned and flee the country; bereaved mothers are frequently harassed and cannot openly express the sorrow of their loss; the young betray their ideals of the 1980s and instead strive to get ahead and make money; and the old are abandoned by the state and left in poverty. In the center of this space we see the gradual physical and spiritual deterioration of Dai Wei's mother, who must endure the extreme emotional and economic strain of looking after a paralyzed son, and desperately seeks consolation in Falun Gong, her own kind of spiritual exile. After being pursued by the state through one despairing crisis after another, in the end the only way she can escape is through mental breakdown:

My mother walks to the edge of the room to look at our balcony which is lying in the rubble on the ground. Her shadow sways before my eyes. A loud bang from the bulldozer below frightens her back inside. She grips the frame of my iron bed, squats down

and, bursting into tears, pulls out the box of my father's ashes, and the one she bought for mine. She moves to the edge of the room again, hurls the boxes into the floodlight's beam and in her clearest, most resonant tone, sings out "You are liberated at last! Quickly, run away..." (*Beijing Coma* 582)

Here Ma Jian offers a very different understanding of China and its "prosperity" in the 1990s from that of much contemporary Chinese literature and from the popular media whose "historical imagination has increasingly become enthralled by the glamorous prospect of global capital, the world market, middle class prosperity, civil society and endless economic development" (Wang 2). Instead of extolling the economic development and material progress of a rising China, Ma Jian exposes to us the human costs and moral compromises that the nation has made under a new collusion between capitalism and a "living Maoism" which "continues to define social habits and expectations as well as political possibilities and limitations" (Cheek 3).

140 Within this confined living space and enclosed reality, the only invigorating escape from bleak reality is an immobile body through which the active mind can try to remember the past and make sense of the present. By contrasting Dai Wei's vivid, minute and detailed remembrance with its immediate context of political suppression and collective amnesia, Ma Jian creates one of the most original and profound images and characters in writing about post-Tiananmen China: "His body/flesh becomes his castle, and he is able to hide inside it to escape the fate of being reformed, brainwashed and forced to do self-criticism. But in this way, he is the only one who is living in the novel because he holds on to his memory. He is able to reflect on his own remembrance. When he wakes up, he finds that he is reborn in a society full of dead people" (Tang). Dai Wei's body thus becomes, in Braidotti's words, "the materialist but also vitalist grounding of human subjectivity and...the specifically human capacity to be both grounded and to flow and thus to transcend the very variables—class, race, sex, gender, age, disability that structure us" (Braidotti 25). Dai Wei's persistent remembrance is a form of resilient protest and resistance to an authoritarian state¹⁰ that enforces a culture of amnesia upon its people, and his comatose state represents a critical disengagement from the deeply problematic nature of Chinese society after June Fourth. Here we encounter Deleuze's idea that nomadic experience may have nothing to do with travel as long as it "entails a radical critique of dominant formation from within" (Braidotti 26).

In the novel, the nomadic consciousness emerges at the very core of the "political" narrative of the Tiananmen student movement. Dai Wei presents a mundane narrative of students' day-to-day lives and activities during the spring of 1989 very different from many of the student leaders' accounts, such as Li Lu's *Moving the Mountain: My Life in China* (1990). Instead of idealism and heroism, here the spontaneously unfolding mass event is remembered as chaos and rivalry marked by factional infighting, power grabs, and opportunistic performances. This suspicion of the mass movement is made explicit in the reaction of an older intellectual in the novel who asks what will happen "if military dictatorship is replaced by student dictatorship". And in fact,

Dai Wei, who had become so disillusioned by the political mass movements that frequented China's recent past, such as the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, had already withdrawn from the central circle of the student movement when he was shot.

