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# **Escape from Censorship: The Aesthetics of Reflexivity in Gao Xingjian's Pre-Nobel Plays**

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## Abstract of Thesis

Censorship and freedom of expression are matters of universal concern. The case of Nobel Laureate and bilingual writer Gao Xingjian, who started his career in China before relocating to France in the late 1980s, offers a most suitable case study for a comparative examination of global regimes of censorship. This project uses an inclusive definition of censorship that considers not only public and institutional censorship, but also structural and internal censorship. While Gao appears to be conditioned by both Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism, his plays constitute a productive site of intercultural contact. Drawing on European theatrical modernism and the conventions of Chinese indigenous theatre (*xiqu*), Gao has developed on the idea of theatrical suppositionality (*jiadingxing*) and a performance theory that he describes as “tripartite acting” (*biaoyan de sanchongxing*). This thesis defines suppositionality and tripartite acting as Gao’s “aesthetics of reflexivity,” namely, techniques that Gao deploys to induce reflexivity and self-awareness towards one’s limitations – of actors, audiences, and Gao himself. For Gao, the artist’s ego is always blinded by narcissism and requires not one, but two levels of reflexive observation – “an observation of an observation.” Through close-readings of selected plays by Gao from the pre-Nobel (i.e., pre-2000) period, this study examines how Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism are theatrically *and* reflexively represented. Overall, this project argues that the foundation of Gao’s “escape from censorship” is not fleeing from external (ie, institutional) censorship, but his capacity of redefining self-censorship into a reflexive expression.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Censorship and freedom of expression are matters of universal concern. The case of Nobel Laureate and bilingual writer Gao Xingjian, who started his career in China before relocating to Europe in the late 1980s, offers a most suitable case study for a comparative examination of global regimes of censorship. Gao was a witness to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76), a voice of dissent against the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and a political exile turned naturalized French citizen. Gao's departure from China to Europe is therefore usually considered a self-imposed exile in search of free speech. Yet, the plays he wrote in China, namely *Absolute Signal* (*Juedui xinbao*, 1981), *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan*, 1983), and *Wild Man* (*Yeren*, 1985), show signs of the realism as required by the Chinese cultural authorities, whereas some of the plays he completed in France, such as *Of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing zhuan*, 1989), *City of the Dead* (*Mingcheng*, 1991), and *Snow in August* (*Bayue xue*, 1997), appropriate Chinese cultural elements which fulfill the Orientalist expectations of Euro-American audiences.

This project uses an inclusive definition of censorship that considers not only public and institutional censorship, but also structural and internal censorship. If Gao has been subjected to different forms of censorship in China and in the West, the accepted narrative of Gao as being a “literary freedom fighter”<sup>1</sup> requires further investigation. While Gao appears to be conditioned by both Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism, his plays constitute a productive site of intercultural contact. Drawing on European theatrical modernism and the conventions of Chinese indigenous theatre (*xiqu*), Gao has developed the idea of theatrical suppositionality

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Lovell, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 36.

(*jiadingxing*) and a performance theory that he describes as “tripartite acting” (*biaoyan de sanchongxing*). The former emphasizes that all aspects of the theatre are artistically represented and collaboratively imagined by actors and audiences, while the latter gives life to the suppositional stage through the actor’s performance in a state of neutrality and non-attachment. Both suppositionality and tripartite acting are what I refer to as Gao’s “aesthetics of reflexivity,” which I define as Gao’s theatrical techniques that induce reflexivity, or self-awareness towards one’s limitations, of actors, audiences, and Gao himself. For Gao, the artist’s ego is always blinded by narcissism and requires not one level, but two levels of reflexive observations.<sup>2</sup> In my close-reading of selected plays by Gao from the pre-Nobel (ie pre-2000) period, I examine how Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism are theatrically *and* reflexively represented. In order to show how Gao offers actors, audiences, and himself, a distance for reflexivity towards Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism as structural forms of censorship, I follow Gao’s artistic vision of detachment and identify an aspect from each of the selected plays as “an observation of an observation” of Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism: sound (*Absolute Signal*), silence (*Bus Stop*), imagination (*Wild Man*), Chinese mythology (*Of Mountains and Seas*), Daoism (*City of the Dead*), and Chan/Zen Buddhism (*Snow in August*). Overall, this project argues that the foundation of Gao’s “escape from censorship” is not fleeing from external (ie institutional) censorship, but his capacity of redefining self-censorship into a reflexive expression.

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<sup>2</sup> Gao Xingjian, “Guandian ji yishi” [Perspective as Awareness], in *Lun chuangzuo* [On Creative Production] (Taipei: Linking Books, 2008), 155-159.

## Gao Xingjian's Notion of Escape

MIDDLE-AGED MAN: [...] Escape! Escape is what we have to face now! It's destiny, yours and mine. (Talks to himself.) To live is to escape, to run for your life all the time!<sup>3</sup>

The above statement is taken from the play *Escape* (1990). Aside from being one of Gao Xingjian's most well-known plays, the text and paratext of *Escape* are apt entry points into understanding Gao's "escape" from censorship. In the play, a massive, nationwide, yet peaceful protest for democracy was suppressed by a state army's machine guns, tanks, and tracer bullets. The character Middle-Aged Man is trapped with two other characters: Young Man and the Girl. The location of this suppression of democratic protest is not specified, but it is easily understood that the play is alluding to the Tiananmen Square protest and its subsequent massacre on June 4th, 1989.

As the characters are hiding inside an abandoned warehouse, the Middle-Aged Man criticizes the Young Man for his blind heroism and lacking of retreat plan during the unnamed protest. In response, the Young Man accuses the Middle-Aged Man of cowardice, immorality, selfishness, and lacking of aspirations for justice. Evident from the above quote, the Middle-Aged Man considers "escape" as merely an existentialist reality. The third character the Girl is an aspiring actress who also participated in the protest. However, she was not mentally prepared for its violent outcome, as can be seen from her signs of trauma and disorientation after witnessing the brutal suppression of the protesters.<sup>4</sup> At times, she also regrets having joined the protest. Her dreams of becoming a successful actress are all but dead because the state

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<sup>3</sup> Gao Xingjian, "Escape," in *Escape & The Man Who Questions Death*, trans. Gilbert Fong (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007 [1990]), 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 4-7.



will most likely place her on a political blacklist.<sup>5</sup> It appears that the Girl had not thoroughly considered the consequences and costs of her participation.

The Girl's lack of mental preparation to join the protest can be further seen from her wavering stance in face of the Young Man and the Middle-Aged Man. The Young Man symbolizes romanticism and idealism, while the Middle-Aged Man represents a mixture of pragmatism and individualism. The Girl initially seems to welcome the Young Man's advances, after he saved her from the gunfire. She then rejects the Young Man for the very same reason, believing that he is taking advantage of her during such dire times.<sup>6</sup> After conversing with the Middle-Aged Man about issues beyond politics, such as her life goals and his view towards marriage, the Middle-Aged Man and the Girl end up having sex. Not long after their intimacy, the Girl denounces the Middle-Aged Man as someone who is cold-hearted and destined to be forever alone.<sup>7</sup>

Trapped inside a warehouse, the three characters represent three distinctive and conflicting views towards themselves, towards each other, and towards the outside world. However, technically, the three characters are not trapped, and they could leave the warehouse if they wish to. The Young Man does leave the warehouse for a period of time, only to come back and become even more shell-shocked.<sup>8</sup> The three characters are forced to deal with each other: the Young Man hates the Middle-Aged Man and desires the Girl; the Middle-Aged Man despises the Young Man and longs for the Girl; the Girl simultaneously desires and hates both of them. Their love-hate relationships become a torturous experience for all parties.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 45, 54.

At the same time, the three characters have their own unresolved internal struggles. The Girl constantly swings from romanticism to existentialism, which shows her lack of orientation in life. The Middle-Aged Man has accepted his fate as a loner and rejects all permanent attachments with humans, and yet he continues to stay in an unhappy marriage because of his responsibilities as a father. The Young Man, curiously, does not show any concrete signs about his internal struggles. The absence of evidence, however, is not an evidence of absence. The Young Man's romanticism and complete devotion to the protest, even if it results in sacrificing his life, is perhaps related to his lack of self-awareness and reflexivity.

*Escape* ends with "heavy pounding on the door, which sounds like the rapid firing of a machine gun."<sup>9</sup> After the detailed portrayal of each character's internal agony, and the excruciating interaction between them, the play reminds us that the world outside of the warehouse is equally torturous. There is a juxtaposition of the hell inside each individual, inside the warehouse, and outside of the warehouse. Most importantly, each hell is interdependent of one another, fueling the inferno with desires, insecurities, aspirations, romance, morals, and bullets. Nevertheless, the Middle-Aged Man remarks that the warehouse is "no heaven," but it is neither "hell" because of the presence of the beautiful Girl.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, all three characters have their share of intimate and sexual pleasure with each other amidst the chaos and bloodshed.

At the heart of Gao's *Escape* is the portrayal of each character's hellish experience, and their attempts of escaping it. If *Escape* is what one critic describes as an "autobiographical play,"<sup>11</sup> then the play is also a means for Gao to understand, and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Mabel Lee, "Two Autobiographical Plays by Gao Xingjian," in *Escape and The Man Who Questions Death*, Ibid, xi.

escape from, his own hell. If absolute censorship is the hell for any writer, then the opposite is the heaven of absolute freedom of expression. Neither absolute censorship nor absolute freedom exists for Gao. Like the hells represented in *Escape*, the hell of censorship is a web of interrelations between the individual, the other, and the collective. In fact, an examination of the events surrounding the creation and publication of *Escape* reveals that the play itself was a hellish experience for Gao. *Escape* was a source of political controversy for Gao on two separate occasions: the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and the announcement of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Escape* was initially commissioned by an undisclosed American theatre company. Upon reviewing the initial draft, the company requested Gao to add more “student heroes” and a more political ending to the play.<sup>12</sup> Gao immediately withdrew the play, remarking that “even the Communist Party could not coerce me into making changes to my manuscripts when I was in China, let alone an American theatre company.”<sup>13</sup> In 1990, Gao published the play in the inaugural issue of the revived Chinese literary magazine *Jintian (Today)*, which relocated to Stockholm after being banned in China. Intriguingly, *Escape* was also published in China in 1991, and sold out in two months.<sup>14</sup> *Escape* was met with controversy and political tension. Pro-state critics and media in China cited the play as evidence of anti-patriotism amongst exile writers. Some supporters of the democratic movement deemed *Escape* as promoting

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<sup>12</sup> Mabel Lee, “Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003): 4 <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1181>.

<sup>13</sup> Gao, “About *Escape*,” in *Escape & The Man Who Questions Death*, Ibid. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Mabel Lee describes the publication of *Escape* in China in 1991 as a “miraculous accident.” The Chinese authorities sought to use *Escape* as an example of reactionary and unpatriotic writings by overseas Chinese writers. As such, *Escape* was released in a publication entitled *Wangming “jingying:” qi ren qi shi* (On the Diaspora “Elite:” Who They are and What They are Doing). See Lee, “Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing,” Ibid. 4.

cowardice and cynicism, all under the guise of a pseudo-artistic transcendence.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese state subsequently categorized *Escape* as subversive material, revoked Gao's party membership, imposed a complete ban of all of Gao's work, and confiscated all of his property in mainland China.<sup>16</sup>

A decade later, *Escape* once again played a role in altering the course of Gao's life. In the press release of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy shocked the world, and particularly China, by announcing Gao as the first Chinese writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize. *Escape* (translated as *Fugitives* in the press release) was cited alongside the novels *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*, 1990) and *One Man's Bible* (*Yigeren de shengjing*, 1999) as works that demonstrated Gao's "universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama."<sup>17</sup> Due to the perceived political nature of *Escape*, which seemingly contradicts Gao's own proclamation of being "without isms" (*meiyou zhuyi*) and prioritizing of artistic expression, a global debate ensued immediately after Gao's Nobel Prize win, a topic which I will elaborate on throughout this project.

The reason for detailing the controversies surrounding the creation, publication, and reception of *Escape* in this introduction is because they aptly illustrate the role of censorship in Gao's artistic career, and how censorship is not always immediately apparent. While the Chinese state's complete ban on Gao's works

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<sup>15</sup>Li Bei, "Taowang yu chaoyue" [Escape and Transcendence], *Huang Hua Gang Magazine*, 10 Oct 2001. [https://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/DACHS\\_Leiden//archive/leiden/topical/banned/20050321/www.huanghuagang.org/issue01/index\\_big5.htm](https://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/DACHS_Leiden//archive/leiden/topical/banned/20050321/www.huanghuagang.org/issue01/index_big5.htm). Accessed 9 May 2018.

<sup>16</sup>Mabel Lee, "Returning to Recluse Literature: Gao Xingjian," in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Joshua S Mostow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 614.

<sup>17</sup>"The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000: Gao Xingjian," *Nobelprize.org*, 12 October 2000, [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/press.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/press.html).

are typical examples of state censorship, the American theatre's request for a more political ending of *Escape* is an attempt to exert (democratic, capitalist) ideological influence on Gao's artistic expression and undermine his creative independence. As for the disapproval *Escape* received from the pro-democratic supporters, Gao expected it, being aware that his play "had criticized some of [the democratic movement's] immature tendencies."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even though the Nobel Prize committee claims that "the decision to award an author with the Nobel Prize is never politically motivated,"<sup>19</sup> the political connotations of the Prize, particularly the politics of recognition of Euro-American and non-Euro-American literatures, cannot be easily dismissed. Indeed, censorship manifests itself in multiple forms. As Louis Althusser's concept of Institutional State Apparatus (ISA) demonstrates, the state's ideological control can manifest itself without the direct involvement of state authorities. Readers, editors, publishers, critics, state officials, and even writers themselves can all be potential forces of institutional repression of independent expression.<sup>20</sup>

Censorship can occur on a general level and on a personal level. A general level of censorship refers to an agreed set of descriptors and criteria that restricts expression. Such descriptors and criteria are external and fits the traditional understanding of censorship. But censorship can also be discussed at a more personal level which has no agreed set of descriptors and criteria. Everyone experiences censorship differently, and a more liberal definition of censorship not only offers a

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<sup>18</sup> Gao, "About *Escape*," in *Escape & The Man Who Questions Death*, Ibid, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Horace Engdahl, "World Literature in Transformation," *Chinese Literature Today*, Vol. 5 No.1, (2013), <https://www.ou.edu/clt/05-01/engdahl-world-literature-transformation.html>. Accessed 9 May 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004 [1970]), 42-50.

more inclusive discussion about censoring experiences, but also addresses the fluidity of censoring practices itself. As Richard Burt highlights, and I shall elaborate in Chapter 3, even “the notion of autonomy manifests censorship in the form of “regulat[ing] membership in the critical community by appealing to the notion of diversity as a criterion of inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>21</sup> In this project, I discuss Gao’s awareness and escape from censorship in the liberal and inclusive sense of the term.

### **Gao Xingjian and Structural Censorship**

The case of *Escape* is only one part of Gao’s lengthy history of negotiation with different forms of censorship in China and abroad. There has, however, yet to be a systematic and detailed study of Gao’s relationship with censorship. Gao’s experience with bans and political criticism are most often presented as biographical information, and only discussed in passing to contextualize Gao’s creative works as a reaction against state censorship. Moreover, although English-language scholarship on Gao has tackled topics *indirectly* related to censorship, such as the politics of recognition<sup>22</sup> and exile,<sup>23</sup> discussions of Gao’s artistic career within the context of censorship are curiously absent. Such lack of direct exploration of Gao and censorship may be ascribed to two reasons.

Firstly, prevalent perceptions of censorship in Euro-American societies and amongst Euro-American-influenced readers originate from the Enlightenment era.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Burt, “Introduction: The ‘New Censorship,’” in *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Richard Burt (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xvii.

<sup>22</sup> See Tam Kwok-kan, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and the Politics of Recognition,” in Tam Kwok-kan ed. *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 2001); Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> See Janet Shum Sau-ching, *Gao Xingjian de liuwang huayu* [Gao Xingjian’s Exilic Discourse] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong: Dashan wenhua. 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Geoff Kemp, “Introduction,” in *Censorship Moments: Reading Texts in the History of Censorship and Freedom of Expression*, ed. Geoff Kemp (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–8.

Censorship is frequently defined as a violent oppression of expression coming from an external source, most notably authoritative powers, like the State or the Church. Since freedom of expression is the foundation of any modern democratic society, the dominant narrative with regards to censorship is to support free speech and condemn state-imposed censorship.<sup>25</sup> In Gao's case, as a writer in China, he experienced constant political pressure and backlash, as well as censorship of his creative works. Yet Gao's experience in China, which I shall elaborate in Chapters Three and Four was not unique. All writers in China during the 1980s were subjected to some form of state censorship. As such, Gao's censorship experience, if purely based on an Enlightenment (-inflected) definition, offers little room for further intellectual exploration.

Secondly, the majority of Gao's creative works emphasize detachment from politics – a point that Gao takes great pains to highlight in his literary criticism and essays. Through the invention of a series of technical terms, Gao has played an important role in directing the critical discourse of his own works to focus on the aesthetic representation of the internal and the psychological. For example, Gao describes his works as “cold literature” (*leng de wenxue*) in the sense that they are written as a cool observation of society from the margins, as opposed to socially-committed literature which aims to directly confront sociopolitical issues.<sup>26</sup> Writers of cold literature are those who are responsible to language alone and free from the influences of politics, social mores, and the writer's own consciousness.<sup>27</sup> For Gao, cold literature is literature which “entails fleeing in order to exist, it is literature that

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<sup>25</sup> Nicole Moore, “Censorship and Literature,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, December 2016, <http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-71>. Accessed 10 May 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Gao, “Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wen xue” [I Advocate a Kind of Cold Literature], *Meiyou zhuyi* (Taiwan: Linking Press, 2001 [1990]), 15-18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

refuses to be strangled by society in its quest for spiritual salvation.”<sup>28</sup> Although some critics have held a degree of skepticism towards Gao’s self-labelling and self-exposition,<sup>29</sup> most have nevertheless discussed Gao’s creative works in largely cultural terms, often at the expense of overlooking the sociopolitical implications in Gao’s works. For example, Jianmei Liu’s comparative study of Gao and the classical Daoist tenets of Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi focuses on the former’s exile and the latter’s absolute spiritual freedom (*xiaoyao*), but she does not address directly what Gao is spiritually fleeing from, nor does she elaborate what freedom means for Gao.<sup>30</sup>

Censorship “never parades itself,” as JM Coetzee famously remarks.<sup>31</sup> But without clearly delineating what, exactly, Gao is escaping from, any discussion of his plays as a form of escape would only swim in abstraction and vagueness. The premise of *Escape* is not merely an understanding of hell, but also an attempt to escape from it. If the act of escaping is what the character Middle-Aged Man describes as the “destiny” of everyone, then the destiny of Gao the artist is to escape through his art. But to escape also implies that there is something to escape from. The term censorship bears the connotation that any repression of expression is unwelcome, even if it is inevitable. “Escaping” censorship implies a subjective stance towards the restriction of expression as something that is not desirable and that is not passively accepted by Gao as a “fact of life.”

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 18. Translation by Mabel Lee in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, ed. Gilbert Fong and Mabel Lee, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Jessica Yeung, for example, questions the validity of Gao’s exegesis of his own works: “In many instances I find Gao’s treatises to be more the expression of the writer’s own artistic aspirations than an objective description of the texts. In some other instances, I find his practice simply at odds with his treatises.” See Jessica Yeung, *Ink Dances in Limbo: Gao Xingjian’s Writing as Cultural Translation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Jianmei Liu, “Gao Xingjian: The Triumph of the Modern Zhuangzi,” in *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 211-34.

<sup>31</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 35.



Like the pain mixed with pleasure which the characters in *Escape* experience inside the warehouse, censorship is not necessarily a totally damning event as traditional understandings of censorship have claimed. Michel Foucault understands power as appearing in the form of surveillance and self-censorship rather than as the imposition of external force.<sup>32</sup> The individual internalizes power, which results in his expression being subjected to a process of voluntary legitimation, or an unconscious willingness to have his expression shaped by the ruling ideology. While such a legitimation of expression involves a degree of self-censorship, the same process also decides what knowledge and expressions are acceptable. As such, an individual's expression becomes part of the creation of new forms of communication and genres of speech, or what Foucault describes as "an incitement to discourse."<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, censored individuals, despite experiencing censorship, continue to enjoy the "pleasure" of producing *legitimized* expression.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, Foucault's findings are drawn from the censorship experience of Western societies, particularly the ordering of discourse since the late eighteenth century. But, to a certain extent, the generative effects of censorship (or the notion of censorship as a productive force) can be seen in autocratic regimes, too, as evidenced by surveying developments in Chinese drama and theatre from 1949 to the 1980s.

The early decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were heavily influenced by Stalinism, and subsequently, by Mao Zedong's own interpretation of Marxist-Leninism (Maoism). Under Mao's socialist dictatorship, all aspects of society and culture were under strict state governance. In terms of stage performances, the

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans Robert Hurley (New York, Pantheon Books, 1978 [1976]), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, ed Colin Gordon (Harlow: Pearson, 1980), 119.

state pushed for a twofold policy: the popularization of Chinese modern “spoken drama” (*huaju*) and the reform of traditional Chinese theatre (*xiqu*).<sup>35</sup> Chinese spoken drama has a long history as a tool for social reform since its import from Europe, via Japan, in the early twentieth-century, at the time of the New Culture Movement (1917-1921) and the May Fourth Movement (1919). During that time, spoken drama served as a means for intellectuals to promote modern sociocultural values and ideological agendas. Yet in the Maoist era, spoken drama was utilized by the state to promote propaganda themes. Playwrights had to conform to specific themes according to the directives of the Drama Reform Committee: positive representation of the masses, negative representation of the ruling class, portrayal of patriotism, and promotion of revolutionary ideals.<sup>36</sup>

With regards to traditional Chinese theatre, the 1950s reforms sought to change it at its roots, so that it would lose its significance as a “weapon of the old ruling class.”<sup>37</sup> Both the repertoire and performance style of traditional Chinese theatre experienced strict governance that involved bans, script revision, and public-pressure campaigns.<sup>38</sup> The censorship process was conducted by the semi-official Chinese Theatre Association, under the direction of the influential playwright Tian Han. Plays which contained “feudal,” “superstitious,” “ignorant,” and “pornographic” themes either were banned or underwent revision from censors.<sup>39</sup> Censorship towards traditional Chinese theatre was particularly detrimental to the art form because of its reliance upon performance. As Siyuan Liu observes, the bans on plays and the death

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<sup>35</sup> Colin Mackerras, “Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theatre,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Siyuan Liu, “Theatre Reform as Censorship,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 61, no. 3, (October 2009): 389.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 390, 392.

of actors “had the effect of extinguishing the physical memory of some of the plays,” resulting in the disappearance of plays and the destruction of memories of performance.<sup>40</sup> Similar to the Western-style spoken dramatists in China, *xiqu* practitioners sought the approval of the highest authorities to feel politically safe.

Strict governance of stage performance reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution, when only the so-called “model operas” (*yangbanxi*) sponsored by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, were allowed to be staged. In 1960s, director Huang Zuolin was one of the few voices that championed the introduction of new methods and aesthetics alongside the conventional realist models. Huang’s theory of *xieyi*, which emphasized portraying impression rather than reality, combined the dramatic theories of Bertolt Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and Mei Lanfang to develop a directorial style that was anti-illusionistic. Although Huang was heavily criticized during the Cultural Revolution period, his theatrical vision paved the way for the Chinese experimentalists during the post-Mao era. With the death of Mao in 1976 and the emergence of Deng Xiaoping, ultra-leftist politics were replaced by “unprecedented cultural pluralism and intellectual debate.”<sup>41</sup> Artists introduced previously-banned modernist techniques into the traditional realist conventions. As Rossella Ferrari sums up, experimental theatre practitioners sought to revitalize the stagnant Chinese theatre and identified the main culprit as “the unquestioned dominance of realistic structures and characterization, naturalistic mise-en-scene, Stanislaviskian acting and formulaic social problem plays styled after the Ibsenian model.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 401, 405.

<sup>41</sup> Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (London: Seagull Books), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 24.

Amongst the experimental playwrights, Gao Xingjian and his creative partner Lin Zhaohua were two major representatives of 1980s experimentalist theatre. Yet both were supported by the state-owned Beijing People's Art Theatre. Gao reveals how the avant-gardist in China tactfully emerged within the institution: "As long as it is not thought of as a movement, small theatre in fact began in China's largest theatre. Lin Zhaohua and I planned to break away from the established Stanislavsky patterns of realist theatre [...] we kept this to ourselves and did not publicize it."<sup>43</sup> The distancing from labels pertaining to modernism was a sign of self-censorship because "the adoption of unconventional aesthetics might amount to an invitation to ideological warfare."<sup>44</sup>

Aside from the period of absolute censorship during the Cultural Revolution period, Chinese drama and theatre from 1949 to the 1980s largely depended on the approval of the authorities. Chinese stage practitioners internalized the state expectations and directives, and consciously or unconsciously practiced self-censorship. Although different periods and genres have experienced varying degrees and forms of state censorship, the aspect of self-censorship remains constant.

Gao emerged as an established writer in 1980s China. This period was regarded as the "New Era" (*xin shiqi*) and defined by unprecedented freedom in literary and cultural production.<sup>45</sup> Yet such freedom remained subjected to the state's

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Wang Ning considers the New Era to have begun around 1978 and ended in 1989. After Mao Zedong died and the Gang of Four collapsed in 1976, China had yet to end its isolation from the outside world. It was when Deng Xiaoping seized control and officially introduced the "open-door policy" that the relaxation of literary governance, and the rise of "New Era literature," occurred. The New Era ended in 1989 when the market economy and commercialisation of literature dominated the Chinese literary scene, which Wang refers to as "post-New Era." See Wang Ning, "Confronting Western Influence: Rethinking Chinese Literature of the New Period," *New Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Papers from the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change (Autumn, 1993), pp. 924.

preferred aesthetic/artistic ideology of realism. In 1987, Gao Xingjian went on self-imposed exile to Europe, where freedom of expression is supposed to be a fundamental right.<sup>46</sup> But Gao may, in fact, be more repressed abroad than in China. Shih Shu-mei elucidates the covert control of “the West” over “the rest” as “technologies of recognition.”<sup>47</sup> The self-censorship of democratic society, as Pierre Bourdieu remarks, is the result of a perfected structural and impersonal forms of control:

Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorized to say: in this case he does not even have to be his own censor because he is, in a way, censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalized and which impose their form on all his expressions.<sup>48</sup>

The implications of Bourdieu’s “perfect” and “invisible” censorship are telling. As Matthew Bunn points out, an autocratic society ruled by formal regulations and censorship may suggest that its structural censorship is under-developed, which allows individuals to actually enjoy greater freedom of speech than those of democratic societies.<sup>49</sup> Such a reading possibly explains Perry Link’s observation of the wide-ranging and heterogeneous “uses of literature” within the rigid socialist

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<sup>46</sup> As summarised by Catherine O’Leary, the United States Constitution (First Amendment, 1791), Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the 1976 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, have highlighted the freedom of expression as a fundamental right. See Catherine O’Leary, “Introduction: Censorship and Creative Freedom,” *Global Insights on Theatre Censorship*, eds. Catherine O’Leary, Diego Santos Sánchez, and Michael Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Shih, Shu-mei, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.” *PMLA*, Vol. 119, No. 1, Special Topic: Literatures at Large (January, 2004): 17.

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 138.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Bunn, “Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After,” *History and Theory*, Volume 54, Issue 1, (February 2015): 41.

literary system in China since 1949.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, though, Link reminds us that literature has always been lauded in Chinese society as “relevant or even essential to morality, social life, and politics at every level from the policymaking of the highest leadership, to the daily life of the average reader.”<sup>51</sup> The liberal spirit of the post-Mao era was therefore subjected to “the national literary ‘weather’” as determined by the state’s interference.<sup>52</sup>

I study Gao’s negotiation with regimes of censorship within and outside China in terms of “fields” and “doxa” as conceptualized by Bourdieu. I argue that in the New Era Chinese literary field, Gao was subjected to the doxic requirements of Chinese realism, whereas during the first decade of his exile in Europe (1987-1997), Gao was subjected to the doxic requirements of Euro-American Orientalism in the world literary field. In Chapter Three, I shall elaborate on my examination of Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism as doxa rather than ideology. For Bourdieu, the notion of “ideology” operates in the unconscious and cannot be identified or measured through scientific means or by acquisition of certain scientific knowledge.<sup>53</sup> The conventional application of ideology, however, assumes that observers of ideology are fully-conscious agents who are able to identify certain thoughts or philosophies as “ideology.” Bourdieu’s doxa, on the other hand, acknowledges that no one is capable of attaining complete awareness of the influence of ideology. In this sense, the difference between doxa and ideology is the reflexivity of how repression exists in symbolic and unconscious terms.