The nomadic consciousness embodied in Dai Wei's mind is most evident in the set of fragmentary interior monologues presented in italicized paragraphs, interspersed between Dai Wei's subjective narratives of Tiananmen and its aftermath. Imaginative, lyrical and highly symbolic, these paragraphs stand out from the generally clear and direct prose style of the book, and throw some fresh and poetic light on Dai Wei's existence beyond the purely political symbolism. They include poetic meditations on the physical and spiritual aspects of Dai Wei's comatose being. For example, "melancholy yearnings stir within you. Forgotten fears and hopes drip from your bones like dark marrow"; "your conversation with the past stirs your muscles from their sleep"; "time overlaps before your eyes. The past spreads through your flesh like a maze of blood vessels" (*Beijing Coma* 67, 505). They also include supernatural images from the ancient *Book of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing)*: "At the western edge of the Greater Wastes lies Lake Utmost. It is the home of Bingyi, god of the yellow River. Bingyi often roams across the land in a cart driven by two dragons"; "On Buzhou Mountain grows the jia tree. It has oval leaves, and flowers with yellow petals and red sepals. If you eat its fruit, you will forget all your worries" (*Beijing Coma* 215, 405). While the former can be read as Dai Wei's philosophical reflections on the fragility and strength of human life, and the persistence and temporality of memory, the latter appear to be Dai Wei's visions of the wild and fantastic world that his fragile and stagnant life longs for—we are told that *The Book of Mountains and Seas* has been Dai Wei's favorite since his childhood, and he has developed this fascination with the wild and strange world out of many traumatic experiences ranging from the persecution of his grandfather to the mental breakdown of his parents.

This literary flight into the wilderness offers some transcendent moments of mental escape from the oppressive and brutal reality both before and after 1989. These seemingly random lines and mystical images hint at a lyrical nomadic self that manages to survive in the midst of historical catastrophe; they also give the novel a new dimension of nomadism which adds shades of complexity to the politically engaged tone of the novel as a whole. Here, we notice a similar ethical and aesthetic tension in Ma Jian that we observed in Gao Xingjian. On the one hand, there is an individualist who strives for artistic autonomy and holds a nomadic vision of life as free wandering. Yet on the other hand, there is also a deep sense of political commitment and moral responsibility towards writing the historical truth. These two conflicting values create an ambiguous but also complex space that transcends the political activism rooted in the Chinese intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

For Chinese intellectuals and writers, exile has traditionally been viewed as a temporary and undesirable “banishment as a form of punishment by the government” from one’s homeland and people (Lee 226). As soon as the political environment changed, many have chosen to return to China. Consequently, narratives of modern Chinese literature are often presented within a nationalist framework that seeks to change China and make it a better society. And the diaspora discourse often evokes China—imagined or in reality—as a place of nostalgic remembrance, a homeland to which one always longs to return.¹¹ However, Gao Xingjian and Ma Jian are among the few exile writers who have consciously chosen to maintain their status as exiles and have steadfastly refused to identify China as their home. While differing in their literary styles and political engagement, Ma Jian and Gao Xingjian nonetheless share a similar perspective towards writing as an exile. “Becoming minoritarian” (Deleuze and Guattari) is not only central to their sense of identity but is also the central theme and experience in their work. They have constantly talked of the positive impact of exile on their writing and have consciously explored the alternative concept of nomadism as a creative space and a source of literary inspiration. In the process, they have developed a discourse in which the nomadic position reshapes their critical disposition. Disillusioned by the whole experience of statehood, dictatorship, repression, imprisonment, mass murder and mental torture, they and their narrators/characters subsequently refuse to become the subject of any nation-state and suspect of any forms of power formation.

Based on my reading of their representative works, I contend that the emergence of Chinese intellectual nomadism is closely related to the general humanistic discourse among 1980s intellectuals, who challenged the state’s hegemonic forces from an individualistic and autonomous point of view and marked a departure from their previous identity as state servants and their historical role as “pedagogical elites” (Barme 1). In the constant confrontations during the post-Mao era between the individual seeking freedom and an overwhelming surveillance state, including the Party/State’s new attempt “to incorporate them in a new social contract” (Barme 2), wandering in “the wilderness” can serve as a form of critical disengagement, through which the individual can escape from as well as resist the state’s power and “rewards”. This spiritual and existential wandering has continued into the 1990s and the new millennium, as China experienced capitalist development while still maintaining its political authoritarianism. Their geographical displacement and intrinsic de-territorialization have further shaped them into nomadic subjects writing within a broader global context.