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<sup>50</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton, “Doxa and Common Life,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 1994), 267-68.

In this project, I build upon Foucault and Bourdieu and hold a poststructuralist view towards censorship, which acknowledges the influence of abstract social structures on the human experience. Censorship, then, do not necessarily comply with traditional expectations, such as explicit and/or state-induced censoring practices. Instead, censoring forces are omnipresent in expression. As I shall elaborate in Chapter Three, some critics have labelled such a broader understanding of censorship as “new censorship.” It should be noted that the “new” in “new censorship” is not referring to an original insight towards censorship, nor is it an erasure of the specificity of the repression of state censorship. Instead, “new censorship” is a marker that avoids conflating the kind of external, violent, state censorship associated with Enlightenment-era understandings with that of internal, invisible, structural censorship. Nevertheless, my discussion of Gao’s negotiation with structural censorship will be discussed under the umbrella term “censorship.” Since “new censorship” is not a complete departure from existing perspectives towards censorship and freedom of expression, it does not warrant adding the extra adjective.

### **The Aesthetics of Reflexivity**

Rather than resisting or complying with the symbolic dominance of realism and Orientalism, Gao’s plays opt to escape them through reflexivity. In order to identify and reflexively observe the unconscious limitations in his creative works, Gao creates the trope of the “chaotic self” (*hundun de ziwo*).<sup>54</sup> Being aware of the covert influence of the doxic rules as a writer in the New Era Chinese literary field and the world literary field respectively, Gao understands that reflexivity is a never-ending process. On top of the reflexive observation through the artistic representation

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<sup>54</sup> Gao, “Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth,” in *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*, ed. Horace Engdahl, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2002), 122.

of his plays, Gao introduces another level of observation to observe the initial observation. Such is Gao's perspective of the "Third Eye" (*di san zhi yanjing*).<sup>55</sup> By "escaping from censorship," then, I am referring to Gao's re-presentation of censorship as a source of productive expression which, in his plays, I identify as "the aesthetics of reflexivity." Gao's plays are conceived with the intent of performance.<sup>56</sup> They are therefore infused with the qualities of acting and theatre at the point of writing, before any directorial intervention or actor's embodiment. As I shall elaborate in Chapter Three, Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity is an observation of an observation (See Figure 1).

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<sup>55</sup> Gao, "Guandian ji yishi" [Perspective as Awareness], in *Lun chuangzuo* [On Creative Production] (Taipei: Linking Books, 2008), 155-159.

<sup>56</sup> Gao, "Dramaturgical Method and the Neutral Actor," *Aesthetics and Creation*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York: Cambria, 2012), 159.





Fig. 1: Gao Xingjian and The Third Eye’s “Observation of an Observation.”

Several scholars, including Quah Sy Ren<sup>57</sup> and Izabella Łabędzka<sup>58</sup>, as well as Gao himself<sup>59</sup> have thoroughly examined his theatrical techniques of suppositionality and tripartite acting. Moreover, there is consensus regarding Gao’s theatre as the product of the dual influence of Chinese and European theatrical traditions. Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect or distancing effect)<sup>60</sup> is a direct reference for Gao’s theorization of tripartite acting and the neutral actor. Vsevolod Meyerhold’s notion of “stylisation” is also a major inspiration for Gao’s artistic use of suppositionality. At the same time, Gao draws from the portrayal of the contrast between real and unreal in Chinese *xiqu*, and particularly on Huang Zuolin’s appropriation of *xiqu*’s *xieyi* aesthetic in Chinese modern theatre. For Quah, what sets Gao apart from Western and Chinese modern dramatists, though, is his “transform[ation of] philosophies into forms and [his usage of] them in terms of theatrical representation for the contemplation of the modern human condition.”<sup>61</sup> By transforming philosophies like Chan/Zen Buddhism into aesthetic forms, Gao focuses on representing and contemplating the “modern human condition” rather than mobilizing the masses for action. In this sense, Gao’s theatre is what Quah calls “an autonomous mode of artistic representation” because it only strives to portray human beings.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: Hawai’i University Press, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Izabella Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian’s Idea of Theatre: from the word to the image* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Gao Xingjian, *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* [In search of modern theatre] (Beijing 1988: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe).

<sup>60</sup> There has yet to be a consensus towards the translation of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* into English. “Alienation” effect is the most common but not the most accurate as it may be misunderstood as an “alienation of the audience,” which is the opposite of Brecht’s aim. Distancing effect, estrangement, have also been proposed. I have opted to use “distancing effect” in my discussions as it corresponds with my emphasis of detachment in Gao’s theatre. See John Willett, “General Introduction,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

Quah's understanding of Gao's theatre as form rather than philosophy or ideology derives directly from the playwright's artistic vision of being "without isms." According to Gao:

To be without isms is not to be without opinions, points of view or thoughts. However, these opinions, points of view and thoughts do not require verification or a conclusion and do not constitute a system, but end as soon as they are voiced and they are voiced even if it is futile to voice them. Nonetheless, unless physically incapable of speech, to be alive in the world one inevitably speaks, therefore without isms is in fact simply speech without outcomes.<sup>63</sup>

Gao's definition of being without isms should be understood in three layers: Firstly, "without isms" is a phrase, and should not be mistaken for an ideology or, itself, an "ism". Secondly, "without isms" does not require individual expression to be dictated by conclusive outcomes. Expression that is without isms is only for the sake of expression. Thirdly, since the expression of one's opinion is an innate desire, expression that is without isms is not a unique or categorical way of expression; it is simply, as described above by Gao, "speech without outcomes."

It is worth reiterating that the phrase without isms is an individualistic expression. And as can be seen from the above unpacking of Gao's explanation, without isms is a highly reflexive expression too – a point which I shall elaborate on in Chapter Two. If censorship manifests within expression, the phrase without isms and its ideals regarding artistic expression remain within the greater ideological structure. Similarly, Gao's suppositionality and tripartite acting do not seek to

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<sup>63</sup> Gao Xingjian, "Author's Preface to *Without Isms*," trans. Mabel Lee, in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, Ibid, 42.

proactively present a version of reality, nor do they wish to mobilize people into action. However, the representation of the modern human condition does not escape the influence of censorship in its doxic and symbolic form. If Gao's theatre is never autonomous from the greater ideological structures, it is important to acknowledge the specific censoring forces that Gao is subjected to as a playwright.

Theatre embodies languages not only of the written or spoken kind, but also a range of vocabularies that are not logocentric. Antonin Artaud ponders whether the language of theatre has the same intellectual capacity as the spoken language "to not define thoughts but *to cause thinking*."<sup>64</sup> As I shall explore in Chapter Three, the foundation of Gao's escape, as I understand it, is less about his physical exile from external censorship than his capacity of redefining censorship into a reflexive expression via theatre. In Chapters Four and Five, I examine six pre-Nobel plays by Gao. In each play, I identify an element of reflexivity which informs the aesthetic representation of structural censoring forces: sound, silence, imagination, mythology, Daoism, and Chan/Zen Buddhism.

Censorship is as much a complex social issue as it is a highly personal experience. An examination of an author's response towards censorship can thus offer a more complete understanding of censorship, in both its repressive and productive forms. Overall, this project examines the negotiation between Gao's theatre and the structural censoring forces of China and Euro-America. At the same time, a fuller picture of censorship, in both its repressive and productive aspects, emerges when Gao's theatre is discussed in conjunction with the structural censoring forces he is subjected to. As Chapter Six, the conclusion of this project, contends, these insights

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<sup>64</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 69.

will be essential for further research into Gao's post-Nobel career, which remains relatively understudied in comparison to his pre-Nobel career. This project also serves as a launch-pad for an investigation into the mechanisms of censorship at the national and transnational level,<sup>65</sup> and particularly with respect to the politics of recognition and China's obsession with the Nobel Prize.

## **Chapter Two: Gao Xingjian's Without Isms**

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<sup>65</sup> Refer to Mary Mazzilli's *Gao Xingjian's Post-Exile Plays: Transnationalism and Postdramatic Theatre* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015) for latest developments of transnational readings of Gao's plays.

“Escape” (*taowang*), for Gao Xingjian, is associated with freedom: “In face of totalitarian politics, public opinion, social mores, trends, and the interests of political parties, people who seek to preserve their personal values, their characters, their spiritual independence, otherwise known as ‘freedom,’ can only escape. If they cannot even escape, they are essentially dead.”<sup>66</sup> Gao’s simultaneous awareness towards the dangers of state politics and sociocultural forces echoes the type of structural censorship which I have touched on in Chapter One. While externally-imposed state censorship is identifiable, internal self-censorship, in the Foucauldian sense, appears to be omnipresent and inevitable. Nevertheless, Gao proclaims that the approach to preserving one’s spiritual freedom is to escape.

In this study of Gao’s pre-Nobel plays, I ask: if censorship is inevitable, what is freedom of expression? What is the role of reflexivity in the pursuit of freedom of expression? How does the aesthetics of reflexivity serve as a means to “escape” censorship? Before tackling these questions, I first examine without isms (*meiyou zhuyi*) as Gao’s artistic vision. Through a contextualization of Gao’s without isms with the philosophical tenets of Friedrich Nietzsche and Keiji Nishitani, the poststructuralist debates of the author, the feminist debates of Gao’s alleged misogyny, and the postcolonial debates of the Nobel Prize, I clarify that Gao’s without isms is an individualistic and reflexive expression.

## **Without Isms**

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<sup>66</sup> Gao, “Bali suibi” [Notes from Paris], in *Meiyou zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990]), 19. Translation my own.

In Chapter One, I have briefly unpacked Gao's somewhat perplexing definition of without isms. A more accessible way of understanding without isms is to begin with a dismantling of its linguistic construction. If without isms is read as a noun, as either "without isms" (quotation marks inclusive) or without-isms (hyphenated), the term evokes comparisons with ideologies exploring an existence void of meaning, such as nihilism, existentialism, or absurdism. Yet, if both the quotation marks and hyphen are omitted, *without* and *isms* become a preposition and a noun respectively, and the term no longer evokes immediate comparisons with other ideologies. Gao states that by being without isms, he is referring to "without" (*meiyou*) as a verb phrase (that is "to be without") and "isms" (*zhuyi*) as a noun.<sup>67</sup> At first glance, the expression without isms, without quotation marks and hyphen, may cause confusion because of how it blends into a sentence as a preposition/verb phrase and a noun. Some critics have therefore resorted to using punctuation marks to remove any comprehension ambiguity.<sup>68</sup> However, I would argue that such clarifications destroy Gao's wordplay to convey an ambiguity of whether without isms is itself an ideology, and more importantly, to pave way for introducing without isms as an artistic vision of "inconclusive expression" (*wu jieguo de yanshuo*).

The difference between perceiving without isms as a noun ("without isms") or as an expression ("having no isms") should not be understated. As a noun, "without

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<sup>67</sup> Gao, "Author's Preface to Without Isms," trans. Mabel Lee, in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 42.

<sup>68</sup> The most common English translation variants of *meiyou zhuyi* are "no-ism" and "without isms" with quotation marks. For "no-ism," see Henry Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre* (London: SOAS University of London, 2000); Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2004); Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006). For "without isms" with quotation marks, see Carlos Rojas, "Without [Femin]ism: Femininity as Axis of Alterity and Desire in Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002); Lin Gang, "Toward an Aesthetics of Freedom," in Michael Lackner and Nikola Chardonnens, eds., *Polyphony Embodied: Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian's Writings* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

isms” is an absence of ideology that is defined by ideology, which implies that ideological void becomes a systematic body of ideas and doctrines. As an expression, however, without isms is merely a personal proclamation of having no ideology. The expression does not seek to convince others of its emptiness and therefore is not an organized, theoretical tenet. Without isms is, as Gao puts it, “speaking for the sake of speaking and does not lead to any conclusions.”<sup>69</sup> Although inconclusiveness is in itself an important observation and insight, without isms does not convey inconclusiveness in the category of observation, insight or “isms.” Without isms is first and foremost an expression that is purely individualistic.

Chan Buddhism is a key source of thought which Gao draws from in his exploration of void and emptiness in literary expression. It is no coincidence that “Meiyou zhuyi zixu” (Author’s Preface to Without Isms, 1995), which could be viewed as one of Gao’s literary manifestoes,<sup>70</sup> shares several stylistic features with Buddhist sutras. Repetition is very common in sutras. For example, the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Diamond Sutra), the most widely circulated Buddhist text in China, frequently repeats Subuhti, the name of the Buddha’s disciple and interlocutor. Chanting is present in all schools of Buddhism; and repetition of short texts, pithy passages, and symbolic phrases generates a sense of power for the chant.<sup>71</sup> In “Author’s Preface to Without Isms,” there is a strong sense of repetition, as evident by the fact that nearly every paragraph begins with the phrase “without isms.” The words “is not” (*bushi*) also appear a total of 14 times.

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<sup>69</sup> Gao, “Author’s Preface to Without Isms,” *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> The essay “Lengde wenxue” (Cold Literature) is also considered by Gilbert Fong as Gao’s artistic manifesto. See Fong, “Freedom and Marginality: The Life and Art of Gao Xingjian,” *Cold Literature*, *Ibid*, ix.

<sup>71</sup> Kevin Trainor, “Chanting,” in *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 84-5.



In addition, Gao appropriates the Buddha's apophatic theological thinking of *via negativa* to explain without isms. Since Nirvana is a sublime religious status that cannot be fully described by language, the Buddha utilizes *via negativa* to explain what Nirvana is not.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Gao uses the apophatic theological thinking of *via negativa* to explain what without isms is not:

Without isms, but not without choices. One can do something, or one can do nothing. If there is something to be done, then do it. But if nothing can be done, it does not mean everything is trashed. If something is to be done, do as much as one can. But do not be killed or commit suicide for a cause.

Therefore, without isms is not nihilism nor eclecticism, nor is it egotism or solipsism. It opposes totalitarian dictatorship but also opposes the inflation of the self to the status of God or Superman. It also hates other people being trampled upon like dog shit.<sup>73</sup>

Gao differentiates without isms from nihilism, eclecticism, egotism, and solipsism by demonstrating how the idea of being without isms disrupts binary thinking: Nihilism views that nothing in existence is of value. In contrast, Gao's without isms states that "if nothing can be done, it does not mean everything is trashed." Eclecticism is the attempt to understand one's existence by adopting multiple doctrines which have inherent and unique values. Yet without isms offers one the choice to "do something" or "do nothing." Egotism and solipsism view the self as central to all meanings of life, but without isms does not romanticize the self to the extent that one needs to "be killed or commit suicide for a cause."

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<sup>72</sup> Donald Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 63.

<sup>73</sup> Gao, "Author's Preface to Without isms," *Ibid*, 48.

From the above excerpt, it can be seen that a key aspect of without isms is being self-aware of how isms restrict an individual's space of exploration about his own values and thinking. To be sure, Gao recognizes that the aforementioned isms serve the purpose of liberating the individual to a certain extent. For example, the idea of being without isms does share the stance of "oppos[ing] totalitarian dictatorship." Yet without isms is even more concerned about whether such an opposition towards totalitarianism would lead to narcissism, or what Gao describes elsewhere as "a blind state of self-love."<sup>74</sup> Without isms therefore "opposes the inflation of the self to the status of God or Superman."

It is intriguing how Gao references Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the Superman (*Übermensch*) in his comparison of without isms and nihilism. In his Nobel lecture, Gao further refers to Nietzsche as "a very egotistic philosopher:"

A person cannot be God, certainly not replace God, and rule the world as a Superman; he will only succeed in creating more chaos and make a greater mess of the world. In the century after Nietzsche, man-made disasters left the blackest records in the history of mankind. Supermen of all types called leader of the people, head of the nation and commander of the race did not balk at resorting to various violent means to perpetuate crimes that in no way resemble the ravings of a very egotistic philosopher. However, I do not wish to waste this talk on literature by saying too much about politics and history, what I want to do is to use this opportunity to speak as one writer in the voice of an individual.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gao, "Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth," in *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*, ed. Horace Engdahl (Singapore: World Scientific, 2002), 122.

<sup>75</sup> Gao, "The Case for Literature," trans. Mabel Lee, in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, Ibid, 10.

Gao has stated that without isms “is not to be without opinions, points of view or thoughts.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, he reserves one of his harshest critiques for Nietzsche. Gao’s implication of Nietzsche as responsible for “the blackest records in the history of humankind” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, for an extended period of time, a prominent opinion amongst Anglo-Saxon countries.<sup>77</sup> In addition to being considered as an important philosophical inspiration for the militarism and imperialism of Adolf Hitler’s German Nazis during the two World Wars, Nietzschean thought has also been viewed as a prototype of the fascist political ethos of dictators from Benito Mussolini to Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein,<sup>78</sup> or what Gao refers to as “Supermen of all types.”

However, Gao’s vehement critique of Nietzsche’s Superman remains unsubstantiated. Consistent with his artistic vision of without isms, Gao prefers to focus on literature rather than politics and history, and his accusation of Nietzsche’s role in inspiring wars, invasions, and massacres, has not been expounded. Yet without considering the notion of Superman in the context of Nietzsche’s entire set of writing, Gao’s critique will only result in a reading of Nietzsche that is no less problematic and inaccurate as that of Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth Nietzsche.<sup>79</sup> And if Nietzsche’s writings resist a uniform understanding,<sup>80</sup> it seems to be more productive and

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<sup>76</sup> Gao, “Author’s Preface to *Without Isms*,” Ibid, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 9.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche, Godfather or Fascist?: On The Uses And Abuses Of A Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth Nietzsche, who married an anti-Semite and held exclusive rights to Nietzsche’s writings for an extended period of time, is partly responsible for the version of Nietzsche which the Nazi’s appropriated and inspired German militarism. She paved way for the interpretation that Nietzsche was a proto-Nazi. See Kauffman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Ibid, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Gao’s critique of Nietzsche is part of the larger divisive understanding of Nietzsche. As Walter Kaufmann observes, Nietzsche is a “myth” that even his admirers and his critics have trouble agreeing what he stands for. See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Ibid, 3.

objective to understand Gao's critique of Nietzsche as only a critique of certain readings of Nietzsche instead of a critique of the philosopher himself.

According to Nietzsche's biographer Walter Kaufmann, the key to understanding Nietzsche is the notion of "self-overcoming."<sup>81</sup> In the following paragraphs, I shall discuss Nietzsche's self-overcoming in conjunction with Keiji Nishitani's Zen Buddhist reading of the same idea. I argue that Gao's critique of Nietzsche lies not in the act of self-overcoming but in the process of self-overcoming: is it possible that the self can be overcome if the self is always present in the process of self-overcoming? In this light, Gao's without isms is an artistic vision that overcomes the artistic self without replacing it. The space of the author is not a void of nothingness but simply of emptiness. An expression of being without isms is an inconclusive expression as opposed to a conclusive expression.

In *On The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche states that "All great things bring about their own demise through an act of self-sublimation: that is the law of life, the law of necessary 'self-overcoming' in the essence of life – the lawgiver is himself always exposed to the cry '*patere legem, quam ipse tulisti*' [submit to the law you yourself have made]."<sup>82</sup> For Nietzsche, self-overcoming is the basis of all aspects of life where the creation of the legislation brings about the potential of it being applied onto the legislation itself. Yet this process of self-overcoming is not a rejection of the law, but rather a sublimation in which the original is retained and reinterpreted into something new.<sup>83</sup> In the context of an individual, traditional moral values inherited and subscribed by an individual can also go through the process of self-overcoming, and resulting in a transformation of the old into new values. In

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Essay III, 27.

<sup>83</sup> Peter R. Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 142-43.

Nietzschean terms, the self-overcoming of an individual is “a will to power,”<sup>84</sup> which seeks to attain a state of personal maturation and spiritual growth through the “willing” or transcendence of one’s own nature.

Nietzsche’s Superman (or The Overman) is the optimal state of perpetual self-overcoming. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891), the solitary protagonist Zarathustra shares his teachings of the Overman: “I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man?”<sup>85</sup> Building on the notion of self-overcoming, Nietzsche introduces the Overman as someone who creates his own values. In contrast to the “ebb of this great flood,” or the masses of society, the Overman is not content with following the existing mainstream values and structures. In *On The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche challenges the roots of 19<sup>th</sup> century Judeo-Christian moral values of “good” and “evil.” He is especially critical of how the weak and mediocre Christian masses have determined the strong and noble elites as “evil,” an attitude which Nietzsche refers to as *ressentiment*.<sup>86</sup>

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche first announces that “God is dead.”<sup>87</sup> From a Judeo-Christian perspective, the demise of God equates to the end of a fundamental belief and therefore the loss of meaning in life, and the state of nihilism. However, Nietzschean nihilism finds an individual proactively giving meaning to his surroundings. Since one’s perception of the world is individually constructed, the notion of fate or destiny no longer exists. Instead, what we experience in life is an

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<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, “Of Self-Overcoming,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 136.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morality*, *Ibid*, Essay I, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 167.

“eternal recurrence” of challenges in which we are capable of overcoming. From this perspective, the Nietzschean Superman is one who takes responsibility over every aspect of his life, including the most daunting and painful parts: “But my creative will, my destiny, wants it so. Or, to speak more honestly: my will wants precisely such a destiny.”<sup>88</sup> The Nietzschean Superman, finally, attains liberation from the perception of fate and reaches the state of embracing all aspects of his life. Nietzsche refers to this as *amor fati*, or “the will to love one’s fate.”<sup>89</sup>

Nietzsche constructs his perspectives towards life based on the assumption that individuals inherently possess the freedom of choice to interpret the world. Individuals bear the responsibility towards their own happiness and sufferings in life. Yet Theodor Adorno, for example, notably criticizes Nietzsche’s *amor fati* as “ignominious adaptation,” since any embrace of the inhumane living conditions such as the World War II concentration camps is unthinkable.<sup>90</sup> The concept of *amor fati* appears to have failed to consider the possibility that the individual’s self is burdened by social conventions and perceptions, and therefore blinded in his perception of the world. As a counterargument, Carol Diethe notes that Nietzsche only spoke for himself: “Amor Fati: that is my innermost nature.”<sup>91</sup>

The objective of this survey of Nietzsche’s thought, nevertheless, is to focus on readings of Nietzsche, as opposed to Nietzsche himself. Through a Zen Buddhist reading<sup>92</sup> of Nietzschean thought, Keiji Nishitani proposes a philosophical approach

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<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Blissful Islands,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Ibid, 111.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, “Epilogue,” in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966).

<sup>90</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, New York: Verso, 2004 [1951]), 98.

<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche, “Epilogue,” in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, Ibid, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Due to the global circulation of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, its practice of meditation has several variants. The Sanskrit term *dhyāna* means meditation. The Chinese transliteration of *dhyāna* is “*Channa*,” which is then abbreviated into “Chan.” “Zen” is the Japanese reading of Chan. See Ronald S Green, “East Asian Buddhism,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (Sussex, Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 123.

of “overcoming nihilism by way of passing through nihilism.”<sup>93</sup> At the core of Nishitani’s critique of Nietzsche is “the problem of the will” within his notion of the “will to power.”<sup>94</sup> As explained earlier, Nietzsche’s response to the death of God is the individual’s inherent freedom to will, and to overcome all difficulties in life, through the construction of one’s own values. However, the values via the “will to power,” then, become the binary opposite of Christian moral values. In place of Christianity, Nietzsche replaces it with one’s own values, and the corresponding need for individualistic will to power. As such, Nietzsche argues for a world that bears no meaning, unless one engages in a will to power. Will to power, paradoxically, becomes nihilism in the form of will. As Martin Heidegger, whom Nishitani studied under for two years, describes: Nietzsche’s value-based “will to power” is the “ultimate entanglement in nihilism.”<sup>95</sup>

Gao’s critique of Nietzsche echoes that of Nishitani’s. Gao’s distaste for Nietzsche’s narcissism is precisely what Nishitani finds problematic about the Nietzschean “will to power:” the replacement of the will of God with the will to power. Gao’s idea that without isms is “speech without outcomes” points to Nishitani’s “overcoming nihilism by way of passing through nihilism.” On the one hand, Nietzsche’s pronouncement that “God is dead” can be considered an unacknowledged influence for Gao’s without isms, as both tenets are striving for human action which does not have any structure to verify or to conclude its meaning. On the other hand, without isms displays the spirit of emptiness as it insists on the

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<sup>93</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* [The Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji]. Vol. 20. Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995. 192. The translation of this quote is from Bret W Davis, “Nishitani after Nietzsche,” in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, eds. Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder, Jason M. Wirth (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, “Nishitani after Nietzsche,” *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A Capuzzi (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982), 204.; qtd. in Davis, “Nishitani after Nietzsche.”

production of “speech without outcomes,” and by extension, avoids a return to the absolutism of Nietzschean nihilism. According to Nishitani’s Chan/Zen Buddhist reading, the key to attaining the state of emptiness is the cutting off of the roots to the self. As opposed to replacing one ego with another ego, Chan/Zen Buddhism’s departing point is the “cutting the root” of this primordial will, or *daishi* (Great Death).<sup>96</sup> This results not in nothingness, but emptiness: “Emptiness in the sense of śūnyatā is only emptiness when it empties itself even of the standpoint that represents some ‘thing’ that is emptiness.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Gao’s definition of without isms indicates the opposite of will to power. Without isms is what Nishitani describes as a “non-willing” alternative to embracing the world. An individual of without isms produces expressions without the necessity of conclusion.

However, Gao clearly remarks that despite the use of Buddhist material and elements in the play *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (1992), he is not producing a Buddhist play.<sup>98</sup> Gao’s without isms is not wholly a metaphysical rejection of the self. I find without isms as a means of reflexivity, or a means of self-awareness without the burden of isms. Gao proclaims that the premise of his creative works is an escape from what he refers to as the “chaotic self” (*hundun de ziwo*). Such an escape is to achieve a spiritual yet critical distance from the ideologically burdened self and produce creative works of without isms. Gao’s escape from the chaotic self, as I shall elaborate in Chapter Three, is the portrayal of the relationship between his internal self and his external surroundings via Gao’s aesthetics of reflexivity.

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<sup>96</sup> Nishitani, *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* [The Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji], vol 11. (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995), 190-91; qtd. in Davis, “Nishitani after Nietzsche,” *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>97</sup> Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. with intro. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 96; qtd. in David Jones, “Empty Soul, Empty World,” in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>98</sup> Gao, “Dialogue and Rebuttal,” trans. Gilbert Fong, in *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), 136.



## The Death of the Author in Gao Xingjian Studies

Nietzsche's influence is perhaps most evident and permanent on poststructuralist philosophers and literary theorists.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the impact of Nietzsche's writings on 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and cultural theory cannot be understated, which explains why Gao chose to preface his Nobel lecture about literature and the "voice of an individual" with a strong, albeit unelaborated, condemnation of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's skepticism towards "Truth" in the age of the death of God has in turn inspired poststructuralist critics to be skeptical about any authority towards textual meaning. At the end of his essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes pronounces that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."<sup>100</sup> The parallels between Barthes's dismantling of the "Auteur-dieu" (Author-god) and Nietzsche's "God is dead" are imminent. Building upon Ferdinand de Saussure's study of signs, or "semiotics,"<sup>101</sup> Barthes considers the literary text as a compilation of linguistic signs which awaits the interpretations of potential readers. Writing is neutral, composite and lack of subjectivity: the figure formerly known as the "Author" is for Barthes a "scriptor" who merely presents the text as a composite of narratives and meanings.<sup>102</sup> As such, the writer has no authority

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<sup>99</sup> Patrick Bixby, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, eds. Gregory Castle, Robert Eaglestone, M Keith Booker (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 363.

<sup>100</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

<sup>101</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure's study of signs, or "semiotics," is widely credited for revolutionising the study of language, and more generally, our understanding of social and cultural products. Saussure approached linguistics in a "synchronic," nonhistorical, and systematic way. He considered language within a greater, universal structure, as opposed to seeing language as developing through historical periods and time. The structure with which Saussure observed was a tripartite one, consisting of signifier, signified, and sign. Sign, or the word, is made up of signifier (the appearance of the word) and signified (the meaning of the word). Because the meaning of the word has no inherent relation with the appearance of the word, the meaning of the word is arbitrary and can vary depending on the speaker. Saussure considered language as the most important sign of society, and social behaviour is dictated by language. Hence Saussure's approach to linguistics has impacted analysis of cultural products, including literature. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Ibid*, 142.

over the meaning of the text, and is only one of infinite number of interpreters of the text.

In response to Barthes' radically anti-authorial stance, Michel Foucault sought a third path which preserved the Author-figure, but for the purpose of revealing its "Author functions." In the essay "What is an Author?" (1969),<sup>103</sup> Foucault's method of genealogical inquiry of the "Author-figure" is indebted to Nietzsche's own genealogical examination of Christian moral values. While Barthes sees the Author as the tyrannical ruler over textual meaning and seeks to liberate the reader, Foucault is more interested in the exploration of the power structures that restrict the Author. He observes that the Author performs various political and ideological functions that do not necessarily relate to the meaning of the text. Rather, such Author-functions are part of an institutional control over authors that holds them accountable for transgressive works.<sup>104</sup> As such, the Author-figure, for Foucault, actually restricts the possible meanings of a text.<sup>105</sup>

Barthes' and Foucault's skepticisms towards the Author are well-known and are essential readings in any undergraduate literary theory course. Nevertheless, the author has never disappeared or "died" from literary studies. As Seàn Burke observes, "the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead."<sup>106</sup> Instead, the poststructuralist critiques of the Author have been absorbed by the textual readings of various schools of theories and studies.<sup>107</sup> Although the author remains

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<sup>103</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984*. Vol. 2, *Aesthetics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 216.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>106</sup> Seàn Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>107</sup> In addition to Nietzsche's influence on Barthes and Foucault, Burke also observes how the poststructuralist arguments of anti-authorialism can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who states that "the pure work implies the disappearance of the poet-speaker." See Burke, "Prehistory of the Author," *The Death and Return of the Author*, Ibid, 8.

present in contemporary literary criticism, the critic's perception of the author is very much informed by the Barthesian scriptor and the Foucauldian "Author-function."

A substantial portion of studies on Gao adopts a poststructuralist view towards Gao as an author figure. In "Criticism vs Creative Writing, I vs Gao Xingjian," for example, Henry Zhao compares Gao's without isms to Jacques Derrida's notion of "erasure" that reduces the past into "rubbles."<sup>108</sup> More specifically, Zhao understands Gao's without isms as anti-repetition, a position that "vows not to repeat anyone, least of all himself, and every new work has to be a step forward."<sup>109</sup> Yet repetition, for Zhao, is at the core of literary criticism:

In the critic's vocabulary, repetition is the most essential word. Any recognition of a feature in art is the result of the discovery of a pattern of repetitions, and any evaluation is based on a certain grouping of repetitions. Without repetitions, research is no longer possible, and the world of art would appear as an intangible nebula closed to critical examination.<sup>110</sup>

Zhao believes that Gao's rejection of isms will self-implode once being studied against Gao's own cultural and aesthetic background. For example, Zhao observes how the inclusion of Chan/Zen elements into Gao's plays is already an apparent contradiction between Gao's authorship of without isms and his creative works. As such, Zhao concludes that "Gao Xingjian and I, as artist and critic, are engaged in a kind antagonist relationship in the ensuing discussions." He further states that "As a critic, I must constantly re-adjust my position in front of Gao Xingjian the artist. I am

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<sup>108</sup> Henry Zhao, "Criticism vs Creative Writing, I vs Gao Xingjian," in *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism*, (London: SOAS University of London, 2000), 13.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

like a tennis player on the other side of the net, intensely watching how the ball will be served so as to take a more advantageous position to respond.”<sup>111</sup>

Few authors have assumed the roles of author and critic of their own works like Gao.<sup>112</sup> In face of Gao the author and his authorial intent of without isms, Zhao the critic is anxious of falling into the trap of intentional fallacy.<sup>113</sup> Throughout Gao’s polymathic career, he has unreservedly elaborated on the literary, historical, philosophical, political, and theoretical backdrop of his creative work. Gao has altogether released seven volumes of critical essays. In these critical works, he introduces an array of concepts such as “without isms,” “cold literature” (*leng de wenxue*), “omnipotent theatre,” (*quannan xiqu*) “tripartite acting” (*yanyuan sanzhongxing*), and “flow of language” (*yuyan liu*). Despite his considerable productivity in theory and criticism, he denies being a theorist or a critic. Instead, Gao perceives his criticism as “self-criticism” and claims that he is just an author who enjoys sharing his thoughts about his own works.<sup>114</sup> A more practical purpose, perhaps, is to offer theoretical support for his own creative works, which are often criticized for their unconventionality.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>112</sup> This is particularly true for playwrights. Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Miller are examples of dramatists who join Gao Xingjian in producing plays and supporting them with their own theoretical framework. Cao Yu, one of the foremost playwrights and predecessor of Gao, did produce criticism about his own plays but not in a systematic framework as Gao does. See Gilbert Fong, “Yi wuzhu wei ben—Gao Xingjian xiju lun de beihou” [Non-abidance as the Basis—Behind Gao Xingjian’s Theatre Theory], in *Lun Xiju* [On Theatre] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>113</sup> Posing as a direct challenge to the Romanticist notion of the Author as creative “Genius,” New Criticism seeks to let the text speak for itself. William K Wimsatt and Monroe C Beardsley famously state in the essay “Intentional Fallacy” (1954) that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” All extratextual elements are rejected. Instead, the text is viewed in a vacuum and evaluated for its rhetorical features like irony and ambiguity.

<sup>114</sup> Gao, *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* [In search of modern theatre] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 1.

<sup>115</sup> Ngai Lingdun compares the origins of Gao’s theoretical essays with those of Bertolt Brecht’s. Both playwrights predict that their progressive aesthetics would not be immediately accepted nor appreciated by the theatre mainstream. In the words of Brecht: “Most of the remarks, if not all, were written as notes to my plays, to allow them to be correctly performed.” See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, trans. Jack Davis, Romy Fursland, Steve Giles et al., (London:

To be sure, the critic should always be critical about the subject of his study. What I seek to problematize, though, is Zhao's lack of *serious* engagement with Gao's authorial intent, particularly with regards to without isms. Despite Gao's prolific descriptions and explanations of his artistic vision and creative works, Zhao appears to have little interest in them. Not unlike Barthes, Zhao's priority is to view Gao as his antagonist, thereby paving way to displace and dismantle Gao's authorial position.

Under the indirect influence of Nietzsche and the direct influence of poststructuralist theory, Zhao seeks to author his own meaning of Gao's creative works through the Derridean notion of "erasure" as well as Zhao's own understanding of "Zen Buddhism" and Chinese *xieyi* aesthetics. Burke crucially reminds us, however, that the French poststructuralist writings about the author do not necessarily suggest the complete negation of the author. Instead, the removal of the author-figure seeks to situate and redistributes the author outside of the construct of the author-figure.<sup>116</sup> Derrida, whom Zhao references, clarifies that "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it [...]. I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions."<sup>117</sup> The pronouncement of the death of the author is the removal of authorial intent and biographical background as the absolute centre of

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Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015 [1964]), 267. I shall elaborate on the controversial reception of Gao's work in China in Chapter Three. See Ngai, *Yi sheng er, er sheng san : Gao Xingjian xiao shuo yan jiu* [One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three: A Study of Gao Xingjian's Novels] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Publishing Press, 2013), 159.

<sup>116</sup> Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Ibid, 184.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida's comment is a response to a question following the presentation of "Sign, Structure, and Play." See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy. The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970 [1966]), 247–72; qtd in Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Ibid, 167.

textual meaning. Yet this does not equate to the negation of all traces of authorial presence.

In fact, the poststructuralist claim of the death of the author paves way for what Burke describes as a “redistribution of authorial subjectivity:” “[...] the denial of an absolute authorial centre implies not the necessary absence of the author, but the redistribution of authorial subjectivity within a textual *mise en scène* which it does not command entirely.”<sup>118</sup> Distinct from authorial intent and biographical information, authorial subjectivity refers to the aesthetic and stylistic choices which the author infuses into his text. The poststructuralist appropriation of the linguistic sign system into literary criticism suggests that no authorial subjectivity could take complete ownership over any language and its meaning. However, this does not prevent the author from expressing his subjectivity in his creative use of language. Authorial subjectivity is redistributed from the author-figure to the author’s aesthetic techniques in a literary text. As such, the author does not disappear but lives on in another form. The question, then, is how to examine the author’s subjectivity in language that has been used by many others of the past.

The issue with regards to the demonstration of authorial subjectivity in literary language is precisely the concern of Zhao’s critique of Gao’s “anti-repetition” proclamation. Zhao contends that any notions of “anti-repetition” in literature would only reduce the creative work into “an intangible nebula closed to critical examination.”<sup>119</sup> As a noted semiotician, Zhao seems to have limited Gao’s withoutisms to a dualistic understanding of repetition and anti-repetition. He has conflated Gao’s rejection of categories with the rejection of repetition. In my understanding,

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<sup>118</sup> Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Ibid, 184.

<sup>119</sup> Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, Ibid, 14.

Gao's denial of labels should not be confused with anti-repetition, and surely not an erasure of his own history of influences. Instead, Gao's without isms is a means of expressing his authorial subjectivity beyond the limitations of categorizations. In the staging suggestions of *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (1992), a play which features a silent yet acrobatic monk, Gao pre-empts Zhao's reading of his plays as "Zen Theatre:"

The play's dialogic form is inspired by the *gong'an* style of question and answer in Chan Buddhism. The play has no intention of promoting Buddhism, and there is no need for the director to devote his time and effort in expounding the meaning of Chan Buddhism. The author only wants to propose that this kind of dialogue and cross-questioning is capable of being dramatized as a form of stage performance.<sup>120</sup>

Gao acknowledges his borrowing of the Chan/Zen Buddhist tradition of *gong'an*, but this is not a passive appropriation of Chan elements. Gao's sole intention is for theatrical experimentation, and hence he specifically rejects any readings that would treat *Dialogue and Rebuttal* as a "Chan Buddhist" play. Without isms, which Gao characterizes as "expression without outcome,"<sup>121</sup> recognizes the instability of meaning. However, the instability of meaning is not because of the breakdown of the sign system. Drawing inspiration from the Chan Buddhist notion of the "great death" of the ego, without isms strives for reflexivity, a never-ending inspection and removal of all conventions and ideologies that burden the artist from expressing his subjectivity. Commenting on the impact that the linguistic sign system has on literary criticism, Gao remarks that "the art of language lies in the presenter being able to convey his feelings to others, it is not some sign system or semantic structure

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<sup>120</sup> Gao, "Dialogue and Rebuttal," trans. Gilbert Fong, in *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), 136.

<sup>121</sup> Gao, "Author's Preface to Without isms," *Ibid*, 42.

requiring nothing more than grammatical structures. If the living person behind language is forgotten, semantic expositions easily turn into games of the intellect.”<sup>122</sup> What Zhao has ignored is specifically Gao’s authorial subjectivity, or the “living person behind language.”

It is important to note that Gao is not anti-theory. At its most basic sense, “theory” is a way of contemplation and speculation. Anti-theory, then, is a theory that provokes critics to rethink how to do theory. WJT Mitchell’s understanding of the premise of the anti-theory project is invaluable:

If we take [anti-theory] literally, this is a theory of pure self-negation, [...] articulating what many will see as the ultimate nihilism of contemporary theory. But if it is nihilism, it is one that demands an answer, not easy polemical dismissal—one that calls for theory to clarify its claims, not to mystify them with the easy assurance of intellectual fashion and institutional authority.<sup>123</sup>

In this sense, Gao’s without isms is actually a theory of anti-theory which reveals the ineffectiveness of existing theories. Gao’s rejection of a series of theories and isms shows the lack of authorial subjectivity within these theories and isms, as well as a tendency to homogenize subjectivity. At the same time, Gao instils his own authorial subjectivity into these thoughts and isms by rejecting them on his own terms. Gao’s utmost priority is expressing his authorial subjectivity through his aesthetic use of language. Aesthetics are never divorced from politics and history, and Gao must engage in the latter in order to proceed with the former. As an artist of without isms, Gao draws from various philosophical thought and ideology, but never repeats them

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<sup>122</sup> Gao, “The Case for Literature,” *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>123</sup> W. T. J. Mitchell, “Introduction: Pragmatic Theory,” in *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. T. J. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 10.



in a wholesale fashion. Despite his strong condemnation of Nietzsche, Gao's subversion of Chinese realism in literature is philosophically indebted to Nietzsche's destabilization of all traditional moral institutions. Gao's without isms as an authorial intent of no authorial intent can also be traced to the poststructuralist notions of de-centering the author. And though Gao's critique of Nietzsche and his philosophical descendants are influenced by Chan Buddhism, Gao is not appropriating Chan Buddhism for the religious purpose of attaining Buddhahood.

Zhao is commendable for offering a rare reflexive examination of how Gao's authorial intent has impacted Zhao himself as a critic of Gao's works. I believe the landscape of Gao Xingjian studies would experience substantial change if critics and readers shared Zhao's self-awareness. This is especially crucial amidst the two key controversies surrounding Gao, namely his alleged misogyny and the cultural politics of his Nobel Prize win. By addressing these two controversies through Gao's without isms, I reveal the importance of a serious engagement with Gao's artistic vision in the study of Gao's works.

One of the more common accusations against Gao is the perception that he is a misogynistic writer.<sup>124</sup> In his examination of the novel *One Man's Bible* (1999), Carlos Rojas deems both the novel and Gao's without isms as misogynistic.<sup>125</sup> He cites several paragraphs from *One Man's Bible* as examples of the novel's narrator being "haunted by the figure of the absent mother – or, more abstractly, by a fantasy of an idealized maternal space."<sup>126</sup> In this space, Rojas argues the narrator claims to experience sexual, national and familial freedom, yet such freedom is rooted in the

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<sup>124</sup> See Mary Mazzilli's review of the debate of Gao's misogyny. "Gender in Gao Xingjian's *Between Life and Death: The Notion of Originary Self and the Use of Tripartition*," *Frontier Literature Studies China*, 2015, vol. 9, no. 3: 370-74.

<sup>125</sup> Carlos Rojas, "Without [Femin]ism: Femininity as Axis of Alterity and Desire in Gao Xingjian's 'One Man's Bible,'" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 2002, vol. 14, no. 2: 163-206

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

same imagined maternal space which the narrator defines his subjectivity. In this tail-chasing of imagined freedom and subjectivity, Rojas considers Gao's proclamation of without isms to be equally illusionary:

Gao's call for being "without isms" – a call that has become one of the best known catch-phrases of this insistently diasporic author – while ostensibly intended as a renunciation of overt politics and nationalist ideology, at the same time also functions as an implicit erasure of feminism – whereby the subject's masculine self-identity is asserted through a process of displacement in which many of the subject's own desires and anxieties are developed against an abstract feminine space, a space that is stereotypically reduced to a hybrid synthesis of maternal and (hetero)sexual attributes.<sup>127</sup>

For Rojas, Gao's literary misogyny is constructed through Gao's idealized notion of without isms. Rojas finds without isms is in itself an ideology that suppresses ideological currents.<sup>128</sup> In Rojas' opinion, Gao is simply imagining that political and nationalist ideologies do not exist in his psyche. And more importantly, Rojas contends that such an imagined space is misogynistic as Gao erases all isms, including feminism, in such a self-denying process known as "without isms."

Rojas' close-reading of *One Man's Bible* is commendable for its meticulousness though not for its rigor. At the beginning of his discussion, Rojas is careful not to consider the novel's narrator as Gao the author. For example, he notes that the photograph which appears to link both stories to Gao's biographical detail, bear slight inconsistencies. Yet as the analysis progresses, Rojas gradually associates the narrator as the author, and even presents the two as "narrator/ author" in his

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 200.

concluding paragraph.<sup>129</sup> By examining a literary work as autobiographical, Rojas has unwittingly fallen into the trap of intentional fallacy.

To be fair, *One Man's Bible* does contain several instances that echo Gao's life and philosophy. As Rojas highlights, the narrator repeatedly muses about being without isms.<sup>130</sup> One may question why Gao portrays his narrator and characters who resemble himself. In my view, this is because writing is Gao's means of reflexivity, and his "escape" from isms. According to Gao, without isms is an inconclusive expression. And as I have argued with reference to Gao's explanation of without isms, as well as references to Nietzsche, Nishitani, and Burke, without isms is more specifically a personal and reflexive expression. Through an aesthetic of reflexivity, Gao observes the ideology that burdens him from a distance, which is how he escapes them too. In fact, if Gao's writings are expressions of without isms and an aesthetics of reflexivity, it matters little whether Gao is sympathetic of women or misogynistic. Mary Mazzilli, for example, seeks not to categorize Gao as "loving" or "hating" woman, but instead focuses on examining how Gao complicates gender dynamics and issues, and how Gao represents the complexities of gender relationships and constructs through his theatrical language of tripartite acting.<sup>131</sup>

Yet, for Rojas, on a surface level, without isms is, "an appeal for the potential independence of aesthetics from ideology, a call for an autonomous 'art-for-art's sake.'"<sup>132</sup> At a deeper level, Rojas thinks without isms is a means for Gao "to locate a space for himself on the margins of conventional national and ideological structures."<sup>133</sup> As Rojas's understanding of without isms appears literal and driven by

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>131</sup> Mazzilli, "Gender in Gao Xingjian's *Between Life and Death*," Ibid, 392.

<sup>132</sup> Rojas, "Without [Femin]ism," Ibid, 199.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 199.

his thesis of Gao's literary misogyny," it is questionable whether Rojas had seriously engaged with Gao's notion of without isms in the writing of his article. To be sure, I am not rejecting Rojas's misogynistic reading of Gao's writings. I am more so of observing a gap in the studies of Gao: a reading of Gao's writings as without isms. Unlike Rojas, I do not seek to dismantle Gao the author so as to author my own reading. Rather, I am examining Gao's writings as aesthetic representation, as aesthetics of reflexivity. Such an absence of studying Gao's creative works as expressions of without isms is also apparent in the debate of Gao's Nobel prize win.

Gao's Nobel Literature prize win in 2000 was not only shocking, but also controversial. Gao himself described his experience of receiving the prize as a "fairy tale moment."<sup>134</sup> The news was instantly celebrated by Chinese communities around the world as it signaled the first-ever victory of the Chinese language on the global literary stage. However, in mainland China, Gao's birthplace and home to the most Chinese-language readers in the world, the announcement was met with negativity and indifference. Outside of China, Gao was an acclaimed writer and artist with a small but dedicated following. Prior to winning the Nobel Prize, his writings had already been translated into nearly a dozen languages, and was knighted *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1992 by the French Ministry of Culture.

In contrast, Gao was largely forgotten in his motherland, despite playing pioneering roles in the introduction of modernist techniques into Chinese theatre and fiction in the 1980s. After experiencing a series of controversies over his creative and critical works, Gao went on self-imposed exile to Europe in 1987. Ties between Gao and the Chinese Communist state became damaged beyond repair after he publicly

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<sup>134</sup> Gao, "Nobel Prize Banquet Speech," *Nobelprize.org*, 12 October 2000, [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-speech.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-speech.html).

revoked his Communist Party membership to protest against the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. All of Gao's writings have since been officially banned in China. After Gao won the Nobel literature prize, the Chinese government disowned him by declaring him a "French writer." Chinese state media even speculated that the Swedish Academy had allowed politics to override aesthetics in their selection of Gao, thereby challenging the credibility of the Nobel Prize. The Chinese government, however, proudly embraced the popular and state-oriented Mo Yan as China's first Nobel Prize-winning writer in 2012. Nevertheless, Gao was always controversial as a writer in China prior to his exile. His Nobel Prize win had only escalated his hostile relationship with the Chinese government onto the international stage, which involved the Nobel Prize as the most respected literary award in the world. In light of this, some critics have seized this opportunity to examine the global literary economy with Gao as their case study.

Julia Lovell remarks that the Nobel Prize operates in a "two-tier treatment" of writers: Western writers are judged by their "universal values" and non-Western writers are lauded for "representing nationalistic voices."<sup>135</sup> She believes that the Swedish Academy's decision is intricately linked to Gao's national politics of challenging Communist China, as evidenced by the disproportionate mention of his most political works in the Nobel Prize press release: Gao's novels *Soul Mountain* (1991), *One Man's Bible* (1999), and his play *Escape* (1989); all are based on two of the most scarring events in modern Chinese history, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989).<sup>136</sup> Lovell is unconvinced that the Nobel committee is truly commending Gao for his works' "universal validity." She

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<sup>135</sup> Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature*, Ibid, 26.

<sup>136</sup> Lovell, "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2002): 20.

contends the Nobel committee only views Gao as a Chinese dissident whose unfeasible independent artistic vision of “No ism” and “cold literature,” “epitomise[s] the stance of ‘neutral engagement’ that the Nobel Committee has sought in recent decades.”<sup>137</sup>

Shih Shu-mei further explores the aspects of academic discourse and the literary market as “technologies of recognition.”<sup>138</sup> In the construction of the world literary canon, the West is an “agent of recognition” who recognizes the other according to their own standards, while the non-West is an “object of recognition” that desires to be recognized.<sup>139</sup> Shih slams Western academia and literary market of defining the non-West singularly vis-à-vis the West. Despite the prevalence of the “antisystematic” poststructuralist thought, Western readings of the non-West, in both the academy and the general public, remain distant and plagued by “omnipotent definitions.”<sup>140</sup> Amidst the West’s technologies of recognition, Gao is what Shih identifies as an “exceptional particular.”<sup>141</sup> Through a close reading of Goran Malmqvist’s award ceremony speech, Shih observes that the Nobel committee viewed Gao as universally valid because of his exceptional ability to translate his experience in Maoist and post-Maoist China to a global stage. Reaching a similar conclusion as Lovell, Shih is in the opinion that Gao’s Nobel literature prize win hinged less upon his artistic merits than the politics of (Euro-American) recognition. Shih, therefore, argues that if Sinophone replaces nation, Gao’s novels and plays would be studied

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<sup>137</sup> Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital*, *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>138</sup> Shih Shu-mei, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.” *PMLA* vol. 119, no. 1 (2004): 16-30.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

with more detail, as opposed to being evaluated by specific national-related categories.<sup>142</sup>

As Lovell sums up succinctly, “writing Chinese (writing about China) on a global stage— especially if it wins a Nobel Prize – is still a highly complex undertaking.”<sup>143</sup> And while the Eurocentrism of the Nobel Prize, and of the whole Western literary field, cannot be easily dismissed, I argue that Shih’s and Lovell’s use of Gao’s Nobel Prize win as proof of Eurocentrism has only weakened their postcolonial critique of the Nobel Prize. They argue that the Nobel Prize selected Gao for his identity as a “Chinese exile writer,” as evident in the Swedish Academy’s emphasis on Gao’s novels and lack of mentioning Gao’s French background. However, neither Shih nor Lovell has supported their accusations of the Nobel with careful readings of Gao’s artistic vision and creative works.

For Shih, non-Euro-American, or “Third World,” writers are culturalised through a Eurocentric lens that stereotypes them into a singular category.<sup>144</sup> Citing Gao as her prime case study, she criticizes the Swedish Academy for focusing predominantly on Gao’s particularity, or Chinese-ness. According to Shih, the Nobel committee’s reading of Gao is incomplete as there is no mention of Gao’s French writings, or Gao’s more global insights on globalization and marketization of literature from the Nobel.<sup>145</sup> Shih argues that not everything in the text can be studied under the lens of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism. Hence, creative works should not be read as “national allegory,” which culturalises politics.<sup>146</sup> But what if Gao is

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>143</sup> Lovell, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals,” Ibid, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,” Ibid, 23.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 23.

strategically Orientalising himself, not purely for the purpose of self-Orientalising, but to “escape” from it?

Shih has overlooked the possibility that Gao has *intentionally* staged the national, and *intentionally* self-Orientalised his creative works. As I shall elaborate in Chapters Three and Five, Gao self-Orientalises himself in his Chinese mythmaking epic theatre, and to a certain extent, in his culturally non-specific psychological plays. While epic theatre plays like *Snow in August* stages Orientalism and therefore “escapes” Orientalism by way of reflection and reflexivity, psychological plays such as *Dialogue and Rebuttal* do not explicitly stage Orientalism and hence fails to fully escape Orientalism through reflexivity. Even Shih’s evidence of Gao as going beyond the omnipotent definition of the particular, such as Gao’s Francophone writings, do not acknowledge the possibility that Orientalism will exist in Gao’s writings, no matter what language he writes in. In fact, one could argue that Gao’s Francophone plays is Gao Orientalising himself as a French writer. If Gao’s entire *oeuvre* is shaped by Orientalism, the Nobel is neither “Eurocentric” nor wrong for reading Gao from an “Orientalist” perspective.

Lovell remarks that *Soul Mountain* is “a romantic core hiding behind a modernist façade, a marginal individual both detached from and capable of speaking truth for the people, a *Volkstimme* towering above the *Volk*.”<sup>147</sup> For *One Man’s Bible*, she describes it as a novel of “the individual, marginal self-battling the political oppressors” and the “Hollywood-Style Resistance Hero Challenges Commie Devils.”<sup>148</sup> As such, both novels are apparently charged with Chinese politics and contradicting with Gao’s theoretical claims of “no-isms,” which Lovell understands as

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<sup>147</sup> Lovell, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals,” *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 26.



a theoretical tenet that proclaims aesthetic neutrality, a stance that is disinterested, not indifferent, from politics. Lovell, however, appear to have opted a reductionist approach towards *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*. Both novels are highly complex works that cover different aspects of Gao's life. Although they do include Gao's experience in China, there is much more to both works than politics. As Liu Zaifu remarks, *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* are spiritual explorations of Gao's life, which include amongst other themes, politics.<sup>149</sup> Horace Engdahl also makes the case that Gao's works cannot be easily reduced to the postcolonial framework of periphery vs centre because they do not belong to either the periphery or the centre, but "an ellipse with two centers or an image of two celestial bodies gravitating toward each other."<sup>150</sup> He describes the aesthetics of Gao's works as an overlapping of cultural traditions from both Chinese and Western influences. As Quah Sy Ren's notion of "transcultural theatre" explains, Gao "is at ease in and moves freely between different cultures" and "embodies aspects of cultural exchange and integration that are at times collaboratory and at times contradictory."<sup>151</sup>

Both Shih and Lovell have replaced Gao's authorial intent with their own political agendas in their discussion of Gao and his creative works. The point of departure in their studies of Gao is to critique the Nobel Prize as a Eurocentric institution. However, it is questionable whether any literary text, especially one that is rooted in the idea of without isms, and strives to be an inconclusive expression rather than a conclusive ism, could serve as reliable evidence to establish any socio-political arguments. Shih laments how studies of Third World writers resort to binary, systematic readings, and result in a form of Hegelian master-slave dialectic, in which

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<sup>149</sup> Liu Zaifu, "Gao Xingjian he ta de jingshen zhi lu" [Gao Xingjian and his spiritual path], in *Gao Xingjian lun* [On Gao Xingjian] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2004), 10-11.

<sup>150</sup> Engdahl, "World Literature in Transformation," Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, Ibid, 14.

the First World critic constructs subjectivity of the Third World writer: “a model that limits subjectivity to a binary model of intersubjectivity of subjects and objects.”<sup>152</sup> Ironically, Shih and Lovell have precisely constructed their own versions of Gao’s subjectivity by reading Gao with their preconceived notions. In order to further their noble cause of casting light to the unequal treatment of marginalized, non-Western writers, Shih and Lovell have compromised Gao’s authorial subjectivity as without isms and replaced it with postcolonial politics. Without isms is an artistic expression without conclusion. Any study of Gao that is not based upon his aesthetic use of language is prone to misreading and misrepresentation.

Similar to the debates of Gao’s misogyny, if Gao’s writings are expressions of without isms and an aesthetics of reflexivity, it matters little whether Gao is a “national,” self-Orientalised writer, or an “international,” autonomous writer. Pascale Casanova, in her review of the history of the Nobel Prize in literature, praises Gao’s contribution as “literary dissident”<sup>153</sup> who “recreates his own tradition using nontraditional forms,” namely the transcultural integration of Western literary modernity and traditional Chinese literature.<sup>154</sup> And through this development of an original literary form, Gao carves out “an unprecedented position of autonomy” in the heavily state-censored Chinese literary tradition.<sup>155</sup> As such, Casanova finds the Swedish Academy’s decision to award Gao the Nobel Prize as a recognition of individual contributions and not the crowning of the Chinese nation and its entire cultural history. However, Casanova appears to have romanticized Gao’s pursuit of artistic freedom in an Orientalised mood. Gao is not a “literary dissident.” As I shall

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<sup>152</sup> Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition,” *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>154</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevois (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

elaborate throughout the rest of the project, whether he was a writer in 1980s China, or a writer in 1990s France, Gao has always been in negotiation and interaction with his surrounding structural censorship. Instead of describing Gao as literary freedom fighter, it is more accurate to refer to his writings of without isms as a spiritual escape of censorship through the aesthetics of reflexivity.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Two has established the importance of without isms in the discussion of Gao's writings. After reviewing the field of Gao Xingjian studies, including the misogyny debate and the Nobel Prize debate, I identify a gap of reading Gao's writings according to his authorial intent of without isms. Under the influence of poststructuralist thought, literary critics have approached Gao's authorial intent with preconceived notions of what the author-figure implicates. Hence, while Gao the author is not "dead" and remains present in the discussions of his writings, there is a lack of serious engagement with his authorial intent. My reading of Gao's without isms goes beyond the assumption of "The Death of the Author." I understand without isms as Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity. Instead of taking without isms literally as a Romanticist call for artistic independence through the rejection of all ideologies and categories, I have probed deeper into Gao's explanation and discussed without isms in conjunction with Nietzsche's Superman theory, Nishitani's Zen Buddhist critique of the Nietzschean self, and Burke's notion of redistributing authorial subjectivity into literary language. I discover that without isms is an artistic vision that prioritizes the aesthetic representation of Gao's surroundings over promotion or subscription of any ideological stance. This is not to say that Gao's writings are *literally* without isms. Instead, all of the ideologies and sociocultural politics that appear in Gao's writings are part of his reflexivity through the aesthetic representations of these ideologies and

politics. An evaluation of the validity of Gao's authorial intent, then, is to assess whether his creative works manage to effectively represent the ideological and structural forces that shape them. Such an aesthetic of reflexivity enables Gao to situate himself at a marginal position in society, and obtain an extent of artistic autonomy. Without isms is crucial for my discussions of Gao's escape from censorship in Chapter Three. Focusing on ideological forces as structural and internal censorship, Gao's without isms is fundamental to his escape from Chinese realism of the New Era Chinese literary field, as well as from Euro-American Orientalism of the world literary field.