Gao and Ma’s works also reveal the specific historical origins of this nomadic consciousness: the past history of anti-humanistic practices of the Maoist totalitarian regime, such as the Anti-rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution, as well as the current “velvet prison” (Haraszti) in which the “living history of Maoism” (Cheek

1-12) continues to permeate contemporary China and its reform experience.¹² While literature in mainland China seems to be suffering from historical amnesia, at least in terms of recent Chinese history, works by Sinophone writers preserve some of the most poignant evidence of historical testimony and ethical reflection. In this way, Chinese exile writers will stand as witnesses to the intellectual alienation and internal resistance against “scattered hegemonies” that is silently shared by so many of their intellectual contemporaries.¹³

NOTES

1. See Oliver Kramer’s discussion of Chinese exile writers in Europe affiliated with the journal *Today*.
2. See, for example, the dialogue between Gao Xingjian and Yang Lian in Paris on 18 Sept. 1993, “Liu-wang shi women huode shenme?” (What have we gained from exile?), in Gao, *Meiyou zhuyi* (116-55).
3. When the Chinese version of this book was published in Taiwan in 2003, Ma Jian chose “Illegal Wandering” (feifa liulang) as the title.
4. For the relationship of the rise of nomadic consciousness and lifestyle among Chinese writers and artists to Western influences, including contacts with foreigners in China at that time, see Zha Jianying’s *Interviews with the 1980s* (Bashi niandai fangtanlu), a collection of interviews with important cultural figures from the 1980s, and Linda Jaivin’s memoir *The Monkey and the Dragon*, which provides first hand evidence of the rise of intellectual nomadism in China in late 1970s and through the 1990s. These writers and artists later become the main inspiration for, or participants in, the student movement in 1989, and many chose to leave China during and after 1989, including Hou Dejian, Liu Xiaobo, and many artists and writers who now reside in Australia.
5. As Gao acknowledges, “*Soul Mountain* replaces characters with pronouns, and events/plot with psychological experiences, and the style shifts according to emotional changes... This novel is nothing but a long monologue in which a single narrator’s perspective on himself shifts continually” (*Meiyou zhuyi* 173, 176). See also Mabel Lee.
6. Gary Xu gives a most extensive and insightful discussion of Gao’s ideas of self and fictionality through the experimental use of pronouns to express subjectivity in *Soul Mountain*.
7. Chinese critic and scholar Liu Zaifu is the most vocal advocate for the subjectivity of literature in the 1980s, and his theoretical essays “On the Subjectivity of Literature” (Lun wenxue de zhutixing), in *Wenxue pinglun* (June 1985) and “On the Subjectivity of Literature (II)” (Zai lun wenxue de zhutixing), in *Zhishi fenzi* (Spring 1990) synthesized the liberal humanist ideas shared by many of his contemporaries and presented a challenge to the CCP’s policies on art and literature.
8. I use Gary Xu’s translation.
9. The cases Michael Berry cites include the novel *Summer Betrayal*, the films *Summer Palace*, *Conjugation*, *Lan Yu* and even the main melody movie *Fatal Decision*. The English-language novel *Sons of Heaven* by Terrence Chang seems to be the only one that clearly depicts the events of June Fourth, but I would not consider it to be within the category of Chinese literature. See Chapter 5, “Beijing 1989”, in *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*.
10. I thank the anonymous reader for pointing out the difference between “totalitarianism” in Mao’s rule and “authoritarianism” which characterizes Chinese state rule in the post-Mao era.
11. For the nationalist and nativist theme and discourse in Chinese writing by Chinese diaspora, see Kong, “Chinese Diaspora Literature”.

12. Tim Cheek's concepts of the "living history of Maoism" and "living Maoism" are very useful in discussing the lingering influence of dictatorial Communist rule on contemporary Chinese experience. See Cheek, in particular 1-12 and 32-53.
13. From Theodor Adorno to Edward Said, many contemporary intellectuals and writers have argued that exile and alienation are existential conditions of modern intellectuals and prerequisites to writings. See, for example, the contributions to the collection by Marc Robinson.

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