### **Chapter Three: Gao Xingjian's Escape from Censorship**

As a survivor of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the Chinese Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement (1983), Gao Xingjian has first-hand experience of hard censorship. In the semi-autobiographical short story “Mother” (1983) and the novel *One Man’s Bible* (1999), Gao reveals how he had burnt all of his notes, manuscripts, diaries, and hand-copied excerpts from the writings of Immanuel Kant, GWF Hegel, and Sergei Eisenstein in order to protect himself from the political persecution of the Cultural Revolution Red Guards. Although the 1980s New Era offered unprecedented cultural freedom, Gao admits that the plays he staged in China during that period were “a product of compromise” to the state’s expectations.<sup>156</sup> Gao went on self-imposed exile to Europe in 1987, and as a Chinese exile artist, he was not blind to the covert censorship forces in the democratic West. The case of Gao withdrawing his play *Escape*, which I have discussed in Chapter One, is an example of his interaction with soft censorship in the West.

In 1990, shortly after his departure from China, Gao observed that “whereas in the past [literature] had to fight oppressive political forces and social customs, today it has to do battle with the subversive commercial values of consumerist society.”<sup>157</sup> More recently, Gao elaborated on the restrictions imposed on literature in greater detail:

In modern societies since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, totalitarian politics and ideology especially have regulated people’s actions, and furthermore even shackled their thinking. Needless to say, the freedom to speak in public is abolished, and various types of political correctness manufactured by the political authorities and official ideology are used to control the individual’s thinking.

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<sup>156</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, Ibid, 86. I will elaborate on the Chinese state’s expectations, particularly realism, later in this chapter.

<sup>157</sup> Gao Xingjian, “I Advocate a Kind of Cold Literature,” trans. Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005 [1992]). 4.

However, in countries with democratic systems, does the individual necessarily enjoy freedom of speech and thought, and does democracy necessarily guarantee the freedom of the individual? These are also questions that must be discussed.

In the globalised market economy, present democratic politics has not basically changed people's existential problems or endowed the individual with greater freedom. The principles of power benefits and market profitability direct politics, and pervade every corner of life via all-embracing mass media strategies, so how can there be freedom for the individual? This old eternal problem continues to cause anxiety in people, and my creative work aim to respond to this.<sup>158</sup>

It is telling how Gao is as concerned about the freedom of expression of democratic societies as that of totalitarian societies, if not more. Although Gao recognises the violence of state censorship, he further questions the possibility of individualistic freedom in capitalist societies, where the complex web of interests, benefits, and profits are embedded at the core of a supposedly "free" society. Gao's view is shared by Sue Curry Jansen, who describes market censorship as "amend[ing] and extend[ing] Adam Smith's classic metaphor by suggesting that 'the invisible hand of the market' is as pro-active as the visible hands of church or state censors."<sup>159</sup> As cultural production is dictated by the market, commercial pressures become constraints which are internalised by cultural producers. Market censorship becomes an inevitable aspect of any cultural production.

### **Structural Censorship**

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<sup>158</sup> Gao, "Freedom and Literature," in *Aesthetics and Creation*, trans. Mabel Lee (Amherst NY: Cambria, 2011 [2012]), 227-28.

<sup>159</sup> Sue Curry Jansen, "Market Censorship," in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* ed Derek Jones (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 1542.

The “invisible hand” of the market is not the only manifestation of internal yet productive censorship. Gao’s and Jansen’s interest in market forces is part of a larger discussion revolving around the constitutive and structural aspects of censorship. Conventional understanding of censorship focuses on the institutional measures of brutal and violent repression, prohibition, and persecution of cultural and intellectual labour.<sup>160</sup> This results in a moralistically-charged definition of censorship which leads to one-dimensional discussions about the restriction of expression. As Dominic Boyer explains, “one hardly wants to know more about the censor, because one is already certain enough what composes him: the absence of morality and ethics, the inversion of standards and norms, the immersion in the abyss of power onto which the writing of (good) intellectuals should always instead seek to cast light.”<sup>161</sup>

In contrast, an alternative view towards censorship has emerged since the 1980s, one that paradoxically considers censorship to be both productive and repressive. Jansen succinctly describes censorship as “the knot that binds power and knowledge.”<sup>162</sup> While the “knot” of censorship is always structurally present, its tightness in binding together the restriction of knowledge (power) and the production of knowledge varies. Censorship, in this light, becomes less of a rigid, one-way imposition than a dynamic two-way relationship where censoring forces and expression are mutually dependent. An examination of censorship in structural terms complicates not only our definition of “censorship,” but also problematises our

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<sup>160</sup> Much of our common-sense perception towards censorship originated from the Enlightenment era. For a concise survey of censorship views from Enlightenment thinkers, refer to Nicole Moore, “Censorship and Literature,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 29 May 2017. <http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-71>.

<sup>161</sup> Dominic Boyer, “Censorship as Vocation: The Institutions, Practices, and Cultural Logic of Media Control in the German Democratic Republic,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* vol. 4, no.3: 511-45.

<sup>162</sup> Jansen, *Censorship: The Knot that Binds Power and Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 61.

definition of “free speech.” If censorship is a constant in expression, how “free” is free speech?

Jansen’s use of the term “power” and “knowledge” is a direct reference to Michel Foucault’s study of sexuality, most notably in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (1976).<sup>163</sup> Foucault conducts a Nietzschean-genealogical study of sexuality and reveals that the definition and function of sexuality have always been fluid since the Middle Ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to the popular belief that the repression of sexuality originated during the Victorian era, Foucault contends that sexuality has never been a taboo. Instead, it has always been a subject of discussion amongst various parties, all of which bearing different political agendas. A discourse surrounding sexuality is formed. The knowledge that comes from these discussions, what Foucault describes as “the science of sexuality,”<sup>164</sup> such as the values and principles of normal and abnormal, moral and immoral behaviour, is therefore highly constructed, arbitrary, and a product of power struggles. The circulation of knowledge, as a product of discourse, is the circulation of power. At the same time, knowledge shapes our behaviour and thoughts, which is an internalisation of power. Our every action becomes a reproduction of knowledge and re-enactment of power. As such, Foucault remarks that “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”<sup>165</sup>

In terms of expression as part of an individual’s behaviour that is shaped by power and knowledge, Foucault avoids labelling it as “censorship” because power functions much more than the restriction of expression, but also produces expression, informs our subjectivity and identity, and circulates from bottom to top. Foucault

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<sup>163</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans Robert Hurley (New York, Pantheon Books, 1978 [1976]).

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 93.



describes this as “the incitement to discourse,”<sup>166</sup> in which the more you express, the deeper your expression is interwoven with power. And even though Foucault does use the term “censorship” throughout *The History of Sexuality*, he is emphasising on the “logic of censorship” and considers the term in a metaphorical light. Foucault is more interested in the complexity of censorship’s logic (knowledge, power, discourse) rather than the act itself.<sup>167</sup>

The abstractness of Foucault’s conception of power/knowledge has come under the critique of his contemporary Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu finds the poststructuralist thinking of Foucault as sharing the same shortcoming as structuralism: an absolute internalism in which the internal and external are being presented in a dichotomous manner.<sup>168</sup> However, Bourdieu does not completely discard Foucault. Instead, Bourdieu’s field theory builds on Foucault’s notion of power. In contrast to Foucault’s emphasis on a theoretical exploration of power/knowledge, Bourdieu introduces a more empirical framework to understand the internalisation and reproduction of structures through the competition of “capital” in both its economic and non-economic/symbolic forms.

In Bourdieu’s field theory, each field is populated by participants or “agents” who behave according to their habits, mannerisms, and strategies.<sup>169</sup> Bourdieu refers to the agent’s behaviour as “habitus.” Each agent’s habitus concerns how one will uniquely accumulate capital to ensure one’s social status and prestige in the field.<sup>170</sup> A field is fuelled by a multitude of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>167</sup> See Beate Müller’s discussion of Foucault’s use of the term “censorship.” Müller, *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 6-7.

<sup>168</sup> Staf Callewaert, “Bourdieu, Critic of Foucault: The Case of Empirical Social Science against Double-Game-Philosophy,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol 23 (2006), no. 6: 73-98.

<sup>169</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Loïc Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 104-5.

<sup>170</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 52-65.

symbolic capital. Economic capital is simply mercantile exchange for objects of value. Cultural capital is socially constructed qualifications such as education. Symbolic capital conveys prestige and honour. It is important to note that symbolic capital is capital that is converted from other forms of capital (eg economic capital, cultural capital).

Every Bourdieusian field comprises of social agents that compete for capital, and this competition is governed by specific rules and conventions of that field. Such rules of the game are sustained by “doxa.” The term “doxa” has its epistemic roots in the Greek term “endoxa,” which means “ideas acceptable enough.”<sup>171</sup> Not dissimilar to a football match, players on the football field (agents) must comply with, or reproduce, the rules of a football game (doxa) in order to stay in the match (survive) and obtain victory (thrive) in the field.<sup>172</sup> As such, an agent’s participation in the field involves the accumulation of capital, the reproduction of doxa, and ultimately the reinforcement of doxa and the field. Bourdieu is adamant to clarify that “censorship” is just a metaphor for how the structure of the field governs individual expression, as opposed to an involvement of judicial control.<sup>173</sup> A successful compliance with or compromise to the doxic rules of the field depends on the competence of the agent in negotiating with the formalities of the field, and would be one that

guarantee[s] the satisfaction of the expressive interest, biological drive or political interest (in the broad sense of the term), within the limits of the structure of opportunities for material or symbolic profit which the different forms of discourse can procure for different producers according to their

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<sup>171</sup> See Sameh Hanna’s in-depth discussion of Bourdieu’s doxa in Hanna, *Bourdieu in Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 45.

<sup>172</sup> According to Patricia Thompson, Bourdieu constantly referred to social life as a game and there are a number of references to football. See Thompson, “Field,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham, Acumen, 2008), 68-69.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

position in the field, that is, in the structure of the distribution of the specific capital which is at stake in this field.<sup>174</sup>

What Bourdieu identifies as “structural censorship” in the field is akin to the operations of the market, in which “the prices of different kinds of expression are formed.”<sup>175</sup> Subjected to market forces, the expressions of agents are institutionalised without explicit traces of prohibitions. By contextualising the unconscious aspect of censorship within its social and historical conditions, Bourdieu argues that structural censorship is inherent in any field.<sup>176</sup>

Overall, Bourdieu refers to his field theory as a “theory of practice,”<sup>177</sup> which is essentially a systematic understanding of the actual actions of all people. Habitus is the strategic reproduction of the structures and rules of the field for the purpose of accumulating capital; expression, as being part of an agent’s habitus, is strategically compromised for the purpose of accumulating capital. The “practice” of individuals is a negotiation between structure and agency: agents are structurally linked to each other, thereby forming a web of influences (field). At the same time, agents in the field also possess a degree of agency amongst themselves in their reproduction of the structures and rules of their surroundings (habitus). Through this dual emphasis on both materialistic and abstract concepts that influences individualistic behaviour, Bourdieu manages to ground his understanding of structural censorship within a framework that includes the involvement of both the individual and his surroundings.

Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge and Bourdieu’s field theory have paved way for an emerging academic interest in censorship that never operates in the binary

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<sup>174</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Censorship and the Imposition of Form,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans John B Thompson et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 137-138.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 138

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>177</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

modes of repressive/productive, authoritative/structural, and good/evil. Richard Burt, Michael Holquist, and Judith Butler are amongst the key scholars in the debates of self-censorship due to the influence of the multi-dimensional and spread out influence of censorship. In the age of progressive politics, calls for freedom of speech and diversity in representation are seemingly unanimous in Euro-America. Burt observes how a more covert and invisible form of censorship in which he refers to as an “administration of aesthetics” has emerged from these very demands for liberal expressions of aesthetics and political criticism. For Burt, the notion of autonomy manifests censorship in the form of “regulat[ing] membership in the critical community by appealing to the notion of diversity as a criterion of inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>178</sup> In other words, the demands for an autonomous aesthetic and political expression is paradoxically involved with a process of legitimation and delegitimation of expression: the discourse on free speech and diversity is selective and therefore contradicts its premise of striving for free speech and diversity. Burt introduces the notion of “administration” to draw attention to how censorship exists both as a positive and negative exercise of power that blocks the access to discourses as well as induces circulation of discourses.

Holquist succinctly articulates the paradox of censorship through what he calls the “corrupt originals.”<sup>179</sup> He argues that “all originals are open to corruption in the sense that their authority is hostage to the contexts in which they are consumed rather than to the ones in which they are produced.”<sup>180</sup> Censorship occurs before expression, and the meaning of the text is altered from the very moment of its consumption by a

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<sup>178</sup> Richard Burt, “Introduction: The ‘New Censorship,’” in *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Richard Burt (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xvii.

<sup>179</sup> Michael Holquist, “Corrupt Originals: The Paradox of Censorship,” *PMLA* 109.1 (January 1994):16. 36.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

reader who brings his own contextual lens to understand the text. Holquist contends that all expressions, even in their original form, are as arbitrary as they are censored. By this logic, the discussion of censorship is not limited to the modes of “who-whom” or “persecutor-victim” since it is not even determinable as to who the censor and censored are. For Holquist, the only certainty is that censorship exists in more or less degrees, and therefore, “to be for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship is.”<sup>181</sup>

While Burt and Holquist mainly pronounce both the impossibility of a complete absence of censorship, and the impossibility of a complete censorship, Butler focuses on exploring the question of “when and why certain kinds of censorship are [...] more complete than others.”<sup>182</sup> Butler finds explicit, state censorship as the easiest to evade since it “rehears[es] and proliferat[es] the very terms that they seek to bar from discourse.”<sup>183</sup> Censored expressions take on lives of their own and reproduce themselves within the censored discourse, or what Butler refers to as “excitable speech.” As Butler puts it, “To become a subject means to be subjected to a set of explicit and implicit norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject.”<sup>184</sup> The incompleteness of censorship becomes the foundation for the production of a subject’s speech.

Following Burt and Holquist, if explicit and implicit forces of censorship are essential to the formation of expression and intelligibility of said expression, it appears that the opposition of censorship is not only impossible, but unnecessary. Butler rejects this generalised viewpoint by further exploring the dissemination of

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>182</sup> Judith Butler, “Ruled Out: The Vocabularies of the Censor,” in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1998), 247.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 252.

ensorship from an individualistic approach. In our everyday interaction, particular voices, supported by institutional power, have the potential of ruling out, or “silencing” other voices. For example, derogatory remarks effectively deauthorises the targeted social group’s expressions, thereby rendering them to be an “unspeakable” group. Such an implicit form of censorship, for Butler, is the result of the subject being subjected to the effect of power. If subjectivity, like expressions, is limited by the boundaries of power, it is indeterminate and therefore contains gaps for individual agency.

The important difference between Butler, and Holquist and Burt, then, is the former’s relational understanding of the censoring body and the censored subject. Censorship for Butler is a continuum between the censoring institution and the censored individual. As such, the specificities of the censorship experience for each individual is preserved. In contrast, Holquist and Burt have generalised the censorship experience in their emphasis on the omnipresence of censorship. Butler casts attention to the importance of individualistic and subjective experience of censorship. Helen Freshwater, for example, calls for a new approach to censorship studies which “place[s] greater value upon responsiveness to the experience of the censored author or artist.”<sup>185</sup> Yet neither Butler nor Freshwater offers substantial insight into how an internalised and subjective experience of censorship can be concretely examined. The lack of social and political context of cultural production is a common critique against poststructuralist readings. As Boyer argues, “unless the censor is represented as a real social actor in cultural and historical context, it will be impossible to determine the true affinities and differences between professional intellectual labour in authoritarian

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<sup>185</sup> Helen Freshwater, “Towards a Redefinition of Censorship,” in *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, Ibid, 225.

contexts and the disciplinary imperatives of intellectual professionalism more generally.”<sup>186</sup> Boyer therefore proposes a framework of censorship studies that views both the censored subject and the censoring body as “intellectual labour.”<sup>187</sup>

Bourdieu’s field theory, and particularly the rules of the field (doxa), are useful in the study of the censoring body and the censored subject as dynamic social agents. Nevertheless, critics have argued that Bourdieu does not move completely beyond structuralism, or a generalisation of social structures and behaviour.<sup>188</sup> This is evident in the significant overlaps between Foucault’s notion of power and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus: both explore social behaviour as an internalisation of structures and the reproduction of structures through one’s actions. While Bourdieu claims to have developed a “realist third way” between existentialism (subjectivism) and structuralism (objectivism),<sup>189</sup> the notion of habitus as a strategic negotiation between structure and agency, remains rooted in the concept of structures. As Richard Nice remarks, “The fact remains that a text which seeks to break out of a scheme of thought as deeply embedded as the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism is fated to be perceived through the categories which it seeks to transcend.”<sup>190</sup>

Bourdieu is well-aware of the scholarly bias and limitations not only in his own work, but also sociological studies in general: “I believe that the blindness of intellectuals to the social forces that rule the intellectual field, and therefore their practices, is what explains how, collectively, often under quite radical airs, the

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<sup>186</sup> Boyer, “Censorship as Vocation,” *Ibid*, 540.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 512.

<sup>188</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992), 115.

<sup>189</sup> Bourdieu sought to think “Marx against Marx,” “Weber against Weber,” and “Durkheim against Durkheim,” to develop a “realist third way.” See Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 2004 [2001]), 200.

<sup>190</sup> Richard Nice, Translator’s Foreword to *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by Pierre Bourdieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), viii.

intelligentsia contributes to the perpetuation of dominant forces.”<sup>191</sup> Rather than seeking to break new grounds or revolutionise our understanding of society, Bourdieu places reflexivity at the heart of his theory of practice.

I find Gao equally aware of the covert forms of restrictions embedded in his artistic and creative practice. As I have elaborated in Chapter Two, Gao’s artistic vision of without isms has also been criticised for being a self-contradictory act that is less critical than romanticist. In response, both Gao and Bourdieu have clarified that they are not proclaiming to have respectively transcended the limitations of ideology and structures, but to be reflexive. In the following paragraphs, I seek to compare and contrast the modes of reflexivity between Gao the artist and Bourdieu the sociologist. For Bourdieu, an agent’s reflexivity is important in learning about the field as well as shaping the field. If an agent accepts the doxic rules of the field as factual and non-negotiable, the agent has “an investment in the game [ie field],”<sup>192</sup> which Bourdieu describes as “illusio.” As for Gao, he creates the trope of the “chaotic self” (*hundun de ziwo*) to signify the unconscious limitations to his artistic expression. I argue that Gao offers an artistic perspective towards reflexivity. The crucial difference between artistic reflexivity and sociological reflexivity is aesthetic representation.

### **Without Isms: Gao’s Response to Structural Censorship**

In Chapter Two, I have reiterated without isms as Gao’s artistic vision of inconclusive expression. I have further extended without isms as Gao’s aesthetics of reflexivity, which prioritises the aesthetic representation of Gao’s surroundings over the promotion of or subscription to any ideological stance. As an artist of without

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<sup>191</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, eds. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 192.

<sup>192</sup> Bourdieu, “The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason,” trans. Loïc JD Wacquant, *Sociological Forum*, 6:1, 1991, 8.



isms, Gao's creative works are what he calls "cold literature" (*leng de wenxue*). A common thread that ties without isms and cold literature together is the notion of detachment. In "I Advocate a Kind of Cold Literature" (*Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wenxue*, 1990), Gao portrays literature as something that has little utilitarian value: "It is only by being an unwaveringly solitary individual without attachment to some political group or movement that the writer is able to win a thoroughgoing freedom."<sup>193</sup> In "Without Isms" (*Meiyou zhuyi*, 1993), Gao extends his detachment from categories to the realm of literary criticism of his creative works. He views the creation of art as a fluid practice, an act that can never be categorised or labelled or pinned down. In his case, Gao admits he is heavily inspired by Western theories, but this does not mean he is repeating Western theories in a wholesale manner. Gao stresses that he looks at works, not labels. Aside from the nature of his artistic practice, Gao rejects labels for the practical reason of avoiding being banned. For Gao, labels have brought him nothing but trouble.<sup>194</sup> In his Nobel lecture "The Case for Literature" (*Wenxue de liyou*, 2000), Gao describes his writing approach as "talking to oneself" (*ziyan ziyu*), in which he writes only for himself. He further argues that this autocommunicative approach is the starting point of literature.<sup>195</sup>

On the surface, Gao's without isms and cold literature appear to be claims of distinguishing himself from all categories and comparisons to other artists. And within the context of the Bourdieusian field of cultural production, they even suggest that Gao views himself to be in his own field. However, a closer examination

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<sup>193</sup> Gao, "Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wen xue" [I Advocate a Kind of Cold Literature], *Meiyou zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990]), 20; trans. by Mabel Lee in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, eds. Gilbert Fong, Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>194</sup> Gao, "Meiyou zhuyi" [Without Isms], in *Meiyou zhuyi* (Hong Kong: Cosmos, 1996 [1993]), 4.

<sup>195</sup> Gao, "The Case for Literature," trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 14.

indicates quite the contrary— Gao’s rejection of categories reveals his intimate engagement with other agents in the field of cultural production, and more importantly, fuels the development of his authorial subjectivity.

Broadly speaking, literature is created by literature, where texts influences each other and create more texts. Quah Sy Ren’s “transcultural” framework comes closest to illuminating Gao’s individual voice through the appropriation of Chinese and Western influences.<sup>196</sup> Quah views Gao’s theatre as rooted in neither Chinese traditions (eg *xiqu*) nor French traditions (eg Theatre of the Absurd). He rather presents Gao’s theatre as a space where different cultures are in dialogue with each other. Departing from Patrice Pavis’s usage of “transcultural,” which describes a hybridisation of different cultures to attain a state of universality, Quah’s transcultural reading finds Gao’s theatre as “not confined to a single area of cultural exchange but, in the context of China and beyond, ambitiously embraces the intercultural, the intracultural, and the transcultural [in his theatre...].”<sup>197</sup> The theoretical thrust behind Quah’s transcultural framework is shared by Roger Brubaker’s and Frederick Cooper’s proposal of going “beyond identity:”

If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallise? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that is often striven for and sometimes realised by politicians

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<sup>196</sup> Several critics have systematically studied the influence of Western traditions in Gao’s creative work. See Chen Xiaomei “Wild Man Between Two Cultures,” in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed Tam Kwok-kan (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001), 89-110; Izabella Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian’s Idea of Theatre: from the word to the image* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008); Mabel Lee, “Aesthetics in Gao’s *Soul Mountain*,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.4: 2012 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/X>.

<sup>197</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2004), 14.

seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups? How can we understand the power and pathos of identity politics?<sup>198</sup>

The above series of rhetorical questions draws attention to the shakiness of identity politics. Brubaker and Cooper note that “identity” is either too strong or too weak for serious analytical purposes. Our focus should instead be on the components that comprise identity, rather than generalising all the components through “identity.”<sup>199</sup>

Quah proposes an argument on Gao’s appropriation of cultural influences in the same vein: culture cannot be universalised, yet one cannot ignore that cultures share similarities. Instead of viewing culture as either “intercultural” or “intracultural,” Quah suggests to simultaneously read for both Gao’s intercultural and intracultural features: “Gao’s transcultural theatre embodies aspects of cultural exchange and integration that are at times collaboratory and at times contradictory, and encompasses the myriad cultural practices and politics.”<sup>200</sup> Quah’s transcultural framework transcends cultural identity politics to examine Gao’s multifaceted appropriations of cultural influences. In Gao’s simultaneous rejection and appropriation of all labels, including the common ones such as “modernist,” “absurdist,” “Daoist,” and “Chan Buddhist,”<sup>201</sup> Gao is cultivating a transcultural, and more importantly, an individualistic voice.

According to what Liu Zaifu describes as Gao’s “theory of freedom” (*ziyou yuanli*),<sup>202</sup> Gao’s pursuit of freedom is highly pragmatic and firmly rooted in an attempt to transcend the aforementioned external conditions.<sup>203</sup> This observation

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<sup>198</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” in *Theory and Society*, vol 29, no.1 (2000): 1.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 11-14.

<sup>200</sup> Quah, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Transcultural Theatre,” Ibid, 14.

<sup>201</sup> Gao, “Meiyou zhuyi,” Ibid, 9.

<sup>202</sup> Liu Zaifu, “Gao Xingjian de ziyou yuanli” [Gao Xingjian’s Theory of Freedom], in *Zailun Gao Xingjian [Revisiting Gao Xingjian]* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2016), 33-39.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

crucially reminds us that Gao has never detached himself from the reality of his surroundings. Despite proclaiming a marginal position in society, Gao remains firmly attached and acutely aware of his external conditions:

[i]f the writer sought to win intellectual freedom the choice was either to fall silent or to flee. However, the writer relies on language and not to speak for a prolonged period is the same as suicide. The writer who sought to avoid suicide or being silenced and furthermore to express his own voice had no option but to go into exile.<sup>204</sup>

For Gao, the sole purpose for a writer is the freedom to express himself, and the absence of free speech is equivalent to suicide. However, one should not understand Gao's notion of "intellectual freedom" through a conventional sense. At the most basic literal level, a writer has to eat to survive. As a writer who is reflexive about the structural nature of censorship, Gao is aware that his individuality, and by extension, his survival, depends on how he negotiates with his external surroundings.

In this respect, Gao stands in direct opposite to Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is the only writer thus far to have voluntarily declined the Nobel Prize in Literature, claiming the award would "let himself be transformed into an institution."<sup>205</sup>

However, one should not consider Gao a complete break from Sartre's influence. Through the notions of "bad faith" and "being precedes essence," Sartre explores how we consciously deceive ourselves to avoid the heavy burden of responsibility from freedom. In turn, this self-deception perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy of the lack of personal freedom.<sup>206</sup> While Sartre recognises bad faith as the result of the

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<sup>204</sup> Gao, "The Case for Literature," Ibid, 14.

<sup>205</sup> "Nobel Prize Facts," *Nobelprize.org*, Accessed June 04, 2017, [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/facts/](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/facts/).

<sup>206</sup> Like Gao, Sartre presents his philosophical tenets through creative work. His idea of "bad faith" and "The Other is Hell" are most notably illustrated in the play *No Exit* (1944). Garcin, Inez, and Estelle's

Other's gaze, Gao is more concerned about the self, and in particular self-obsession. Although "The Other is Hell" (eg Nobel Prize), Sartre fails to reject the self-obsession that comes with his rejection of the Other. He becomes unaware of the hell that lies in his subjective rejection of the Other, which in turn breeds another hell. More importantly, Sartre fails to acknowledge that his rejection of the economic and cultural capital of the Nobel Prize carries in itself a great amount of symbolic capital within the literary field. As Bourdieu observes, the field of cultural production is "the economic world reversed."<sup>207</sup>

In contrast, Gao's pursuit of free artistic expression is not a matter of viewing the institution or the field as the Other and hell, but *how* the self responds to the Other that makes it hell. Hence Gao asserts that "it's not enough to flee the Other, there's also the need to flee oneself."<sup>208</sup> In the Bourdieusian field, subjectivity is hell because forces of repression (ie doxa) are unconsciously reproduced in our subjectivity. Gao's without isms, I argue, is an artistic vision that strives for an observation of the chaotic self.

### **The Chaotic Self: Troping Structural Censorship**

Gao describes the self as "chaotic" and "usually in a blind state of self-love."<sup>209</sup> He also remarks that "the [s]elf is like a black hole capable of sucking everything in. It's terrifying."<sup>210</sup> Gao's critique of Nietzsche's Superman theory is precisely focused on the dangers of the inflated ego. Therefore, Gao thinks it is of

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mutual torturing (or objectification through competitive subjectivity) and inability to leave the room (or the Other's gaze) are vivid portrayals of Sartre's existentialist notions.

<sup>207</sup> Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production or: the Economic World Reversed," *Poetics* 12, no. 4-5: 311-56.

<sup>208</sup> Lee and Dutrait, "Conversations with Gao Xingjian," *Ibid*, 743.

<sup>209</sup> Gao, "Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth," in *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*, ed. Horace Engdahl, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2002), 122.

<sup>210</sup> Gregory B Lee, and Noel Dutrait, "Conversations with Gao Xingjian: The First 'Chinese' Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature." *China Quarterly* vol. 167 (2001): 743.

utmost importance that the writer “flee[s] the [s]elf”<sup>211</sup> when he creates. Although Bourdieu does not refer to the agent’s subjectivity as “narcissistic” or “inflated ego,” he refers to how an agent who is unaware of the impact of structural forces (doxa) to one’s behaviour (habitus) as being in a state of *illusio*. Bourdieu defines doxa as “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma.”<sup>212</sup> Both Gao’s chaotic self and Bourdieu’s doxa seek to examine the unconscious restriction of an individual’s expression. As a social agent, it is impossible for Bourdieu to remove himself from the influence of the doxa. Likewise, the self of an artist is, according to Gao, usually narcissistic and chaotic.

Gao’s response to the narcissistic, chaotic self is “perspective as awareness” (*guandian ji yishi*).<sup>213</sup> He considers the self in three interrelated perspectives, namely first person (*wo*), second person (*ni*), and third person (*ta*). The first-person perspective is what Gao refers to as the chaotic self. In order to assert control over the chaotic self, the self-aware artist develops an objective second-person perspective to overlook the subjective first-person. Such a control, however, is not forceful nor conflictual, but a “dialogue” (*duihua*) between first-person and second-person perspectives. Finally, the self-aware artist aesthetically represents the above dialogue from the third-person perspective, which Gao refers to the “Third Eye” (*di san zhi yanjing*).<sup>214</sup> The Third Eye is a reference to one of the Five Eyes in Chan/Zen Buddhism, which is able to observe the realities of life.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1997]), 15.

<sup>213</sup> Gao, “Guandian ji yishi” [Perspective as Awareness], *Lun chuangzuo* [On Creative Production] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Books, 2008), 155-159.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Donald W Mitchell, “The Teachings of the Buddha,” in *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33-60.

Gao's chaotic self could well be discussed alongside other notions pertaining to splitting consciousness in Western and Chinese thoughts.<sup>216</sup> His awareness of the self and the tripartite structural division of first, second, and third-person perspectives, are highly reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's splitting of the consciousness. Freud proposes to explore the consciousness through a tripartite model. The ego is the rational part of the consciousness, while the id represents irrational desires: "For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions."<sup>217</sup> Although the ego recognises that the id's desires are not compatible with the external world, it is devoted to satisfy the id's desires. The super-ego, however, supervises the ego by imposing conscience and guilt towards it. In contrast to the repressive nature of the Freudian splitting of the ego, Gao's tripartite self is non-conflicting. The tripartite structural division is one of mutual observations from a detached positionality.<sup>218</sup> Gao's Third Eye, then, is an internal observation from a detached positionality.

While Gao acknowledges the contribution Freud makes towards our understanding of the self, he argues that Freud alone does not have all the answers to explaining the subjectivity portrayed in his works:

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<sup>216</sup> In Western discourse, G. W. F. Hegel, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Antonio Gramsci, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy have all contributed their own understandings of the splitting subjectivity, relating it to different contexts and usages. See Hegel, "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), trans. J. B. Baillie, (1910; reprint, New York, 1966); Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001 [1842]); Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973); Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1994); Freud, "The Ego and The Id (1925)," in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, eds. Anna Freud and James Strachey (Vintage Classics: New Ed edition, 2005); Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>217</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, The Standard Edition, London 1961, vol. 19. 25.

<sup>218</sup> Gilbert Fong, "Yi wuzhu wei ben—Gao Xingjian xiju lun de beiyou" [Non-abidance as the Basis—Behind Gao Xingjian's Theatre Theory], *Ibid*, 10.

The so-called self is just a big chaos [*hundun*]. Freud's research on the psychology of sex did not uncover this big mystery. Modern psychoanalysis and psycholinguistics are highly speculative but while they provide a variety of solutions, they cannot either unravel this mystery. East-Asian contemplative cognition of the self tends towards metaphysics; Buddhism's eight consciousness of the self are also attributed to the so-called mystics.<sup>219</sup>

A review of the epistemic roots of the term "*hundun*" illuminates its implications of internal duality. On the one hand, *hundun* is complete and natural through unspecificity and muddiness.<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, it is bad and evil and ignorant.<sup>221</sup>

*Hundun* is a force so powerful it can create the universe, yet it can also be a force blinded by narcissism. In addition, *hundun* appears as mythical creatures or beings.<sup>222</sup>

I view Gao's awareness and portrayal of the chaotic self through the Third Eye as akin to observing the mythical creature, *hundun*, operating in its most natural habitat from a distance. Moreover, a clear observation would require the removal of all obstructions. Without isms, in this context, is a detachment from labels, categories, and isms which interfere with Gao's observation of the chaotic self, and in Bourdieusian terms, it is detachment from the field's doxa.

Neither Freudian splitting nor Daoist *hundun*, however, discusses an individual's splitting subjectivity within a socially-grounded context. As I have mentioned earlier, Gao's artistic vision and theory of freedom are firmly attached to

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<sup>219</sup> Gao, "Wo de xiju he wo de yaoshi" [My Drama and My Key], trans. Mary Mazzilli in *Gao Xingjian's Post-Exile Plays: Transnationalism and Postdramatic Theatre* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 59.

<sup>220</sup> The notion of *hundun*, through Zhuang Zhou's mythical retelling, is a god named *Hundun* who represents a natural, unspecified, and unified primeval chaos. See Lihui Yang and Deming An, with Jessica Anderson Turner, "Introduction," in *The Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 13.

<sup>221</sup> In the ancient Chinese commentary text *Zuo zhuan* (The Commentary of Zuo), *hundun* is bad and ferocious, incompetent, muddled. See Isabelle Robinet, "Hundun," *The Encyclopedia of Taoism, I-II*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (New York: Routledge, 2008), 523.

<sup>222</sup> Robinet, "Hundun," *Ibid*, 523.



his external surroundings. Bourdieu's sociological mode of reflexivity is a useful reference to contextualise Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity. Bourdieu applies his concepts of habitus, capital, and field towards a sociologist's study, seeking to illuminate the influence of internalised structures and field forces on an intellectual: "There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification."<sup>223</sup> Bourdieu's reflexive sociology seeks to attain what Richard Jenkins refers to as the "objectification of objectification."<sup>224</sup> The reflexive sociologist is one that takes into consideration the intellectual bias within the methods of his academic research, for example, the sociologist's relations *and* positionality within his academic field. An awareness towards an individual's positionality (eg white, bourgeois, male) is only partial reflexivity. What is equally important is the individual's habitus, or the relationship between the individual's positionality and the field in which he is situated in. As such, a crucial aspect of Bourdieu's reflexivity is that it cannot be conducted in private but must be conducted within a field.<sup>225</sup>

Similarly, I argue that it is essential to discuss Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity within field(s). The Third Eye views the dialogue between the chaotic self and the objective self from a detached positionality, or the positionality of without isms. The aesthetics of reflexivity is not to transcend isms, but to be self-aware of one's internal state and external surroundings. The Third Eye's third-person perspective is observing the objective second-person perspective's observation of the narcissistic first-person perspective. Stylistically, Gao's creative works recurrently feature an aesthetic of

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<sup>223</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 12.

<sup>224</sup> Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Ibid, 129.

<sup>225</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Ibid, 130.

splitting. He refers to the pronominal interchange in his novels and short stories as “flow of language” (*yuyan liu*). In his plays, Gao infuses a strong sensibility of actor’s performance into the play text, which he refers to as “tripartite acting” (*yanyuan sang chung sing*). Tripartite acting is made possible because Gao constructs his theatre stage in terms of “suppositionality” (*jiadingxing*), where everything on stage is symbolically represented, and requires the stylisation of the actor and the imagination of the audience to bring to life. Both tripartite acting and suppositionality are theatrical techniques that induce reflexivity in both the audience and actors, as well as Gao himself. Before I elaborate on Gao’s suppositionality and tripartite as aesthetics of reflexivity, I first present the two literary fields with which Gao produced his plays prior to winning the Nobel Prize in 2000: The New Era Chinese literary field and the world literary field. In this chapter, I focus on elucidating the doxic rules of these literary fields, and defer my discussions of their respective contextual details to Chapters Four and Five.

### **The New Era Chinese Literary Field**

The initial inspiration and application of Bourdieu’s field theory was largely limited to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French society. Bourdieu is therefore often criticized for being “Francocentric” in his study of social behavior. As Jianmei Liu remarks about the application of Bourdieu’s theory to the study of Chinese literary production: “Bourdieu’s Francocentric observation of the literary field that is based on cultural capital or symbolic capital cannot fully explain the utopian desire, the nationalist implication, the semicolonial sentiment, or an individual’s sensuous and bodily experience that are implicated in the movement of ‘revolutionary literature.’”<sup>226</sup> One

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<sup>226</sup> Jianmei Liu, *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women’s Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 36.

of the biggest obstacles for constructing a Bourdieusian reading of modern Chinese literature is the contradiction between the logics of capitalism and the logics of socialism. Field theory revolves around the competition between agents for capital, in which the field is constantly shaped by the interdependence of the agent and his habitus, and capital. However, all cultural activities in China, throughout most of the modern period, are under the explicit governance of the state. In order to retain the theoretical value of Bourdieu's theory in a modern Chinese literary context, one must take care to avoid conflating symbolic capital with political cause, in which the latter is uniquely shaped by Chinese communist state logic.

According to Yan Lianke, Chinese state censorship, in both its hard and soft forms, has only one primary objective: to serve the ideological interests of the ruling state. Hard censorship is the banning of writers and works that go beyond any legal framework.<sup>227</sup> Soft censorship, in contrast, is a state machinery that involves the reader, the author, the media, the publisher, the editor, the literary prizes/institutions. All of the above parties have internalised the state's ideology and directives, and therefore can self-regulate themselves to automatically perform actions in line with the Party's ideology and directives. While both hard and soft censorship result in authorial self-censorship, Yan elucidates a crucial difference:

Under a hard censorship regime, self-censorship arises out of an environment of terror, anxiety, and fear, and while it is predicated on unwillingness and resistance, it eventually generates a kind of intuitive response. Because it develops in reaction to outside pressure, it may eventually generate a sense of awakening or enlightenment following a change in the external conditions,

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<sup>227</sup> Yan Lianke, "An Examination of China's Censorship System," trans. Carlos Rojas, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, eds Carlos Rojas, Andrea Bachner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264.

thereby permitting writing to return to its original conditions. However, under a system of soft censorship, this sort of self-monitoring develops in response to the seduction of power, fame, and influence rather than being a product of fear and desperation. Its reflexive character, accordingly, is formed in response not only to the censorship system that has been in place for the past several decades, but more importantly to the author's own self-denigrating character. The self-censorship that develops under a regime of hard censorship has a fundamentally oppressive character, but as China's censorship system has begun to transition in recent years from a hard approach to a soft one, the practice of self-censorship has gradually become more voluntary and intuitive.<sup>228</sup>

Although I agree with Yan's observation that hard censorship produces self-censorship rooted in fear towards authoritarian and violent literary governance, and soft censorship produces self-censorship that is more voluntary and intuitive, I am skeptical whether the traits of soft censorship is only a "recent" phenomenon. As Michel Hockx contends regarding the modern Chinese literary field: "the most acclaimed literary producers are those who seemingly effortlessly combine 'literary excellence' with political efficacy and economic success, while never giving the impression that they sacrificed the first principle for the other two, or the second for the third."<sup>229</sup> In this sense, soft or structural censorship, particularly from a Bourdieusian perspective, occurs so long as agents compete for capital. The pursuit, or "seduction" of power, fame, and influence has always existed in modern Chinese literary scene.

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>229</sup> Michel Hockx, "Introduction," in *The Literary Field of Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Michel Hockx (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1999), 12.

Hockx extends Bourdieu's field theory outside of its original 19<sup>th</sup> century French literary context to construct a "modern Chinese literary field." By acknowledging the crucial difference between a capitalistic, democratic nation like France in Bourdieu's analysis, and a socialist, autocratic nation like post-socialist China, Hockx conceives of a literary field that is three-dimensional. The modern Chinese literary field consists not only of an autonomous pole (literary) and a heteronomous pole (economic), but also of a third pole that is partly heteronomous (politics).<sup>230</sup> Accordingly, these three poles result in symbolic capital, economic capital, and political capital. While symbolic capital and economic capital remain regulated by autonomous and heteronomous principles respectively, political capital is determined by a partly heteronomous political principle. Hockx complicates our understanding of the political forces in China by viewing them as "political capital." The influence of politics towards literature comes not only from the state, but also from the writer, who is an agent that desires to accumulate capital, including that of political capital. The presence of the political pole reflects the unique complications of a writer's habitus in accumulating capital in the modern Chinese literary field:

To my mind, the main reason why modern Chinese literary practice does not allow itself to be schematised as easily in terms of only two conflicting principles, the way Bourdieu described modern French literary practice, is the presence of a third principle, partly but not fully heteronomous, which motivates modern Chinese writers to consider, *as part of their practice*, the well-being of their country and their people. It would be incorrect to view this "political principle" as part of the autonomous principle, for two reasons: first, because overly utilitarian writing has never been accorded high literary value

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

by the Chinese literary community and, second, because “politically correct” writers can be upwardly mobile in terms of “political capital” within the field, even if they are immobile in terms of “symbolic capital.”<sup>231</sup>

Hockx’s conceptualisation of the political principle as partly heteronomous is rooted in the importance of “[the modern Chinese writer’s] ability to deal with the concept of ‘the people.’”<sup>232</sup> A survey of the turbulent relations between state and intellectuals in modern Chinese history, and particularly since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, echoes Hockx’s observation. In the name of serving the masses and the nation, a cycle of repression and relaxation towards intellectuals can roughly be observed after the Chinese Communist Party took reign in 1949.<sup>233</sup>

Harsh and humiliating “Thought Reforms” were followed by The Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956). The Campaign was supposed to give intellectuals more freedom of speech after the indoctrination of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideology. As soon as Mao Zedong noticed that the reformed intellectuals’ criticism would threaten his rule, he immediately launched the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957) to clamp down any oppositional voice. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), repression towards intellectuals further heightened. The populist notions that “studying is useless” and “workers rule schools” became widely accepted. Mao even pronounced that “the masses are the real heroes” and “the lowly are the most intelligent, the elites are the most ignorant.”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Merle Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

<sup>234</sup> Tao Dongfeng, “Thirty Years of New Era Literature: From Elitisation to De-Elitisation,” trans. Angie Chau, *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 99.

China experienced vast and abrupt changes after the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao. The transition from Mao's socialist regime, to Deng Xiaoping's state-capitalist regime, resulted in significant changes in all aspects of Chinese society. The Mao regime deemed the upholding of socialism as its top priority and sought to destroy everything that would threaten socialism and the party's rule. In stark contrast, the Deng regime deemed the Four Modernisations as its top priority, which was accompanied by the opening of China to external influences.<sup>235</sup> As part of the Deng regime's push of the Four Modernisations, the state offered unprecedented freedom for writers to embrace external influences and thoughts, most notably for the purpose of reconstructing a new self and subjectivity for the post-Mao Chinese people. This period in the 1980s is known as the New Era (*xin shiqi*).<sup>236</sup>

The search of new subjectivity was to resolve the identity crisis of the post-Mao era (three-belief crisis: Marxism, socialism, Chinese Communist Party).<sup>237</sup> The death of Mao and downfall of Gang of Four released Chinese people from the Cultural Revolution madness, but there was a vacuum of identity, as observed by Rong Cai: Who was I? Who am I? What will I be?<sup>238</sup> Literature was an important means to assist with the reconstruction of Chinese subjectivity. The search for new subjectivity was accompanied by a "high culture fever" (*wenhua re*) that allowed Chinese literature to blossom in ways unimaginable during the Mao era. As Cai describes:

Post-Mao writers mounted an all-out assault on the Communist principles—artistic, social, and ideological—ignoring taboos in both subject matter and

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<sup>235</sup>The Four Modernisations referred to the state's commitment of modernising China's agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence.

<sup>236</sup>For my understanding of the New Era, refer to footnote 44 in Chapter One.

<sup>237</sup>Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>238</sup>*Ibid*, 9.

techniques. It is no exaggeration to say that post-Mao literature has effectively challenged all previous traditions (which came to include the May Fourth literary realism), completely repainting China's literary landscape in the 1980s, though the writers inherited from both the May Fourth and Communist traditions the confidence in the power of literature over the human minds, the belief in literature's role in nation building, and the intellectuals' social commitment.<sup>239</sup>

However, this freedom was conducted within the state's objective: socialist modernisation which focused on the economy, industrial development, reengagement with global economy, without sacrificing the state's central power or social stability. The experimentations and pursuit of freedom were under the governance of the state. This resulted in debates about literature and culture that were not so much about literature and culture but more so political. The consequences of these debates were, subsequently, political too.

Perry Link evaluates literary works during the New Era period as produced with a "socialist literary system."<sup>240</sup> Link notes the unique emphasis of the functions or "uses" of literature in China's socialist literary system. The liberal spirit of the New Era was subjected to "the national literary 'weather'" as determined by the state's interference in the name of serving the state and its people. As Link vividly describes:

In good weather, freedom of expression was broader, themes more varied, criticism more common, and readers generally more enthusiastic. In bad weather, just as many words went down on paper, but less literary life was visible both on and off the page, as writers and editors took cover and readers

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>240</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).



bided their time. How much freedom any given writer enjoyed at any particular moment was determined by more than the general weather [...]. [Such freedom] could vary with who one was, who one's supporters were, where one published, who the supporters of one's publishers were, one's reputation among readers, and many other factors.<sup>241</sup>

Indeed, the underlying principle of such state-sanctioned literary freedom was to assist in “educating” the masses to adapt to the new direction of the Deng regime. Yet the state was also fearful that too much liberalism would threaten to destabilise the Chinese state's control over the nation. Cai therefore notes how the state's ever-changing stance towards literary freedom was indicative of its fear that the “emancipation of thought” would become a double-edged sword. Literary freedom in the New Era, on the one hand, paved way for “‘de-Maoisation’ in the realms of literature and ideology.” On the other hand, it had the power to potentially “delegitimise the centre.”<sup>242</sup>

As such, the doxa of the New Era Chinese literary field is Chinese realism, as part of the state's directives for its modernisation efforts.<sup>243</sup> Western modernism has impacted Chinese literature since the May Fourth movement, and was reintroduced in New Era. The New Era intellectuals wanted to reproduce Western modernism in New Era China, which the intellectuals considered as the “essence of modernisation.”<sup>244</sup> But all of these discussions and developments of Chinese modernism, or “School of Western modernism” (*xifang xiandai pai*), were held within the state system, which

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>242</sup> Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Ibid, 4.

<sup>243</sup> I am aware that such a liberal definition of censorship would risk conflating hard, external censorship with soft, structural censorship. For example, a liberal definition of censorship may view the authoritarian state censorship of 1980s China as merely “doxic.” However, my aim is to have an inclusive discussion about censorship, which acknowledges that censorship can come in all forms that may or may not be immediately recognizable. And while this project discusses 1980s New Era Chinese literary field in doxic terms, it is not meant to be overarching.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 4.

never compromised the state's priority: socialist modernisation. And the expectations for literary works were modernism within the parameters of realism, which carried the notion that "the function of literature is to convey the morality" (*wenyi zaidao*).

Gao's plays in China therefore all have strong hints of realism containing the literary experimentations with absurdism. Gao and many critics consider this approach as a compromise to Gao's artistic expression, which implies that he was devoted to the New Era intellectual's project of Chinese modernism, pursuing freedom and subjectivity. My project, however, seeks to examine how Gao's plays compromise towards the state's expectations and more specifically, how they are reflexive about the pursuit of Chinese modernism. In Chapter Four, I elaborate that the priority of Gao was not to pursue Chinese modernism, but to be reflexive about this pursuit.

### **The World Literary Field**

In the Bourdieusian cultural field, agents have an interest in disinterestedness. And like other fields, the literary field forms its own hierarchy of power, status, and even politics. Literary autonomy and disinterestedness are "less a refusal than a deferral of worldly success."<sup>245</sup> Pascale Casanova builds on Bourdieu's field of cultural production to propose a "world republic of letters" that is autonomous to political boundaries and conflicts. She conceives of a competitive, global literary space that values literary autonomy from external matters like social, political, and economic factors.<sup>246</sup> The boundaries and conflicts of the global literary space occur in symbolic terms, related to a competition for literary and cultural capital: dominant and

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<sup>245</sup> James F English, "Cultural Capital and the Revolutions of Literary Modernity, from Bourdieu to Casanova," in *A Handbook of Modernist Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 369.

<sup>246</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. MB DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004 [1999]), xii.

big nations (Western-European) occupy the centre of the literary space, while dominated and small nations (non-Western European) are at the periphery.

For Casanova, from 16<sup>th</sup> century to at least 1960, Paris was the absolute cultural hegemony of the world literary space.<sup>247</sup> The symbolic capital of the world literary space is therefore one that is defined by French culture, particularly French modernism. Paris also serves as the “literary Greenwich meridian” that measures the symbolic distance of national literary spaces from the “literature of the present.”<sup>248</sup> The greater the symbolic distance away between a national literary space and Paris, the more backwards its national literature is perceived in the world literary space. In order for the weak and marginal literary space to reduce its distance from the great and central literary space, the former acquires symbolic capital from the latter. The dispersion and circulation of French modernism as symbolic capital eventually solidifies the world republic of letters as a literary space that is definitively modernist, and by extension, a literary space that formulates a hierarchy of status and influence: at the centre of the world literary space are great national literary spaces which have accumulated large amounts of symbolic capital; at the margins are weak national literary spaces with little amount of symbolic capital.<sup>249</sup>

Peripheral writers are always competing with the centre writers for symbolic capital, seeking ways to break into the centre of the world literary space. For Casanova, the competition for symbolic capital of disinterestedness in the world republic of letters is accompanied by an ethnocentric symbolic domination between

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 87. Casanova argues that the designation of Paris as the centre is not a gesture of nationalism but based on the amount of translation, publishers, publications come out from Paris during this period of time. And even though Paris may no longer be the cultural hegemony of the world literary space, she argues that the influence of French thought and culture is still highly influential around the world and in Anglophone regions. See also Ibid, 46-7.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 83.

the great national literary spaces (European) and the weak national literary spaces (non-European).<sup>250</sup> As such, one of the contributions of Casanova's conception of the world literary space is revealing the inequalities of the international literary marketplace. The inequality of Casanova's world republic of letters lies in a two-tier hierarchy that places Paris, but broadly Euro-America, at the centre of the world literary space, leaving writers from non-Western European nations at the margins. The doxa of the world republic of letters is Eurocentrism and Orientalism.

Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* (1978)<sup>251</sup> is a study of colonialism through ideas. Colonialism is the West's attempt to dominate and control the East through politics and economics. Said is more interested in studying colonialism through Western European cultural products and how they constructed the idea that the East is backward, simple, uncivilised, superstitious, and requires the domination of the European West. Said borrows heavily from Foucauldian discourse that our perception of the world is shaped by knowledge, which is a product of discourse, and a product of the discussions of different powerholders. Similarly, the construction of the Orient is a product of discourse amongst powers. Cultural products therefore not only can create the Orient, but can also recreate the Orient.

Casanova remarks that writers from central literary spaces are prone to being subjected to a literary *illusio*, and become unaware of the doxic mechanism of the world literary space.<sup>252</sup> On the other hand, writers from peripheral national literary spaces are more aware of the Greenwich literary meridian, and the rules of the world literary field: Henrik Ibsen, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Richard Wright, Gao Xingjian,

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>251</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

<sup>252</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, Ibid, 93.

and other non-Western European writers become initiated into the central position of the world literary space by “maneuver[ing] with extraordinary sophistication to give themselves the best chance of being perceived, of existing in literary terms”<sup>253</sup> in a literary centre plagued by “ethnocentric blindness.”<sup>254</sup> Borrowing from Said, Casanova contends that peripheral writers innovate literary strategies that allow them overcome the inequalities of distribution of capital in the world literary space. These strategies include assimilating and appropriating Parisian culture.

Although Casanova seeks to illuminate the Eurocentrism of the world literary space, her exploration of inequalities of the system is in itself Eurocentric. Casanova’s conception of world literary system, including the conception of what “centre” is and what “peripheral” is, is based on her identification of world literary space as starting with 16<sup>th</sup> century European politics to 20<sup>th</sup> century post-war decolonisation (1960). Yet it is obvious that the literary history of “small nations” like China, Japan, and Arab countries began long before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With the case of East Asia, it is Japan, Korea, and Vietnam who have associated with China for centuries as the centre of their literary space.<sup>255</sup> Writers and literary cultures which appear before Casanova’s reading of 16<sup>th</sup> century European literary history are omitted. In fact, most of the non-Western European writers which Casanova cites appear during the postwar period and are all somehow related to European/Paris cultures. According to Aamir R Mufti, Casanova’s misidentification results in post-war, non-Western writers as becoming the (mis)representative figures of all world literary writers of non-Western traditions:

Because Casanova misses this initial charting of non-Western traditions of writing on the emerging map of the literary world (as in fact in many of the

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<sup>253</sup> Casanova, “Literature as a World,” *New Left Review* 31, (Jan/Feb 2005): 89.

<sup>254</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>255</sup> Michael Emmerich, *The Tale of Genji* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 234.

recent discussions about transnational literary relations), such figures as Kateb Yacine, V. S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie and the psychology of *assimilation* into metropolitan languages and cultures typify the non-Western writer (as they all do for Casanova). Such models of cultural change as creolization and *métissage* consequently become the privileged mode of understanding literatures originating outside the metropolis, and the far more complex and elusive tensions and contradictions involved in the emergence of the modern non-Western literatures disappear from view altogether.<sup>256</sup>

Although Casanova argues how peripheral writers compete with centre writers, and how the former innovate strategies to overcome the power imbalance, these examples of peripheral writers are selected and filtered through a Eurocentric and Orientalist, lens. Casanova's attempt to empower non-Western European writers is admirable, yet one should not ignore that such an empowerment contributes to an Orientalist construction that risks erasing of non-Western European literary traditions which existed centuries before the 16<sup>th</sup> century starting point of Casanova's study. Indeed, Edward Said states that "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."<sup>257</sup>

While the Eurocentric and Orientalist tendencies in Casanova's "world republic of letters" seem apparent, it is also worth questioning whether they are "necessary evils" to the study of world literature. Considering the ambitious and global scale of world literary studies, it is impossible to give equal treatment to all possible cases. Such an insurmountable obstacle inevitably breeds Eurocentric practices, as Franco Moretti identifies in the practice of comparative literary studies as

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<sup>256</sup> Aamir R Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 36, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 460.

<sup>257</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, Ibid, 2.

well. Moretti instead seeks to establish world literature as a “new science” based on a division of labour of literary studies: world literature as waves which “observ[e] uniformity engulfing an initial diversity,”<sup>258</sup> and national literatures as independent branches on the world literature trees. The work of world literary studies, then, is distant reading, “a patchwork of other people’s research without a single direct textual reading.”<sup>259</sup> According to Moretti’s “distant reading” of the patterns of the unequal flows of world literature, particularly the development of the modern novel, European literature is the centre which peripheral cultures compromise and revolve around in their struggle to attain literary modernism. Moretti describes this world literary system of centre and peripheral as “a law of literary evolution.”<sup>260</sup> Mufti calls for a “better close reading” that pays attention to the effects of standardisation and homogenisation both within and across languages and cultures that come masked as diversity.<sup>261</sup>

In this project, I call for a “better close reading” that pays attention to the subjectivity of the Orient. The Eurocentrism of the Nobel, the world literary space, and Casanova’s critique of Eurocentrism of the world literary space, is difficult to defend. Both Said and Foucault are controversial due to the highly abstract and theoretical nature of their observations, albeit this abstractness is intentional because “facts” are also originated from discourse and power/knowledge. As much as Said is prompting a critical intervention into the constructed image of the Orient, his own critical intervention is based on a constructed assumption that is detached from its materialistic reality. One example of the shortcomings of this highly abstract discussion of Orientalism is Said’s contention that the Orient is being passively classified into neatly organised objects which can therefore be dominated by the

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<sup>258</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (Jan/Feb 2000): 67.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>261</sup> Mufti, “Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures,” *Ibid*, 493.

West. However, as I shall elaborate in Chapter Five, the Orient can also take part in Orientalism, or is engaged in “self-Orientalism.”

In the case of Gao Xingjian, discussions about the alleged Eurocentrism of the Nobel prize must return back to Gao’s literary works. Casanova recognises Gao’s contribution as “recreat[ing] his own tradition using nontraditional forms” through the integration of Western literary modernism into traditional Chinese language and literature.<sup>262</sup> Aside from the fact that Casanova has selected Gao as a convenient case study because he is a naturalised French citizen when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2000, she also considers Gao as a “literary dissident.”<sup>263</sup> As I have touched on in Chapter Two, and shall elaborate in Chapters Four and Five, Gao’s priority is not to be subversive in political or literary terms. Instead, Gao has always been in negotiation with the structural forces that govern the literary fields in which he produces his creative works. In Chapter Five, I study Gao’s response towards Orientalism in the vein of self-Orientalism. I argue that Gao is intentionally staging such a typified, Orientalist, “transcultural” feature in his plays in France, to meet the expectations of the (Euro-American) world literary space in the post-war period. Yet because Gao’s theatre is infused with the aesthetics of reflexivity (suppositionality, tripartite acting), such a typified image is presented in a reflexive way, one that comments on its own typified image. In turn, Gao escapes such an Orientalist perception of him as a Chinese writer in the world literary space. Gao’s engagement with literary Eurocentrism is for the purpose of reflexivity, which simultaneously allows him to accumulate capital in the world literary space.

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<sup>262</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, Ibid, 152.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 151.



## The Aesthetics of Reflexivity in Gao Xingjian's Theatre

I consider the notions of suppositionality and tripartite acting as the most effective illustrations of Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity. From identifying Gao's web of theatrical influences in both *xiqu* and modern European theatre, including Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Vsevolod Meyerhold,<sup>264</sup> to the transcultural integration of *xiqu* and Brechtian distancing effect into Gao's tripartite acting,<sup>265</sup> the techniques of Gao's theatre have been the subject of extensive discussions. Rather than *telling* Gao's suppositionality and tripartite acting as detached from Gao's creative works, I shall *show* these techniques in the light of "aesthetics of reflexivity" through my close-reading of his plays in Chapters Four and Five. In lieu of (another) general survey of Gao's theatre, I wish to set the stage for the later close-reading chapters, and focus specifically on the aspect of "reflexivity" in Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity.

Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity can be described as "an observation of an observation." The Third Eye's third-person perspective, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, observes the objective second-person perspective's observation of the narcissistic first-person perspective (see Figure 1 in Chapter One). The first-person "chaotic self" is always in a state of chaos and narcissism, which I have theorised as Bourdieusian doxa: an individual is aware of the unconscious influence of the doxa in his habits, routines, and assumptions, which are never questioned. As discussed earlier, I argue that Gao is under the doxic influence of Chinese realism in the New

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<sup>264</sup> See Izabella Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, Ibid, 31-82; Jessica Yeung, *Ink Dances in Limbo*, Ibid, 51-75; Quah Sy Ren, "Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian's Theatre," in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, Ibid, 157-200.

<sup>265</sup> See Todd Coulter, *Transcultural Aesthetics in the Plays of Gao Xingjian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 30-72; Gilbert Fong and Shelby Chan, "Nonattachment and Gao Xingjian's Neutral Actor," in *Gao Xingjian and Transmedia Aesthetics*, eds. Mabel Lee and Jianmei Liu (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2018), 99-114.

Era Chinese literary field, and of Euro-American Orientalism in the world literary field. The second-person perspective is the objective observation of the narcissistic self. In the context of Gao's theatre, this observation was first conducted in the experimentations during the 1980s, where Gao, alongside other New Era playwrights, appropriated European modernist techniques and *xiqu* techniques. Several Chinese playwrights during the New Era<sup>266</sup> were heavily influenced by the modernist, anti-illusionist theatre styles/techniques/aesthetics, which challenged the dominance of naturalist-realist theatre, most often associated with Russian director and theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky. European models such as Brecht's epic theatre, Grotowski's poor theatre, and Meyerhold's stylised theatre drew inspiration from *xiqu*, and considered its suppositionality as a suitable theatrical device for an anti-illusionist theatre. Suppositionality is the idea that everything on stage is represented, and the theatrical experience is an interaction between the actors' stylised performance and the audience's interpretation of that performance. The performance of anti-illusion theatre sought to tear down the realist theatre's "fourth wall," so that the audience can engage with what is on stage in a critical manner. Under the influence of European playwrights, as well as the Chinese root-seeking trend of the 1980s,<sup>267</sup> Chinese playwrights also reconsidered *xiqu* as anti-illusion theatre which might contribute to challenge the dominant realist-naturalist theatre.

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<sup>266</sup> Due to the "brotherly" political and ideological intimacy of Soviet-Chinese relations in the 1950s, the Stanislavsky System became the orthodox theatre style in China. See Min Tian, "Traditional Performances in Modern Times: China," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre*, ed Siyuan Liu (New York, London: Routledge, 2016), 493. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky's "fourth wall" was intended to return the actor's attention back on to the stage. The fourth wall was never intended to exclude the audience's participation from the theatrical experience. Quite the contrary, reference to audience participation scattered throughout Stanislavsky's influential theory text *An Actor Prepares* (1937). See Bella Merlin, *Konstanstin Stanislavsky* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 49-50.

<sup>267</sup> Jessica Yeung, *Ink Dances in Limbo*, Ibid, 68.

Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect or distancing effect),<sup>268</sup> in its essence, is the intentional distancing of the audience away from the emotional and sentimental aspects of a theatrical performance. Brecht contends that one cannot lack objectivity in the process of social change, and in terms of watching theatre, he does not wish to see his audience "leave their reason in the cloakroom along with their coats."<sup>269</sup> Techniques of the Brechtian distancing effect include actors "going out" of their characters so as to directly address the audience; the use of placards to disclose the development of the plot and dispel dramatic suspense; and characters explaining their stage directions during the performance.

In the essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936), Brecht recounts his experience of watching a *xiqu* performance starring Mei Lanfang performing in plain clothes in Moscow:

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off the audience, just as if they were *acrobats*.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> See footnote 59 of Chapter One for my discussion on the English translation of *verfremdungseffekt*.

<sup>269</sup> Brecht, "A New Theatre," trans. John Willett, in *Brecht On Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 46.

<sup>270</sup> Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," trans. John Willett, in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, eds. Jane de Gay, Lizbeth Goodman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 95.

It is important to not overemphasise *xiqu*'s influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century European theatre. While Brecht's theatrical devices are reminiscent of certain aspects of *xiqu* performance (eg self-introductions, singing, and direct address to audience), Brecht most likely drew influence from fellow European playwrights like William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, as well as Russian formalist theory to develop his own theatrical vision before having contact with *xiqu*.<sup>271</sup> More importantly, the illusion of the "fourth wall" never existed in traditional Chinese theatre. As Huang Zuolin summarises: "Stanislavsky believed in the 'fourth wall,' Brecht wanted to demolish it, while for Mei Lanfang such a wall did not exist and so there was never any need to pull it down, since the Chinese theatre has always been so highly conventionalised that it has never set out to create an illusion of real life of the audience."<sup>272</sup> Building on Huang, Tian Min reiterates that "it is true that there is no fourth wall in the Chinese theatre that cuts the audience off from the stage and the actor. But it is precisely this absence of the fourth wall in the first place that conditions the fact that the Chinese theatre needs no device to demonstrate the absence of a fourth wall and no anti-illusionistic 'A[lienation] effect' whatsoever."<sup>273</sup> In other words, *xiqu* cannot be anti-illusion since the illusion of realism is a non-issue for the Chinese theatrical form. Brecht partly derived his anti-illusionistic epic theatre from *xiqu*. Yet, ironically, *xiqu* is highly illusionistic, even more so than Western naturalistic theatre. The essence of *xiqu*'s illusion is the poetic and emotional atmosphere (*yijing*) and the essence of physical movement (*shensi*).<sup>274</sup> And the illusion

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<sup>271</sup> Tian Min, "The Effect of Displacement: Brecht's Concept of the 'Alienation Effect' and Traditional Chinese Theatre," in *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 40.

<sup>272</sup> Huang Zuolin, "Mantan xiqu guan" [A detailed discussion about theatrical vision] (1962); qtd. in Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 130.

<sup>273</sup> Tian Min, "The Effect of Displacement: Brecht's Concept of the 'Alienation Effect' and Traditional Chinese Theatre," in *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 46.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

of *xiqu* serves as much as a form of entertainment as it is a means to promote social values (eg filial piety, obedience to the state, and women's chastity) as well as teaching people about their own history.<sup>275</sup>

Instead of following the European playwright's misunderstanding of *xiqu*'s suppositionality and its corresponding actor performance, Gao develops his own understanding of European modernist theatre and *xiqu*. Gao's play *The Other Shore* (1986) offers key demonstrations of his own theatrical vision. The play's suppositional setting is evident from its undefinable time and a location "from the real world to the hypothetical other shore."<sup>276</sup> Actors are required to construct the setting and time through their performances. The rope game that is featured in the opening scene of *The Other Shore*, played by a troupe of actors acting as themselves, can be viewed as an exposition of Gao's notion of tripartite acting and the neutral actor. Gao's tripartite acting requires an actor to play the triple role of daily-life actor (ie person whose profession is acting), character, and neutral actor. The neutral actor is an intermediate state between the real-life actor and the character.<sup>277</sup> The neutral actor maintains distance from both his position as daily-life actor and the character. In the rope game scene, the actors, through the physical action of pulling ropes, become aware of their physical environment, which includes the presence and participation of other actors:

ACTOR PLAYING WITH ROPES: If I were to pull the rope real hard  
towards me, then we'd have to see who's stronger. The stronger one  
pulls and the weaker is being pulled. It becomes a tug-of-war, a

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<sup>275</sup> Colin Mackerras, "Traditional Chinese Theatre," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre*, Ibid, 38.

<sup>276</sup> Gao, "The Other Shore," trans. Gilbert Fong, in *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>277</sup> Gao, "Biaoyan de sanchong xing he zhongxing yanyuan" [The three-tiers of performance and the neutral actor], *Lun Xiju* [On Theatre], Ibid, 53-67.

competition of strength, and there'll be a winner and a loser, victory and defeat. Now if I carry this rope on my back like this and pull even harder, you'll be like a dead dog; likewise if you manage to gain control of this rope, I'll be like a horse or a cow, and you'll be able to drive me around like cattle. In other words, you'll be running the show. So you see, our relationship is not at all constant, it's not at all unchanging.<sup>278</sup>

According to Quah, the rope game demonstrates what Gao refers to as the “psychological field” (*xinli chang*), where “the actors are not only required to portray the characters they are playing, but are also supposed to be aware of and to maximise the potentiality of theatrical space.”<sup>279</sup> During the rope game, the actor is in an in-between state of character in *The Other Shore* but also an actor who seeks to bring life into the suppositional stage. This simultaneous performance is what Gao envisions as the performance of a neutral actor.

In discussing Gao's suppositionality, Quah alludes to the famous saying in the Chinese novel *Dreams of the Red Chamber*: “Reality becomes fiction when the fiction appears to be real” (*Zhen zuo jia shi jia yi zhen*).<sup>280</sup> The “fiction” that Quah references is Cao Xueqin's representation of a Buddhist-Daoist view towards the illusive nature of lived experiences and emotional attachments. In contrast, contemporary European modernist playwrights and Chinese *xiqu* dramatists, despite sharing an interest in suppositionality, remain preoccupied with the representation of reality for political and ideological purposes. Instead, Quah finds Gao being without isms, and treats

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<sup>278</sup> Gao, “The Other Shore,” *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>279</sup> Quah, “Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian's Theatre,” *Ibid*, 162-63.

<sup>280</sup> This is in fact a misquote. The original quote from *Dreams of Red Chamber* is “jia zuo zhen shi zhen yi jia” (When fiction is treated as reality, reality is also fiction). See Quah, “Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian's Theatre,” *Ibid*, 189-90.

suppositionality as the subject of his theatre.<sup>281</sup> While Quah is correct that Gao's theatre does not serve any ideological purposes, it is important not to overlook the fact that Gao is highly aware of his surroundings, and he does represent his surroundings on stage. Instead of isms, Gao is representing doxa, or a "definition of reality that simultaneously disguises its arbitrary nature."<sup>282</sup> I find Haiping Yan's understanding of *xiqu*'s "theatricalised ethics" as closer to my understanding of Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity.

In addition to *xiqu*'s ambivalence of real and unreal, Yan argues there is an "ethicalised aesthetics, or theatricalised ethics" that conveys an ethical imaginary to the audience; hence it is not completely detached from social realities.<sup>283</sup> Although the *xiqu* stage is suppositional, it promotes Confucian moral ethics too. *Xiqu* evokes feelings, and these feelings are connected to the social reality, hence an energy that "moves heaven and earth" (*gantian dongdi*).<sup>284</sup> Perhaps predicting that *xiqu*'s ambiguity of the real and unreal may be difficult to grasp for a reader unfamiliar with *xiqu*, Yan intriguingly references WEB Du Bois to describe the *xiqu* spectator's experience: "how does it feel to be a problem [...] of two souls, two thoughts, two irreconciled [sic] strivings."<sup>285</sup> Although Yan risks being accused of culturally appropriating Du Boisian double consciousness, a psychosocial theory that is fundamental to the study of the plights of the African American racial experience, the gamble pays dividends for our understanding of the unreconciled strivings between feelings evoked from theatre and feelings of social reality.

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>282</sup> Philip Hodgkiss, "Paths of Critical Relations," in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, eds Jose Lopez, Garry Potter (London and New York: The Athlone Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>283</sup> Haiping Yan, "Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama," in *Theatricality*, eds Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, 65.

For Yan, the *xiqu* experience is a space of spectatorial subjectivity because the spectators get to decide how to feel. Similarly, Du Boisian double consciousness poses the question of “how does it feel...” that returns subjectivity to African Americans with regards to how they respond to double consciousness. In Du Bois’s explanation of double consciousness, he illustrates the divide between the black minority and the white mainstream with the metaphor of a transparent color curtain known as “the veil.”<sup>286</sup> With the veil on, African Americans are viewed by whites as “blacks” and are misrecognised as a problem, and face racist treatment. With the veil off, African Americans are invisible to mainstream society, and not even a sign of misrecognition is demonstrated. The veil, however, can be freely lifted so that African Americans can freely roam within and beyond mainstream social perception. The transparent nature of the veil is crucial to Du Bois’s argument that double consciousness potentially bears the gift of “second sight.”<sup>287</sup> As the veil is invisible, its position of covering or lifting depends on the minority’s awareness of double consciousness. As long as African Americans gain awareness of the presence of the veil, double consciousness becomes a strength that offers insider-outsider perspectives. In contrast, a lack of awareness means the veil is a prison house that traps African Americans. In the case of *xiqu*’s actor-audience interaction, both parties are aware that what is represented on stage by the actor is unreal. Yet the audience can choose how to evaluate and interpret the stylized actions of the *xiqu* actors. Yan, in this sense, is considering the *xiqu* audience as one that is experiencing an unresolvable tension of two “realities:” theatrical and social. With that said, *xiqu*’s evocation of feelings results in moving the people and further “moves heaven and

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<sup>286</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett Premier Book, 1967), 16-17.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, 16.



earth” and therefore offering new possibilities for social ethics, but not necessarily bringing about social changes.<sup>288</sup>

Gao categorises his plays into “epic theatre” (*shishi xiju*) and “psychological theatre” (*neixin xiju*).<sup>289</sup> Gao’s epic theatre works draw influence from their sociopolitical surroundings to portray a type of collective memory and consciousness that is akin to ancient mythology or modern allegory. Gao is deliberately acknowledging the influence of Brecht’s “epic theatre” (*episches Theater*). While both Gao’s and Brecht’s theatrical vision involves the critical distancing of actors and audiences from the theatrical performance, Gao’s epic theatre does not only seek to be reflective about the world at large, but also reflective of the relationship between the individual and his external surroundings. As I shall elaborate in Chapters Four and Five, Gao’s epic theatre works, namely *Absolute Signal*, *Bus Stop*, *Wild Man*, *City of the Dead*, *Of Mountains and Seas*, and *Snow in August*, are engaged with the realities of its external surrounding (ie field and doxa) for the purpose of examining its relationship with the individual’s consciousness (ie reflexivity).

During his first decade of voluntary exile to Europe (1987-1997), Gao produced nine plays. Amongst these plays, critics have noted that a substantial amount can be considered as “psychological theatre.” Gao’s psychological theatre looks inwards to examine universal themes of humanity.<sup>290</sup> As Quah Sy Ren describes Gao’s plays from this period, “References to the Chinese sociocultural context have almost completely faded from his settings and characters. The plays appear to be thematically universal and formally innovative, and yet his themes are all discussed

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<sup>288</sup> Yan, “Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama,” *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>289</sup> Gao Xingjian and Gilbert Fong, “Quanneng Xiju” [Omnipotent Theatre], in *Lun Xiju* [On Theatre] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>290</sup> Gilbert Fong, “Yi wuzhu wei ben—Gao Xingjian xiju lun de beihou” [Non-abidance as the Basis—Behind Gao Xingjian’s Theatre Theory], in *Lun Xiju* [On Theatre], *Ibid*, 3-17.

and represented with reference to various cultural traditions.”<sup>291</sup> Critics generally agree that Gao’s theatrical vision is more extensively realised in his psychological theatre, or the plays he completed in France. This is further confirmed by Gao’s admission that his plays in China were “a product of compromise.”<sup>292</sup> Even though Gao’s suppositional stage and tripartite acting are stripped of realist conventions, I am skeptical of whether Gao’s ideal theatre can be truly liberated from the ideological restrictions with which these conventions impose onto Gao. While plays such as *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, *In Between Life and Death*, and *Nocturnal Wanderer* explore universal issues of modern life in a non-specific context, they nevertheless were written in French, and commissioned by French capital.<sup>293</sup>

An example of Gao’s psychological theatre that seeks to transcend structural censorship through a universalised and abstract setting is *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (1992). The play, which was commissioned by the *Maison des Auteurs de Théâtre Étrangers*,<sup>294</sup> features three characters: A middle-aged man, a young girl – who are both talkative – and an aloof, silent monk. Throughout most of the first half of *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, only the monk is engaged in theatricality through his performance of acrobatic stunts, such as attempting to take one hand away and do a single-handstand and trying to balance an egg on the tip of a wooden staff.<sup>295</sup> The man and the girl embark on a random and longwinded conversation about topics ranging from sex and drugs encounters in India, to gender politics. Their dialogue initially appears to be a desperate attempt to alleviate the awkwardness of their situation after an evening of casual sex. Yet, as the conversation develops, it slowly reveals itself as

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<sup>291</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Chinese Transcultural Theater*, Ibid, 145.

<sup>292</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, Ibid, 86.

<sup>293</sup> For a survey of French funding and commissioning of Gao’s plays, see Ibid, 12.

<sup>294</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Chinese Transcultural Theater*, Ibid, 12.

<sup>295</sup> Gao, “Dialogue and Rebuttal,” trans. Gilbert Fong, in *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*, Ibid, 94, 102.

part of their mutual flirting and seduction, a psychological tug-of-war and negotiation, with the end goal of subordinating one another. However, once the man and the girl realize the importance of balance in communication, they also turn to performance. Their theatrics are first in the form of a sex game that ends in mutual decapitation. After their beheading, the man and the girl sit back to back. Two unidentified heads, presumably belonging to the man and the girl, lay on the floor. The monk is nowhere to be found.

Near the end of the play, the monk reappears and brings out a large broom. As the monk sweeps the stage, the stage lighting goes dim and the man's head and the girl's head ramble on about random subjects while their movements become extremely slow. When the monk sweeps faster, the man and the girl move faster, twisting their bodies like "two creepy crawling bugs" and obsessing over a "crack:"

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: What sort of crack?

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: Why is there a crack?

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: Where is this crack?

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: Why is it called a crack?

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: One crack after another!

GIRL: A crack.....

MAN: Why is there only one crack?<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid, 134.

The unresolved mystery of the “crack” evokes similarities of Zen *gong’an* which are stories about enlightenment/awakening. A well-known *gong’an* is “Zhaozhou si men” (Zhaozhou’s Four Gates).” A monk asks his master from Zhaozhou what he is or where it is. Zhaozhou/His master replies “East Gate, West Gate, North Gate, South Gate.” Zhaozhou’s/The master’s response, like the girl’s repeated reply of “a crack,” appears to be evading the question in discussion. Yet if one reads between the lines, Zhaozhou/the master might be identifying his inner being with the traditional structures in China, such as town, home, or temple compound. This could highlight that these enclosures are not only barriers to separate people but are also openings to allow interaction with the outside world.

In the performance suggestions, Gao states that the play is inspired by the Chan/Zen Buddhist literary form of *gong’an*, but has no intention of promoting Chan Buddhism.<sup>297</sup> Yet references to Buddhist cultural practices and Chinese theatrical acrobatics are scattered throughout the play. In a play full of dialogue and rebuttal regarding abstract and universal issues, the inclusion of a silent monk who performs various acrobatics and stunts appears to be a forced one akin to Daphne Lei’s notion of “Hegemonic Intercultural Theatre” (HIT).<sup>298</sup> An attribute of hegemonic intercultural theatre is the West’s dominance in the intercultural process, which often results in displaying a superficial side of Asian elements like *jingju* acrobatics and costumes in Western-initiated intercultural theatre productions. Although Gao seeks to distant *Dialogue and Rebuttal* from the label of “Chinese” or “Asian” cultural

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>298</sup> Daphne Lei, “Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson's HIT Productions in Taiwan,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 4, December 2011 pp. 571-586.

product through a culturally-unspecified setting, his approach continues to be influenced by “Oriental” signifiers.<sup>299</sup>

Gao considers theatre as a “game” (*xi*). The objective of theatre, for Gao, “is to make both the performers and audiences believe that it is suppositional and to join in playing the game.”<sup>300</sup> Coincidentally, Bourdieu explains his notion of habitus as “feel for the game,” in which the “game” is the social field, and the “feel” is the habitus. Both Gao’s conception of theatre and Bourdieu’s examination of habitus are akin to a game that requires the active participation of actors/audiences/agents. For Bourdieu, the agent’s habitus is shaped through a negotiation with the rules of the game/social field, resulting in the most competitive strategy to accumulate capital. For Gao, both actors and audience participate in the construction of the theatrical experience/imagination through suppositionality and tripartite. Yet Gao’s ideal theatre only constitutes as one level of observation of the reality represented on stage (objective second-person perspective). The essence of Gao’s Third Eye is to further observe this observation (detached third-person perspective).

If Gao’s theatre is a game/field in the Bourdieusian sense, what is being represented and reflexive about is the doxa of the field. Doxa is something highly unconscious yet manifested into one’s actions. While the theatrical stage for epic/allegorical plays is not entirely empty or suppositional, I identify a marginal space in each of these plays that is suppositional. In these marginal spaces, Gao’s aesthetics of reflexivity is in the most intimate juxtaposition and contact with

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<sup>299</sup> This project does not dispute the fact that all of Gao’s plays, including the psychological post-exile plays are merging of Chinese and Western elements. What this project does seek to argue is how such a merging of Chinese and Western elements, or “transcultural theatre,” do not transcend the influence of orientalism. As such, a degree of reflexivity is needed to show awareness of such orientalist influences. As I shall elaborate in Chapter 5, I argue that *Of Mountains and Seas*, *City of the Dead*, and *Snow in August*, with their direct appropriation of classical Chinese cultural products, serve such a reflexivity towards orientalism.

<sup>300</sup> Gao, *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* [In search of modern theatre] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe), 66; qtd. in Quah, “Space and Suppositionality in Gao Xingjian’s Theatre,” *Ibid*, 175.

structural censorship. In the plays completed in China, Gao is representing Chinese realism as the doxa of the New Era Chinese literary field; in the plays completed in France, Gao is representing Euro-American Orientalism as the doxa of the world literary field. And if these doxic restrictions, in terms of structural censorship, are essentially part of Gao's expressions, I contend that Gao's epic theatre, which has a specific cultural context, is more effective in its reflexivity of the structural censorship that influences Gao. In order for Gao to reflect on structural censorship, he must be intently engaged with structural censorship. Although Gao is without isms, he is highly aware of his surroundings, and represents the doxa in his epic theatre plays.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 has introduced the theoretical lens of my study of Gao's pre-Nobel plays, namely "the aesthetics of reflexivity." Such a critical perspective is jointly informed by Gao's escape from his so-called "chaotic self" as well as a Bourdieusian understanding of structural censorship in terms of field, capital, habitus, and doxa. Before proceeding to the close-readings of Gao's plays in the New Era Chinese literary field and the world literary field, it is important to note that these close-readings do not argue whether they successfully subvert state expectations or Orientalist expectations or in the public discourse or reception. Whether the readers and audiences can experience this subversion depends on their quality and capacity. Instead, my close-reading argues how these plays offer a space of reflexivity that makes such subversion possible amongst readers and audiences. Furthermore, while authorial subjectivity, the idea of chaos, and doxa are discussed in detail in the first half of the thesis, not every concept will be specifically referenced throughout the close-reading. Since the above concepts are inter-related, I ultimately group under the umbrella term of "aesthetics of reflexivity." As such, these concepts are blended into

the close-readings that pay attention to how the plays induce reflexivity towards Chinese state expectations of realism and Western expectations of Orientalism.

## Chapter Four: Gao Xingjian's Escape from the New Era Chinese Literary Field

The New Era (*xin shiqi*, 1978-89),<sup>301</sup> as a literary period, was defined by the collaborative pursuit of socioeconomic modernity and literary modernism between the Chinese state and the intellectuals. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the persecution of the Gang of Four, the Deng Xiaoping regime initiated the “Four Modernisations” to reform post-Mao Chinese society. Deng’s Four Modernisations plans did not prioritise reforms of political or cultural structures; modernisation efforts rather focused on agriculture, industry, technology and defense. Nevertheless, the state sought to re-establish the prestige of the intellectuals. After an extensive period of degradation and devaluation of intellectuals during the Maoist era, especially throughout the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese state supported intellectuals by offering not only economic resources, but more importantly, granting them unprecedented relaxation with regards to knowledge pluralism and freedom of expression. In 1979, it was pronounced at a national congress of literary representatives that

the leadership of work in literature and the arts, does not issue orders, does not demand that literature and the arts engage in provisional, concrete, or directly political tasks, but, based on the characteristics and laws of development of literature and the arts, helps workers in literature and the arts achieve conditions for the continuous flourishing of the literature and arts enterprise.<sup>302</sup>

The New Era intellectuals took advantage of their newfound freedom by vastly importing Euro-American thoughts and techniques in order to modernise their cultural

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<sup>301</sup> For my understanding of the New Era, refer to footnote 44 in Chapter One.

<sup>302</sup> Congratulations offered to the congress by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Council in: *Collected Documents of the Fourth Representatives Congress of China's Literature & Arts Workers*, Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1980: 6; qtd. in Zicheng Hong, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Michael M Day (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 260.



scene, prompting a “high culture fever” (*wenhua re*) which sought for an aesthetic autonomy and literary consciousness independent of sociopolitical factors. In contrast, the rationale behind the state’s support towards intellectuals was multifaceted but had little in common with the intellectual’s artistic aspirations. Some critics speculate that the Party reformers sought to utilise literature as a means to strengthen their status within the Party and to push their economic programs,<sup>303</sup> while other critics perceive that the state aimed to reconstruct a new subjectivity for the people of post-Mao China.<sup>304</sup> A paradoxical relationship between the state and the intellectuals was formed under such a context: the state raised the status of intellectuals in order to gain intellectual support towards its plans of modernising Chinese society, yet the intellectuals had no political legitimacy to critique the state.

Industrialism and capitalism, in the post-feudal European sense, breed new social systems and institutions to regulate modern life.<sup>305</sup> Modernism is the reflection and critique of such systems regulating modern life. Modernism and modernity are therefore linked with each other, in which the former is the reflexive critique of the latter. Letty Chen, however, observes that modernism, as defined above, is always absent in the discussions of Chinese modernity during the Republican Era (1912-1949). She remarks that The Other in the Chinese “modern” subject is traditionalism and imperialism, not modernity.<sup>306</sup> The reflexive critique of Chinese modernism is, therefore, not on modern life, but on traditional, Confucianist values and the constant

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<sup>303</sup> Mu Ling, “Beyond the Theory of ‘Language Games:’ Huang Ziping and Chinese Literary Criticism in the 1980s,” *Modern China*, vol. 21, no. 4, (October 1995): 423.

<sup>304</sup> Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

<sup>305</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008 [1991]), 15.

<sup>306</sup> Letty Chen, “Review: Reading between Chinese Modernism and Modernity: A Methodological Reflection,” in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (CLEAR), vol. 24 (December 2002): 175-88.

defence against Western imperialism. The May Fourth spirit (1919) of cultivating a “new culture” in the vein of Euro-American modernism was extended into the New Era.<sup>307</sup> And in both the Republican Era and the New Era, the importation of Western modernism into Chinese society fundamentally lacked the sense of social critique as found in the modernism of the West.

In the midst of the zealous mood of the 1980s, Gao opted to focus on the reflection of these politics through aesthetics. In fact, Gao was never fully part of the “high culture fever.” Instead, he was always assuming an insider-outsider position, observing at the margins. Gao remarks on the differences between Chinese modernism and Western modernism:

Firstly, [Chinese modernists] express an endorsement of the self, rather than negating the self, as did Western modernism. They assert the value of human dignity with a Nietzschean tragic passion, rather than undertaking a cold-blooded dissection of the self. They are opposed to traditional feudal ethics and uphold the legitimacy of sexuality, rather than rejecting the very idea of ethics and being disgusted by sexuality. They reveal the absurdities within reality; they do not see this absurdity as existence itself.<sup>308</sup>

In a way, Gao realised that the Chinese modernist pursuit of enlightenment and humanism was simply replacing one repression with another repression. As Sebastian Veg understands, Chinese modernism is “the type of modernism that Gao associates with ideology and politicised literature, because of its propensity to endow literature

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<sup>307</sup> Zicheng Hong observes that the New Era was often associated with the May Fourth movement, and strived to continue its enlightening spirit for freedom and pluralism. See Hong, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Ibid, 276.

<sup>308</sup> Gao Xingjian, “Chidao de xiandaizhuyi yu dangjin zhongguo wenxue” [The Slow Arrival of Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature], in *Meiyou zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990]), 102.

with a central social role.”<sup>309</sup> Drawing from the essence of Western modernism, Gao’s plays of this period were intended to emphasise on reflection from a distance, however difficult and impossible it appeared. At that time, Gao wanted to promote an aesthetic of self-reflexivity through detachment, or what he would later coin as being “without isms” (*meiyou zhuyi*). As argued in Chapter Three, I contend that Gao creates the trope of the “chaotic self” (*hundun de ziwo*) to observe the unconscious influences of the doxic rules of the New Era Chinese literary field, namely Chinese realism. Such an observation informs his plays completed in China, which serve as literary spaces of reflexivity for himself as a self-censored writer. Through detachment and reflexivity, Gao spiritually “escapes” from the chaotic self and the doxa of the New Era Chinese literary field.

As a way to smoothen the public reception of his spiritual escape via fictional works, Gao first published the literary criticism *A Preliminary Exploration into the Art of Modern Fiction* (*Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan*, 1980). Ironically, this work sparked great controversy in the New Era Chinese literary field.<sup>310</sup> The production of Gao’s first play *Bus Stop* (completed in 1981, staged in 1983) with the prestigious Beijing People’s Art Theatre, his work unit at the time, was delayed. Yu Shizhi, a noted Chinese modern drama actor and the former deputy director of the Chinese Dramatists Association, urged Gao to avoid staging absurdist writing because “the political climate was not right.”<sup>311</sup> He then wrote a second play, *Absolute Signal* (1982), which though conformed more closely to the realist tradition and problem

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<sup>309</sup> Sebastian Veg, “On the Margins of Modernity: A Comparative Study of Gao Xingjian and Ōe Kenzaburō,” *China Perspectives*, no. 2 (2010):37.

<sup>310</sup> The controversy that was sparked by *A Preliminary Exploration*...is now well-documented. Refer to Gao’s essay “Wilted Chrysanthemums,” in *The Case for Literature*, trans Mabel Lee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 140-154; and Jing Wang’s account in *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 145-47.

<sup>311</sup> Gao, “Wilted Chrysanthemums,” *Ibid*, 141.

literature, contained modernist sensibilities. The play was an instant success and evolved into a nationwide phenomenon, as “up to ten theatres throughout China fought to stage the play.”<sup>312</sup> The success of *Absolute Signal* paved the way for a second attempt to produce *Bus Stop*. With prominent Chinese modern playwright Cao Yu’s blessings, *Bus Stop* was staged ten times as a closed experimental performance. After a week’s run, *Bus Stop* was banned again for being “the most poisonous play written since the founding of the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>313</sup> He then entered into a five-month internal exile into the rural areas of Southwestern China. During his travels, Gao discovered he was singled out as part of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. During such a politicised climate, Gao produced the eco-critical work *Wild Man* (1985). Despite its strong resonance with the root-seeking literary trend, *Wild Man* sparked debates for deviating from the tradition of realist mode of representation.<sup>314</sup> The last play Gao wrote in China was *The Other Shore* (1986), which was banned at the rehearsal stage.

Gao understood that his survival depended on a compliance with the Chinese state’s rule, or the Bourdieusian doxa, of the New Era Chinese literary field. Responsibility towards the masses is at the heart of the New Era Chinese literary field. Being a member of the Chinese Writer’s Association as well as a resident writer for the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, Gao depended on the state’s support to develop his artistic career. As such, he had to submit to the doxic requirements of serving China’s modernisation according to the CCP’s (Chinese Communist Party) guidelines. The freedom of the New Era literary field was sanctioned under the condition that it would not threaten the stability and legitimacy of the State’s rule. Yet

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 146-47.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid, 151-52.

Gao's priority as a playwright in China was always reflexivity through content or mode of representation. Even during the New Era, Gao remained highly reflective of the avant-gardism and modernism that he helped introduce into the Chinese literary field. As Quah succinctly describes, "While the prevailing dramatic discourse privileged the idea of modernisation or the imagination of a Chinese modernity, Gao had already begun to reflect on the problems of a modernity that was still in the process of being constructed."<sup>315</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three, structural censorship, like the operations of the market, broadly defined, is essential to the repression *and* production of expression. In this sense, every effort to directly challenge and confront the doxa of the literary field is, effectively, a continuation of the doxa. And the crucial difference between Gao and other New Era writers of "problem literature" and "root-seeking literature" is the emphasis on observation and reflection.

Problem literature derived from the shock and disbelief of a complete negation of the Maoist regime and its socialist direction, and the embrace of state modernisation and capitalism. Liu Xinhua's "Scar" (Shanghai, 1978) is a representative example of the problem literature, or "scar literature." "Scar" offers much conveyance of love, death, regrets, loneliness, and alienation. Liu's aim is to draw the reader into an emotional trough and effectively re-live, re-experience the defining features of the Cultural Revolution, and ultimately, become re-traumatised. Under the Maoist-influenced principles of "practice is the sole criterion of truth" and "seek truth from facts," scar works were viewed as courageous attempts of exposing problems in post-Cultural Revolution China.<sup>316</sup> But aside from achieving readerly

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<sup>315</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2004), 165

<sup>316</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall and Louie Kam, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 333.

catharsis, the Chinese scar genre offers little insight into how the Cultural Revolution trauma occurred. If key debates regarding the individual responsibilities of victims and perpetrators are avoided, what is the purpose of writers as cultural carriers?

Root-seeking literature derived from the ideological and cultural void during the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Despite the vast influx of Western cultural thoughts, Chinese people felt a disconnect between themselves and their cultural roots, which led to the root-seeking literary trend of rediscovering Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Ah Cheng's "King of Chess" (*Qiwang*, 1984) is a prominent example of the root-seeking genre. Following the life of the protagonist Wang Yisheng, an "educated youth" of the Cultural Revolution, who is obsessed with chess, readers rediscover the essence of Daoism. Wang does not care about politics or material matters. All he needs and wants are food and chess. His pure and singular devotion to chess is reminiscent of the Daoist notion of "action by inaction." (*wuwei*) By abandoning all perceptions and preconceived notions, Wang simultaneously defeats nine players in nine games of blindfolded chess. While "King of Chess" glorifies Daoism, its glorification is conducted through an ahistorical approach that is detached from the reality of substantial sociopolitical changes in New Era China. The search for traditional Chinese cultural roots, in "King of Chess," is merely reduced to serving the function of purifying and revising Chinese culture.<sup>317</sup>

As I shall demonstrate in the close-reading section of this chapter, Gao's plays completed in China are surely reminiscent of problem literature and root-seeking literature. Yet my project argues that in addition to resonating with these trends in problem literature and root-seeking literature, each of Gao's plays also contains an aspect that allows for reflexivity and detached observation of these trends. Structural

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<sup>317</sup> Yang Xiaobin, *The Chinese Postmodern* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 36.

ensorship, whilst inescapable as discussed in Chapter Three, does not necessarily place the individual within a deterministic and passive scenario. Liu Zaifu argues that Gao's spiritual exile is not a passive escape from social responsibility but "a proactive challenge against power, market, and any hegemonic narratives."<sup>318</sup> The aesthetics of reflexivity, namely suppositionality and tripartite acting, are the keys towards Gao's spiritual escape from structural censorship. In *Absolute Signal*, the rhythm of the play's sound serves as the "sixth character" that reflects on the appropriation of Western modernist techniques under Chinese socialist rule. In *Bus Stop*, all the characters end up leaving the bus stop, but the Silent Man leaves the earliest. A comparison between the departures of the Silent Man and the other characters serve as a reflection of the belatedness of the Chinese modernism. In *Wild Man*, a fervent pursuit of the Wild Man figure is carried out by local and foreign journalists and scientists for their own personal agendas and benefits. Yet the play's ending suggests the Wild Man figure to be a product of an innocent child's imagination. The Wild Man character highlights the importance of imagination towards the searching of Chinese cultural roots.

### ***Absolute Signal: Escaping through Sound***

Often regarded as China's first black box theatre production, *Absolute Signal* introduced, for China in that period, groundbreaking lighting, sound, set, and acting techniques to convey a marked difference between the play's naturalist scenes and non-realist scenes. In a conversation between Gao Xingjian and the play's director Lin Zhaohua, the lighting and sound are regarded as the "soul" (*linghun*) of *Absolute*

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<sup>318</sup> Liu Zaifu, "Gao Xingjian he ta de jingshen zhi lu" [Gao Xingjian and his spiritual path], in *Gao Xingjian lun* [On Gao Xingjian] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2004), 5.

*Signal*.<sup>319</sup> As sound is mostly used to provoke emotional responses or create mood in an indirect way, it is usually examined in conjunction with other aspects of the production. In the case of *Absolute Signal*, the constant shift between the external and the internal, the present and the past, the real and the imaginative, is fuelled by the minimalistic design of the play's stagecraft. Following Gao's suggestion that the "rhythm of the sound" (*yinxiang jiezou*) is the play's "sixth character," I consider sound as an independent entity that is marginal yet significant to the narrative of *Absolute Signal*. More precisely, I examine how sound serves as an autonomous space of reflection towards the binaries of realism and absurdism in the play. The boundaries of real and non-real are blurred by the use of sound in *Absolute Signal*. The play is self-reflexive that its attempt of appropriating European modernist techniques in pursuit of aesthetic autonomy is limited under Chinese socialist rule.

*Absolute Signal* is Gao's most popular play in mainland China. The play received support from senior writers and enjoyed a sold-out run of over a hundred performances. Critics have remarked that the success of the play lies in its introduction of the familiar in an unfamiliar way.<sup>320</sup> With regards to the aspect of the familiar, *Absolute Signal*, at least on the surface, tackles the impact of the Cultural Revolution towards post-Cultural Revolution survivors. The play was staged in 1982. The characters Blacky, Trumpet, Bee are 20-21 years of age; Train Robber is aged 37; and Train Conductor is 56 years old. At the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, we can estimate that Blacky, Trumpet, and Bee were 4-5 years old (born 1961-62); Train Robber was 21 years old (born 1945); and Train Conductor was 40 years old

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<sup>319</sup> Gao and Lin Zhaohua, "Guanyu juehui xinhao yishu gousi de duihua" [A Dialogue about the artistic conception of *Absolute Signal*] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe bian, 1986), 97-110.

<sup>320</sup> Izabella Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre: from the word to the image* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 96.



(born 1926). The inclusion of the age of these characters indicates different influences the Cultural Revolution had had on the lives of different ages. Michel Bonnin defines the Cultural Revolution generation or “lost generation” as those impacted by the “revolution in education” policy during their formative years: instead of receiving formal education, Chinese youths were relocated to rusticate in the countryside, where they reflected upon the ideas of Maoist thought and conducted manual labor.<sup>321</sup>

Urbanites approximately born between 1947 and 1960 could be described as part of the lost generation.<sup>322</sup> According to Bonnin’s quantitative definition, Blacky, Trumpet, Bee, and Train Robber are roughly within the “lost generation” period. Only the Train Conductor is outside of the “lost generation” period. The difference between the “lost generation” (Blacky, Trumpet, Bee, Train Robber), and Train Conductor is that the latter is rooted in tradition since he grew up before the Cultural Revolution, while the former grew up in feverish destruction and rejection of traditional values. And comparing with the youthful Blacky, Trumpet, and Bee, who were only children during the height of the Cultural Revolution, Train Robber has been affected the greatest by the Cultural Revolution. As part of the lost generation, Train Robber suffered from disillusionment of the Maoist ideals, as well as being in lack of educational and occupational development chances. In the age of the Four Modernisations policy, Train Robber was not prepared at all to adapt to the increasingly industrialised and capitalistic society.

With the above context in mind, one could try to understand the difference in values and behavioural patterns amongst the characters. Spending their formative years during the Cultural Revolution, Blacky, Trumpet, and Bee are more rebellious

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<sup>321</sup> Michel Bonnin, “The ‘Lost Generation’ and Elite Politics,” *Social Research* vol. 73, no. 1 (Spring 2006), China in Transition: 251.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

towards traditional values and expectations. Trumpet carries a Trumpet while he is on duty as an assistant Train Conductor. Despite the job security of his current job, his dream is to become a Trumpet player for an orchestra; Bee is a beekeeper who lives a bohemian lifestyle and drifts from one place to another; Blacky is unemployed and in a moment of desperation and frustration about the lack of opportunities, when he joins Train Robber to rob the train. Train Robber also belongs to the lost generation, but is shaped more thoroughly by the Cultural Revolution's "decade of chaos." He is selfish, manipulative, and appears to resemble the worst of the anti-humanist mentality of Cultural Revolution. Train Conductor is part of the older generation, who is only concerned about the safety and stability of the train. In order to ensure that the train reaches its destination safely, Train Conductor sometimes upholds principles which are unjust and discriminatory. For example, he initially refuses Bee to board the train despite bearing a ticket, yet he allows Train Robber and Blacky to board the train without a ticket. The Train Conductor's double-standard treatment is not clearly elucidated in the play, but one could suspect he is influenced by sexist aspects of Confucian culture.

The didacticism in *Absolute Signal* is built around Blacky who is unemployed. A key feature of *Absolute Signal* is its intertwining of a didactic, realist plot and psychological detours. Through a series of psychological episodes that features imaginations and flashbacks, Blacky's justification for joining a train robbing plot is revealed. Unlike Trumpet, who is full of aspirations in pursuit of his dream of becoming a professional Trumpet player, Blacky just wants to earn a living enough to survive and start a family with Bee. Blacky believes that the mainstream morals of protecting the country's interests are only applicable to those who are well-off. He does not have the luxury to comply with the moral standards. Echoing a Nietzschean

notion of will, Blacky creates his own values which put his interests as priority. Regarding Blacky's "will to power" (*der Wille zur Macht*), Train Conductor and Train Robber have the following remarks:

BLACKY: Their lives are worth nothing anyway. Life is superfluous.

TRAIN CONDUCTOR: (*Scrutinizing* BLACKY) Young man, I was your age once. I've crossed more bridges than the roads you've travelled. Don't be so hot-headed and work yourself into a corner. Once you're in there you'll never be able to get out. I've seen many such cases – people who violated the law for money or fell to their death when they hitched a ride on the train. A sudden slip can have serious consequences. When you dance on a knife you can't be sure you won't die by it. You're just over twenty; after twenty there'll be thirty, after thirty, there'll be forty, fifty, sixty. Our country is experiencing some difficulties these past few years and cannot provide jobs for all of you. You may be out of work for one or two years. But the situation is bound to improve and you won't be without a job your entire life.

TRAIN ROBBER: Nowadays, the young live one day at a time. Some of them just goof off; even when they have work, they squander a salary of thirty dollars in no time. They have no concept of the time when people just lived on pickled vegetables. What's the purpose of life? To have a good time. No wonder they steal, they rob. There's no other way.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Gao, "Absolute Signal," in *Chinese Drama after the Cultural Revolution, 1979-1989*, trans. and ed. Shiao-ling S. Yu (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 197.

Train Conductor and Train Robber are obviously enemies, with their opposite intentions on the train. Yet their views towards Blacky are not dissimilar. On the one hand, Train Robber considers Blacky as a representation of the post-Cultural Revolution youth's nihilism. In general, Train Robber lacks empathy towards the struggles of the post-Cultural Revolution youths, and believes that Blacky is only a spoilt young man who compromises his moral values to satisfy his immediate individualistic desires. Indeed, Train Robber perceives himself, as part of the "lost generation," to have experienced unparalleled sufferings. On the other hand, Train Conductor appears to be more understanding yet no less critical towards Blacky's lack of faith in the country's future, which stems from individualism. Both Train Conductor and Train Robber condemn Blacky for his individualism.

Should the individual be prioritised ahead of the collective? While Train Conductor and Train Robber offer two different interpretations of Blacky's individualism, the latter's view is largely dismissed due to the play's vilification of Train Robber. Near the end of the play, it is revealed that Blacky surrenders and admits his wrongdoings. Train Conductor assures Blacky that the country will get better. He tells Blacky that despite the difficult times, "we're all on this train together, together we must keep it safe."<sup>324</sup> The superficial moral message of the play is: Do not violate morals simply because the country is currently in shamble. Be strong!

As summarized above, *Absolute Signal* bears a didactic story – a moral play that teaches the audience not to justify immoral behaviour, especially those which harm the country's interest, despite one's dire conditions and upbringing. Such conditions include unemployment, backdoorism, lack of meaning in life, all of which were characteristic of post-Mao China in the 1980s. Yet such naturalistic portrayals

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 228-29.

are disrupted by stream of consciousness intervals amongst the characters. In these psychological snippets, which carry strong resonances to Gao's later plays, the actors' performance is more relaxed and dreamy, while the stagecraft seeks to break away from the realist tone of the main plot. Stylistically, *Absolute Signal* has marked a seminal aesthetic departure from the conventions of Stanislavskian realism and the fourth wall. Hence its formal innovations were deemed as too "experimental" and seen as a subversion of the Chinese state's expectations of social realist theatre.<sup>325</sup> After gaining support from state officials and passing an internal trial performance, *Absolute Signal* was finally allowed to be staged.<sup>326</sup> In order for the play to pass state censorship, Gao's modernist techniques had to be contextualised within a social realist plot. As such, the play's non-realist stagecraft and acting were made to contribute to the didacticism of the plot.

In his staging suggestions for *Absolute Signal*, Gao refers to the sound as the "sixth character:" "It is my hope that the rhythm of the sound arrangement for the play is to serve as the sixth character. The rhythm of the sound arrangement should be just as lively as the other characters, and not merely a backdrop."<sup>327</sup> Gao views sound as an independent entity, which is autonomous from other aspects of the production. Mladen Ovadija, in his survey of the dramaturgy of sound in avant-garde and post-dramatic theatre, observes:

The breakthrough of the dramaturgy of sound is not an issue of artistic technique or craftsmanship. It is a consequence of the avant-garde's recognition of the materiality of sound, the revision of the conventional referentiality of artistic means, and the establishment of a new aesthetic that

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<sup>325</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Chinese Transcultural Theatre*, Ibid, 9

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Gao, "*Absolute Signal*," Ibid, 182.

deals with sound as matter, form, and an independent constituent of the work of art. No longer is the question how to produce, by means of sound, a work of art that would represent an object, signify something, or express an aesthetic idea formulated elsewhere in culture, language, or theory. Rather, the question is how to deal with sound itself as an actor in the drama of things – either as an erotic material of vocal performance, or as an element of a new theatricality in which sound interacts independently with lights, objects, and stage design.<sup>328</sup>

The materiality of sound arises when spectators consider sound as a signifier that is independent of its signified. If sound does not have an attached task or objective meaning, such as defining the location and mood of the scene, the indication of time, and the announcement of actors' entrances and exits, it can be viewed as performance akin to an actor. A phenomenological study of sound suggests that sound is not just "sound," but a non-figurative element of performance that is independent of lights, objects, and stage design. The recognition of the autonomy of sound, according to Ovadija, is "a part of the weaponry in the struggle of the historical avant-garde against the closure of representation of the dramatic text."<sup>329</sup> Sound, then, becomes a potential site for detachment from the domination of meaning from text, director, playwright. Following Gao's suggestion of sound as the "sixth character," my reading of the soundscape in *Absolute Signal* considers it as an independent counterpoint to the rest of the aspects of the production, and further functions as a meta-discourse of the play.

It should be noted that Gao's "sixth character" is specifically referring to the "rhythm of the sound" in *Absolute Signal*. Gao's choice of word is telling. In sound or music, "rhythm" is the pattern and movement of the sound in music, and "tempo" is

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<sup>328</sup> Mladen Ovadija, "The Performativity of Voice and Sound in Theatre," in *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-garde and Postdramatic Theatre* (McGill: Queen's University Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

the performing pace or speed of the music. However, in drama and theatre, the distinction between rhythm and tempo appears to be blurred. Both terms refer to the speed of the narrative and stage performance. Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of Gao's influences, invests much attention to rhythm in his production:

Actors must be taught to be aware of time on the stage, as musicians are aware of it. A musically organised production isn't a production where music is being played or sung all the time behind the scenes, but rather a production with a precise rhythmic score, with precisely organised time.<sup>330</sup>

Amongst the various sound effects in the play, Gao invests the greatest emphasis in describing the tempo of the rail track sound. The tempo of the rail track sound varies from *andante*, *moderato*, to *allegro*. The dynamics of the rail track sound varies from mute to *piano* to *forte*. The rail track sound initially appears to be a realist sound effect for the train setting. Closer examination reveals that the tempo and rhythm of the rail track sound communicates in a non-communicational way. Although there are no songs or instrumentals in *Absolute Signal*, the rail track sound externalizes the tempo and rhythm of the play. Patrice Pavis notes that "to seek or find a rhythm for the play is always to seek or find a meaning."<sup>331</sup> The meaning of rhythm is, for example, "the arrangement of the masses of dialogue, the figurability of conflicts, the distribution of strong and weak beats, the acceleration or slackening of exchanges."<sup>332</sup> The rhythm and tempo of the rail track sound become a meta-commentary on the performance rhythm of *Absolute Signal*.

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<sup>330</sup> For a detailed discussion of Meyerhold's interest in rhythm, see David Roesner's "Meyerhold – Theatre 'Organized According to The Music's Laws,'" in *Musicality in Theatre: Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 80-94.

<sup>331</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 313.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

In my reading of the rail track sound, I see it as serving an audible bridge between the realist setting and the psychological episodes of the characters. This sonic transition blurs the boundaries between the external and the internal. The ambiguity, between the external and the internal, creates a space of reflection about the constructs of real and non-real. Sound, particularly the rail track sound, pervades the entire play. The rail track sound becomes a sort of marginal yet significant “glitch” in the realist narrative of *Absolute Signal*. If such a glitch is expanded, it sparks a reflection of the “real” of the realist dialogue and the “non-real” of the psychological episodes. I consider the tempo of the sound as a character that reflects on the binary presentation of external and internal in the play.

Prior to Bee boarding the train and reuniting with Blacky and Trumpet, the rail track sound merely serves as a sound effect for the train setting. However, in the first psychological episode, which features Blacky and Bee having an internal dialogue, the sound of convergence of two trains is replaced by the sound of heartbeat:

*TRUMPET picks up the signal lamp and walks to the door, waiting to meet the coming train. In the booming sound of the passing trains, BEE gazes at BLACKY. A beam of white light shines on BEE's face. The sound of the trains suddenly decreases while the sound of BEE's fast heart beat becomes louder and louder. The following speeches represent BEE's and BLACKY's inner voices. In performing this part the actors should concentrate on what they are doing and speak with their eyes. The dialogues can be delivered using “breath voice” or “voice-over,” to distinguish them from earlier speeches.*<sup>333</sup>

The non-realist set up of the above psychological episode is the result of a collaboration between minimalistic lighting, voiceover, and minimal gestures of

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<sup>333</sup> Gao, “*Absolute Signal*,” Ibid, 178-79.



acting. The stage direction clearly states that the stagecraft and acting of the psychological episode should be distinctively different from the realist performance. However, the link between the real and the non-real is the sound. The rail track sound is transformed into heartbeat sound when Bee and Blacky engage in a psychological dialogue. The stage directions require the rail track sound to be loud and fast-paced. And when the lighting is cast upon Bee, her heartbeat replaces the rail track sound. The sound here reflects the intensity of emotions and frustrations between Bee and Blacky. They are both deeply in love with each other, but due to their current conditions, they are not able to express it.

Once their psychological dialogue ends, the percussive tempo returns from heartbeat back to rail track:

*BEE can't bear it any longer. She turns her head away, and the circle of white light disappears. The two trains pass each other and the sound of heart beats also stops. The two of them resume their composure. They remain seated, not looking at each other. The rhythmic sound of the moving train now has an extra pause, like a half-note rest.*<sup>334</sup>

The tempo of the sound changes, as it goes from loud and fast to slower, with a half-beat-long rest. The change of tempo suggests that the play's mood has returned back to a calm, monotonous state. One should also note how the stage directions describe the order of the change: Once the passing by of the train ends, the heartbeat also disappears. The relationship between the external and the internal are intimate through the medium of sound.

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid, 180.

Preceding Blacky's flashback of a conversation between him and Bee, is an annoying, and arrhythmic rail track sound. The flashback supposedly takes place next to a lake or pond, as the lighting is blue:

*TRUMPET goes to the platform. Light from the station comes in through the observation window and shines on BLACKY's face. BLACKY squints his eyes. The train enters a side track, rocking and shaking. The annoying bumping noise seems to break up the rhythm of the train's movement. TRUMPET stands on the platform, returning signals to the station. The train leaves the station. Light inside the carriage turns dim. BLACKY leans on the chair, his eyes closed as if he is about to fall asleep. The stage is completely dark. The following dialogues are from BLACKY's memories. In the middle of the stage inside a circle of blue light, BLACKY holds BEE in his arms, his eyes closed. The action on stage, especially for the first section, should be restrained. The voices seem far away and there are very few movements so as to distinguish them from reality.<sup>335</sup>*

While the stage directions do not specify what sort of sound replaces the rail track sound, Blacky's flashback does suggest that it has become "fish-diving sounds." Both the rail track sound and the fish-diving sounds are arrhythmic. Furthermore, in the flashback, Blacky finds the fish-diving sounds of the pond as too quiet, and instead prefers the ocean. The train enters a fork junction and produces an annoying, and arrhythmic rail track sound. The irritation caused by the arrhythmic rail track sound appears to translate into Blacky's flashback too. Originally, Blacky and Bee are on a joyous date next to the pond. Their conversation starts positively and optimistically about their future plans together, such as marriage. However, once the topics of

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 182.

employment and income surface, their conversation turns heated and sour. Although Bee tries her best to assure Blacky, he becomes so insecure and defensive that he encourages Bee to marry Trumpet instead. Once again, the external is internalised, and vice versa, through sound.

The relationship between the rail track sound and the character's internal activities is also acknowledged in a meta-theatre style. After Blacky and Bee engage in a heated argument on the train, they notice that Trumpet, who also loves Bee, becomes distant:

BLACKY: Did you hear everything?

TRUMPET: Hear what?

BLACKY: What we just said.

TRUMPET: (Trying to be calm) I heard nothing.

*[The monotonous sound of the moving train continues (in an adagio tempo)]*

BLACKY: You must have heard what we said.

TRUMPET: I only heard my heart beat. Blacky, move over. This is my  
place.<sup>336</sup>

Trumpet's somewhat poetic response is telling when examined in conjunction with the rail track sound. As discussed in the first example, Blacky's and Bee's first conversation is through an internal dialogue, which is signaled through a transition between rail track sound and heartbeat. When Blacky and Bee interact in an external, realist setting, Trumpet's reference to his heart beat appears to echo the blurring of the external and the internal.

In the second half of *Absolute Signal*, the train passes three tunnels. Each tunnel sparks a psychological episode in Blacky, Trumpet, and Bee respectively. The

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid, 194.

first tunnel instigates Blacky's imagination. He is preparing to let the other train robber come onto the train. In the process, Blacky argues with Trumpet, justifying why he has become a train robber. The imagination ends with Trumpet exposing Black as a train robber to Bee. Bee is hysteric and disappointed. The second tunnel leads to Bee's imagination, which is a long monologue about her fears for Blacky's criminal activities and her frustration for Trumpet's infatuation towards her. The passing of the third tunnel leads to Trumpet's imagination. The whole train-robbing plot is exposed. Train Conductor, Train Robber, Blacky, Bee, and Trumpet all confront each other about the crime.

The presence and absence of sound continue to play a crucial role in the transition between external and internal activities. As the train passes through the first tunnel, the rail track sound tempo goes into fast pace (*allegro*). The acting is absurdist: very slow, dreamy, cinematic. Once the train leaves the tunnel, Blacky's imagination ends. The rail track sound returns to monotonous *adagio* but with *staccato*. Entering the second tunnel, the rail track sound suddenly disappears. By the end of Bee's monologue, the rail track sound reappears in an *andante* tempo. As for the third tunnel, the rail track sound goes from deafening loud to deafening silent. When the train comes out of the tunnel, the rail track sound is a sort of duet rhythm featuring *allegro* and *adagio* tempo.

The use of the rhythm of the sound in *Absolute Signal* as "the sixth character" significantly alters our perception of the play if closely studied. Above all, the marginal character serves as a space in which the audience and the actors can be detached from the politics and conventions inherent to the plot, and re-express their subjectivity. An examination of the tempo and rhythm of the rail track sound reveals a space of ambiguity between the real and the non-real in *Absolute Signal*. In this

ambiguous space, the play is not as social realist as critics perceive it to be. If realism is in fact part of the internal/non-realism, the realist aspects of the play are not so real after all. Similarly, the non-realism elements of the play are not so surreal either. Critics, however, consider *Absolute Signal* as a social realist play that is supplemented by non-realist techniques.

Quah Sy Ren, for example, acknowledges the “dreamlike theatrical effects” in the play. Yet he deems the primary narrative of *Absolute Signal* as “realistic and linear, focusing on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the incident, and ultimately providing a direct and didactic answer, i.e., that people should have an optimistic outlook under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, regardless of temporary setbacks perceived in the process.”<sup>337</sup> In other words, Quah suggests that the absurdist elements in *Absolute Signal* are subservient to the play’s realism.

While realism aims to portray an “authentic” reality through art, absurdism embraces the impossibility of meaning as the “authentic” experience of life through art. In contrast, Gao himself notes that his plays are between realism and absurdism, and their authenticity lie in the revelation of the absurd in reality.<sup>338</sup> The binary categories of either realism or absurdism are therefore rejected by Gao. An authentic dramatic representation of post-Cultural Revolution life, for Gao, is the acknowledgement that realism and absurdism are both constructs, neither of which are authentic portrayals of life. In the case of *Absolute Signal*, the binaries of realism and absurdism are enforced through the play’s plot, acting, and stagecraft. The stage direction of “distinguishing” (*qubie*) the internal and the external repeatedly appears throughout the play. However, the tempo and rhythm of the rail track sound has

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<sup>337</sup> Quah, “Historical Narrative, Fictional Reality: China in the Frame of Gao Xingjian's Theatre,” *China Perspectives*, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>338</sup> Gao, “Another Kind of Theatre,” in *The Case for Literature*, trans Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 160-61.

blurred the internal and external. As I shall elaborate below, the answers to “how” and “why,” conveyed through the set, lighting, sound, acting, and plot, resist binary interpretations of real and absurd.

The set is a train that is described to be desolate and battered, which symbolically alludes to destruction caused by the Cultural Revolution’s decade-long chaos in China. After Blacky refuses to surrender, Train Conductor orders Trumpet to release an “absolute signal” to indicate a threat or danger on board the train. The title *Absolute Signal*, then, refers to the state official’s response when the country’s stability is under threat. The state has zero tolerance over any threat to China’s stability, especially after the Cultural Revolution. Train Conductor, representing the state, must keep the train/country moving from point A to point B. With the absence of division of acts and scenes, the play progresses in a continuous movement that mirrors the travels of the train. The moralistic portrayals of Train Conductor as “good” and Train Robber as “evil” guide the audience to embrace the state-oriented beliefs of the former.

However, the train can also be a reflection of the perpetual motion of the psychological activities of the characters. When the train passes through long, dark tunnels, or passes by another train, the train cart disappears and transforms into psychological portraits of the minds of Blacky, Trumpet, and Bee. The realist conventions, such as emphasising on dialogue and creating an illusion of the real, are temporarily set aside. Theatricality and performance are the primary focus during these psychological episodes. In his staging suggestions, Gao remarks: “Theatre is art that happens in a theatrical space. The performance of this play requires theatricality. The pursuit of realism should not overshadow the play’s theatricality. The actors should reference *jingju* acting so as to evoke a sense of instantaneous theatrical

effects” [*jixing de juchang xiaoguo*].<sup>339</sup> In order to create a theatrical space that is detached from realism, Gao alludes to *jingju* theatrics to tear down the “fourth wall” of realist theatre. One should note, though, that the fourth wall never existed in traditional Chinese theatre.<sup>340</sup>

While *Absolute Signal* is Gao’s first produced play in China, he wrote *Bus Stop* first. The two plays can be considered as companion pieces that revolve around the theme of realisation. Both plays tackle how Chinese society responds to the new modernisation policies of the post-Mao state. In *Absolute Signal*, there is a *repression* of self-realisation regarding one’s view towards the country’s future. The characters ultimately submit to Train Conductor’s optimism that the country will get better. In *Bus Stop*, there is a *belatedness* in realisation. Aside from the Silent Man, the characters spend an absurd amount of time (more than 10 years) to realise they cannot wait any longer and they need to leave.

It is possible to imagine Blacky as one of the people waiting for the bus. Similar to the reckless character Youth in *Bus Stop*, Blacky decides not to wait any longer and take matters into his own hands. While the ending of *Bus Stop* finds the people collectively leaving the bus stop and walking to the city on foot, *Absolute Signal* ends with the prodigal son returning home, and into the Motherland’s arms. While Gao incorporates a range of experimental stagecraft and performance techniques to “modernise” the nationalistic sentiment of *Absolute Signal*, he also deftly assigns the rhythm of sound as the marginal character which complicates the play’s patriotism.

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<sup>339</sup> Gao, “*Absolute Signal*,” *Ibid*, 232.

<sup>340</sup> See my discussion of the absence of the fourth wall in traditional Chinese theatre in Chapter Three.

The message behind *Bus Stop* appears to be hinting at the collective awakening of Blacky, Trumpet, Bee, Train Conductor, and Train Robber. However, a closer examination of the marginal yet significant Silent Man in *Bus Stop* reveals that the play goes beyond mere subversion of Train Conductor's optimism that "the situation is bound to improve and you won't be without a job in your entire life." In my close-reading of *Bus Stop*, I shall discuss how the Silent Man is able to escape the various state measures that delay self-realisation.

### ***Bus Stop: Escaping in Silence***

Gao Xingjian's *Bus Stop* is widely regarded as the first play to introduce European avant-gardist techniques into Chinese theatre: the use of polyphonic dialogue, the direct address of the audience, the surreal presentation of time in the narrative, and the existentialist theme of waiting sharply deviated from half century-long conventions of realism and naturalism in modern Chinese theatre.<sup>341</sup> At the same time, the play, especially its ending, is perceived by critics, audience, and state censors as inciting the collective to cause upheaval against the state's post-Cultural Revolution rule.<sup>342</sup> My study of *Bus Stop* goes beyond a close-reading of its theatrical experimentations and alleged anti-establishment sentiments. A closer examination of the marginal character Silent Man reveals *Bus Stop* as a theatrical space that reflects on the belatedness, or incompleteness, of the pursuit of "Chinese modernism" during the New Era.

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<sup>341</sup> See my overview of modern Chinese theatre in Chapter One.

<sup>342</sup> According to Haiping Yan, audience who embraced or rejected *Bus Stop* considered the play as "an esthetic and political position-taking that seizes Western modernism as the transparent inspiration for the fashioning of a Chinese cultural modernity." See Yan, "Theatrical Impulse and Posthumanism: Gao Xingjian's 'Another Kind of Drama'," *World Literature Today*, 75, no. 1, 23. Outside of China, the reception of *Bus Stop* out is not dissimilar. Jessica Yeung states that the message of *Bus Stop* is clear: "An affirmation of the initiative to construct a bright modern future by the characters' own efforts, to walk to the city, however slowly, instead of waiting any longer for a bus to take them." See Yeung, *Ink Dances in Limbo: Gao Xingjian's Writing as Cultural Translation* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 58.



In the performance suggestions appended to the published script of *Bus Stop*, Gao reminds prospective directors and actors about the experimental nature of his play. Great emphasis is invested on non-verbal language: The dialogue exchange is presented with a sense of polyphonic musicality, or “multiple soliloquy” (*duoshengbu*); the actor’s theatrics are a combination of “action with inaction” (*dong de biao yan yu budong de biao yan*); and music is utilised as an “independent role” (*duli de jue se*) for the music of the Silent Man.<sup>343</sup> Similar to *Absolute Signal*, the form of *Bus Stop* is a continued assault at modern Chinese theatre (*huaju*)’s realist conventions and focus on language. Such a challenge of traditional theatre practice, however, is more strongly reverberated through the development of the plot’s tone from realist to absurdist.

The first half of *Bus Stop* can be characterised as portrayal of “realistic” social life. Indeed, the very premise of the play – waiting for the bus to the city – is part of a commoner’s everyday life. Casual conversations and interactions amongst the characters introduce their background and reasons for waiting for the bus. Several buses pass their stop. The longer the wait for the bus, the more frustrations and concerns in their lives are revealed. While *Absolute Signal* mostly depicts the struggles of the youths, *Bus Stop* offers a cross-section study of post-Cultural Revolution China: an interaction between the characters Director Ma and Gramps about cigarettes sheds light on the “backdoor” culture of goods or services being sold or exchanged through unofficial channels for individual favours; a conversation between the characters Spectacles and Mother regarding their reasons for going into the city reveals the job assignment policy in 1980s China with superior and

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<sup>343</sup> Gao, “Author’s Suggestions for the Performance of *The Bus-Stop*,” trans. Geremie Barmé, *Rendition* (19-20): 1983, 386.

comfortable jobs concentrated in the city and difficult to obtain, thus causing families separated as only one spouse is able to get assigned a job in the city; and a collective release of anger and frustration towards another bus passing by, but packed with foreign tourists. Drawing attention to the two-currency system adopted in China until 1994, the characters speculate that foreigners receive preferential treatment over them, and therefore the bus passes them.

In the second half of the play, the play veers towards a non-realistic plot. The characters suddenly realise that they have spent ten years waiting for the bus. This shocking discovery prompts the characters to become increasingly introspective about the purpose and priorities of their lives. Instead of sociopolitics, the characters' interactions are more philosophical and reflexive. Such a change in content is reflected in the form. The characters engage in a polyphonic performance that deviates from a realist portrayal of post-Mao life. Near the end of *Bus Stop*, the actors not only engage in polyphonic performance, they also detach themselves from the characters which they are playing, and comment about the play itself:

*The lines below are spoken by the seven actors at the same time. The speeches of A, F, and G are woven together to make one group and form complete sentences.*

ACTOR A playing the YOUNG WOMAN: Why don't they go? Hasn't everything that should be said already been said... Then why don't they go? Time has all flowed away to no purpose!... [...]

ACTOR B playing DIRECTOR MA: [...] Therefore, I say, it doesn't matter if you wait. What matters is that be clear what you're waiting for. If you line up and line up, and wait in vain for half your lifetime, or perhaps your whole lifetime, aren't you just playing a big joke on yourself?

ACTOR C playing MASTER WORKER: Waiting, really doesn't matter.

People wait because there's always some good prospects ahead. If they don't even have any good prospects, that's tragic [...]

ACTOR D playing MOTHER: [...] A child can't learn to “walk without tripping. To be a mother you have to be patient about this. Otherwise, you're not qualified. No, you don't know how to be a mother. Therefore, I say it's really hard to be a mother. But isn't it also difficult to be human?”

ACTOR E playing GRAMPS: [...] It's clearly a comedy, but you still have to assume a really sorrowful manner and one by one lay out all the laughable aspects of human life for the audience to see. Therefore, I say it's much harder to be a comic actor than to be a tragic actor.”

ACTOR F playing YOUTH:... don't understand...it seems that...they're waiting...of course it's not a bus stop...it's not a terminus stop...they would like to go...then they ought to just go...finished saying...we're waiting for them...ah, go ...

ACTOR G playing SPECTACLES:...really don't understand...perhaps...they're waiting...time isn't a bus stop...life isn't a bus stop either...actually, they don't really want to go...then just go...finished saying what ought to be said...we're waiting for them...go!”<sup>344</sup>

Any remaining realist impression in *Bus Stop* is destroyed through the actors' detached observations. Drawing inspiration from Brecht's alienation effect, Gao's “multiple soliloquy” manages to withdraw the audience's emotional involvement, and

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<sup>344</sup> Gao, “*Bus Stop*,” in *Theater and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama*, trans. and ed. Haiping Yan (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 57-58.

thereby offering them a space of contemplation about the play's deeper meaning. While the actors are making individual remarks about the act of waiting, each of their polyphonic delivery draws their thoughts together to form an interwoven piece of opinion. Actors A, F, and G are adamant that the characters should stop waiting and leave the bus stop. Actors B, C, and D are open to the idea of waiting, though. Actor E's oblique remark about *Bus Stop* as a tragicomedy suggests that he finds the act of waiting both farcical and tragic. As a polyphonic group, the actors don't understand why the characters keep waiting, yet they are not saying they shouldn't keep waiting either.

*Bus Stop* is often regarded as a "Chinese" response to the work of Samuel Beckett, most prominently *Waiting for Godot*. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps and the audience are engaged in the act of waiting. The two tramps are waiting for Godot no matter what. The audience are waiting for something to happen in *Waiting for Godot*. Nobody's wish comes true. The boy, a messenger of Godot, tells the tramps that he will come tomorrow. The appearance of Pozzo and Lucky also teases the audience about Godot's arrival. Beckett gives the tramps and the audience just enough events to keep them waiting. And those events become the themes for our contemplation in boredom. During this torturous process of meaningless waiting, the tramps and the audience become hypersensitive towards everything in the play: the concept of time, meaning of life, minute details in life, environment, people, society, religion/God, free will and slavery, life and death, homosexuality. In short, the motif of the existential waiting in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* produces both no meaning and unlimited meanings. The ending of Gao's *Bus Stop*, however, signals a proactive rejection towards existentialist waiting: After more than ten years of waiting, the characters ultimately decide to leave the bus stop, and walk to the city altogether.

Their collective decision to confront the absurdity of meaningless waiting implies that they have yet to transcend absurdity as a social category. At the same time, the appropriation of modernist and absurdist techniques alone is not suffice to label *Bus Stop* a modernist or absurdist play in the Western sense. Haiping Yan argues that Gao's *Bus Stop* has "an unmistakably Chinese quality in terms of its structural implications in the post-Mao era" which is limited to more of a "humanist self." Geremie Barmé suggests that "Gao might be inspired by Beckett and Ionesco, but he is keeping his themes well within the didactic tradition of Ibsen and Stanislavsky." The act of pursuing aesthetic autonomy becomes another means of politicising literature. Xu Zidong succinctly describes the dilemma of Chinese modernism: "The new literature came to deliver its political-cultural—non-literary—impact precisely by means of its 'pure literary' orientation."<sup>345</sup> Chinese modernism, in its attempt to free literature from its sociopolitical burden, gave birth to another sociopolitical use of literature: liberating literature. The self-reflection induced through Chinese modernist techniques are limited to the subjectivity as mandated by the state.

Theatrical techniques such as the polyphonic structure and Brechtian alienation effect appear as an aesthetic language that induces reflexivity of both the form and message of *Bus Stop*. However, the reflexivity of such modernist theatrical techniques are limited by the state's sponsorship of the writers, including Gao. To uncover a reflexivity that is not limited by the state's reform ideology, one needs to examine how Gao aesthetically constructs and portrays the mysterious Silent Man. Furthermore, the significance of without isms, and its relation with the Silent Man, is worth closer study: while the other characters are panicking, debating, and

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<sup>345</sup> Zidong Xu, "Xiandai zhuyi yu Zhongguo xinshiqi wenxue" [Modernism and the new-era literature in China], *Wenxue pinglun* 4 (1989), 27; qtd. and trans. Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), 144.

rationalising about the reasons behind the repeated passing of buses, the Silent Man is able to leave the bus stop earlier than everyone else, silently. What allows the Silent Man to attain the *earliest* realisation that the wait is futile?

The Silent Man is detached yet observant throughout the entire play. But it should be noted that the Silent Man is not outside of the play. One critic (mis)reads the Silent Man's detachment from the masses as an elitist arrogance, and a mockery of the other characters' blind faith in the Bus Company as "pitiful, lamentable, and laughable."<sup>346</sup> In fact, the presence of the Silent Man is always felt in *Bus Stop*. Before the Silent Man's departure, he crucially intervenes in the scuffle between the characters Youth and Gramps. And even though the Silent Man leaves the bus stop halfway into the play, the theme music of the Silent Man is heard nine times in variations in the remainder of *Bus Stop*. The music is heard along with the sound of a bus passing by the other characters. The audience are led to establish a comparison between the Silent Man's early departure and the other characters' meaningless waiting. Indeed, the Silent Man is a representation of taking action rather than passively waiting. Such an interpretation is further supported by Gao's allusion to Lu Xun's play *The Passer-by* (1925), which should be performed before each production of *Bus Stop*. Moreover, the actor playing the passer-by is the same who plays the Silent Man. *The Passer-by*'s titular character heads towards a graveyard. Yet he has no idea of where he is going, what his purpose is, and what his identity is. All he is concerned about is keep going forward on his path. However, I find the Silent Man to be uncertain in all respects: there is no clear destination of where he wants to go. Lu

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<sup>346</sup> He Wen, "Huaju 'Chezhan' guanhougan" (On Seeing the Play The Bus Stop), trans. Chan Sin-wai, *Rendition* (19-20): 1983, 288.

Xun's passer-by pushes forward despite uncertainty of what the future holds; Gao's Silent Man is not even certain where he is going.

Similar to the rail track sound in *Absolute Signal*, the music of the Silent Man acts as a counterpoint and a form of dialogue with the other characters and the audience. Although the "rhythm of the sound" in *Absolute Signal* is perceived to be the "sixth character," music and sound is only one aspect of the Silent Man character's presence and communication. While the Silent Man is waiting for the bus alongside the other characters, he communicates only through gestures and body language. Even when the Silent Man leaves the bus stop, his departure is subtle yet full of theatrics:

*The SILENT MAN strides back and forth agitatedly.*

[...]

*The SILENT MAN walks in front of them, looks at them sadly. They stop speaking.*

[...]

*The SILENT MAN slings his bag over his shoulder, prepares to leave, then hesitates.*

[...]

*The SILENT MAN turns. The YOUNG WOMAN meets his glance, and immediately looks down. The SILENT MAN doesn't notice, and strides off. He doesn't look back. Soft music begins; the music expresses a kind of pain and a stubborn searching and longing. The sound of the music gradually diminishes. The YOUNG WOMAN gazes in the direction he has gone, as if she has lost something.<sup>347</sup>*

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<sup>347</sup> Gao, "Bus Stop," Ibid, 19-20.

While Gao does not offer any specific instructions towards the performance of the Silent Man, the actor playing the role of Silent Man requires what Gao refers to as “tripartite acting” (*yanyuan sanchong xing*).<sup>348</sup> The neutral actor maintains distance from both his position as daily-life actor and the character, thereby realising Gao’s performance suggestion of “combining dramatic action with inaction.”<sup>349</sup> The actor of the Silent Man needs to be in a state of the neutral actor in order to convey the spirit of political and theatrical detachment that is infused within the role.

The Silent Man’s theatrical neutrality, combines well with the narrative marginality, to reflect on the passenger’s prolonged waiting and belated departure. The Silent Man is able to see clearly not only the outside situation, but his internal state too. The other characters’ blind faith in the Bus Company is the result of being under the influence of various isms, or Louis Althusser’s (1970) “ideological state apparatus” (ISA). The character Spectacles, who resembles a young intellectual, trails behind the Silent Man in terms of realisation. A review of his profile suggests that he is burdened by a series of isms, such as science (the mechanical watch that revealed 10 years’ time have past), western knowledge (learning English), career aspirations (public exam), infatuation (towards the character Young Woman). The Silent Man, on the other hand, is disinterested but not indifferent to the waiting of the bus. For the vast majority of the time, the Silent Man is quietly reading a book. The play does not reveal what the Silent Man is reading. Yet if one interprets the Silent Man as the author’s surrogate, the Silent Man may be reading philosophical or literary works in their original French language, instead of Chinese translations. Gao’s/Silent Man’s

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<sup>348</sup> Gao first discussed the tripartition of the actor in the conversation-essay “*Jinghua yetan*” (1987). He systematically theorised and coined the term “tripartite acting” [*biaoyan de sanchong xing*] in the essay “*Juzuofa yu zhongxing yanyuan*” (1995), in which he cited his later plays like *The Other Shore* (1987) and *In Between Life and Death* (1992) as examples.

<sup>349</sup> See my discussion of the tripartite acting and neutral actor in the context of the aesthetics of reflexivity in Chapter Three.



ability to read French may allow him to evade the ISA of the New Era. Extending the above author-surrogate reading, Gao's exile in 1987 was foretold by the Silent Man's departure in 1983 (the year in which *Bus Stop* was staged). Like the Silent Man, Gao gave up on the Chinese state's post-revolution dream earlier than the mass exodus of Chinese writers after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

If the Silent Man is excluded from the discussions of the play text, *Bus Stop* is a Chinese absurdist text. But with the Silent Man, it is then a *rethinking* of the blind spots in the appropriation of absurdism, and broadly Chinese modernism. In this context, the actions and non-actions of waiting (and leaving) in *Bus Stop* are not merely about the characters' transition from collectivism and patriotism, to individuality and liberalism. It is more about a realisation of the belatedness (and illusive nature) of Chinese modernism. Most importantly, the critique of the belatedness of Chinese modernism is heightened with the early departure of the Silent Man from the bus stop.

### ***Wild Man: Escaping in Imagination***

At the height of the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign" (Fanjingshen wuran yundong, 1983), Gao Xingjian went on a self-imposed internal exile into the Yangzi River regions and districts. During his year-long trip, Gao became an anthropologist of sorts and collected primary data regarding indigenous folk culture and philosophical traditions alternative to the mainstream Confucian thought.<sup>350</sup> These materials included folklore from the ethnic minorities of south China, wedding songs

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For more details about the creative background of *Wild Man*,<sup>350</sup> see Gao's "Jinghua yetan" [Night Talks in Beijing], *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* [In search of modern theatre] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe), 175-78; Gilbert Fong, "Wild Man and the Idea of Freedom," in *Polyphony Embodied: Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian's Writings*, ed. Michael Lackner and Nikola Chardonens (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 105-109; Isabella Łabędzka, "In Search of the Total Theatre," in *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre: from the word to the image* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 178-82.

from Heibei, Taoist ritual dances of Jiangxi, shamanistic theatre practices from the Guizhou province such as the use of masks, and the early prehistoric poetry *Epic of Darkness* (*Heian chuan*).<sup>351</sup> The research material was included in *Wild Man*, and more extensively, in Gao's Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Soul Mountain*.

*Wild Man* is Gao's attempt of theatrically presenting non-mainstream Chinese culture in a new light. Nevertheless, the New Era Chinese literary field's doxic expectations demand all creative work to serve the nation's interests. The play is forced to include discussions of environmental and conservation issues, which were popular topics during the modernisations era. The burden of such realism obstructs the creative reimagination of Chinese cultural roots in *Wild Man*. Yet the play's contribution, I argue, lies elsewhere. A focused examination of the titular character Wild Man suggests that the play is critical of the lack of imagination in the trend of "root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue*) of the mid-1980s.

At the end of Han Shaogong's essay "Roots of Literature" (*Wenxue de gen*, 1985) which is widely regarded as the "unofficial manifesto" of the root-seeking literary current, Han remarks that one's cultural roots never really disappear, and therefore a writer has the duty to confront them and learn about them.<sup>352</sup> In response to the burden of sociopolitics in scar and problem literature, and the fervent importation of Western literary cultures and techniques during the "high culture fever" (*wenhua re*), root-seeking literature strived for literary autonomy and a cultural identity rooted in Chinese tradition as opposed to a mimicking of Western literature.<sup>353</sup> Root-seeking

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<sup>351</sup> For more details about the frenzy regarding the discovery of the *Epic of Darkness* in 1984, see Chen Yiyuan, "Daoyan: Gao Xingjian yu heian chuan" [Introduction: Gao Xingjian and Epic of Darkness In Heian chuan], in *Heian chuan* [Epic of Darkness], ed Hu Chongjun (Taipei: Yunlong chuban she, 2015), 19-21.

<sup>352</sup> Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen'" [The Roots of Literature], *Zuojia* [Writer], 1985, no. 4:2-5; reprinted in *Han Shaogong sanwen* [Essays by Han Shaogong], 2 vols (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1998), 1: 125-32.

<sup>353</sup> Mark Leenhouts, "Culture against Politics: Roots-Seeking Literature," in *The Columbia Companion*

writers attempted to rejuvenate Chinese literature without the overbearing of Western modernity, and without cutting itself off from Chinese tradition. Many of the root-seeking writers, however, were educated youths, as part of the “lost generation” who rusticated at the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>354</sup> On the one hand, they held a (romanticised) belief that the countryside possessed alternative traditions and thoughts untouched by Western modernity, socialism, and the mainstream Confucian thought. These alternative traditions include the Chu culture, Taoism, shamanism etc.<sup>355</sup> On the other hand, the root-seeking writers aimed to salvage post-Mao China and give its people a new subjectivity by looking “backward,” “downward, and “inward.”<sup>356</sup>

According to Mark Leenhouts, the root-seeking trend is less of a movement than a pervasive theme which preoccupied writers of the mid-1980s and resulted in lively debates. The central question for these writers were: “how can writers renovate Chinese literature when they find themselves so cut off from their cultural tradition?” Critics have noted the parallels between the root-seeking writers and the May Fourth writers, particularly the influence of Lu Xun.<sup>357</sup> One of the most important observation and critique of Chinese national character is Lu Xun’s “The Story of Ah Q” (1921). Similarly, Han Shaogong’s novella “Pa Pa Pa” (1985) also launches a scathing critique of the Chinese national character through the character Bingzai. The only two

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to *Modern East Asian Literature*, ed. Kirk Denton, Bruce Fulton, Sharalyn Orbaugh (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 533.

<sup>354</sup> David Der-wei Wang, “Introduction,” in *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*, eds Pang-yuan Chi and David Wang (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), xxviii.

<sup>355</sup> Han, “The Roots of Literature.”

<sup>356</sup> Wang, “Introduction,” *Ibid*, xxix.

<sup>357</sup> See Joseph S. M. Lau, “Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong’s Post-1985 fiction,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Jianmei Liu, “The Resurrection of Zhuangzi in the 1980s” in *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 170-73.

phrases that Bingzai can pronounce are “Pa Pa Pa” and “Fuck your mother,” which represent a moralistic binary of good and evil. While Bingzai is constantly ridiculed and bullied by the villagers of his hometown, Cockhead village, they too display the same binary thinking when responding to a series of crises. The villagers are all Bingzais, who respond either with extreme affection or extreme violence. Bingzai symbolises a scathing critique of the binary thinking that is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese culture, and recurs throughout the history of Chinese civilisation, up till the modern times, particularly the Cultural Revolution and the post-Mao period.<sup>358</sup>

However, is all Chinese culture binary? As Perry Link remarks: “With the root seeking of the 1980s, especially that aspect of it that sought the roots of ‘feudalism’ that were seen as holding China back, the fate of contemporary China was seen as something that lay deep in Chinese culture. But where, precisely? Where could one focus attention when something as vague as one’s whole culture seemed possibly at fault?”<sup>359</sup> Han Shaogong, who was an educated youth (*zhìqing*) sent to the countryside for rustication, may have fallen trap into the “lost generation” cynicism which David Hwang observes amongst root-seeking writers: “stories of ‘roots’ are often accounts of a generation of youth uprooted from their cultural and ethical heritage; their nostalgia indicates not so much a sentimental remembrance of things past as a melancholic effort to re-member an age betrayed by political illusions.”<sup>360</sup>

In “Belated Modernism and Today’s Chinese Literature” (*Chidao de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjin zhongguo wenxue*, 1987), Gao argues the roots Chinese writers are already under their feet, and does not require seeking. The real question for Gao is: what sort of traditional roots does one want? Although Gao prefers marginal cultures

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<sup>358</sup> Liu Zaifu, “Lun Bingzai” [On Bingzai], in *Guangming ribao, Shixue yu yishu*, vol. 572, 1988.

<sup>359</sup> Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 144.

<sup>360</sup> Hwang, “Introduction,” *Ibid*, xxviii-xxix.

like Daoism and Chan/Zen Buddhism, he does not wish to promote them through a critique of Confucianism as a dominant culture. As a writer, Gao emphasises on presenting tradition in a new light and new form.<sup>361</sup>

Gao's much understudied short story, "Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather" (1986),<sup>362</sup> is a useful entry point into the vision behind his handling of Chinese cultural roots. The narrator, who has lived in the city for a period of time, misses his childhood home in the countryside. With the excuse of sending a brand new and modern fishing rod to his Grandfather, the narrator embarks on a journey back to the countryside to relieve his homesickness. Upon his arrival at the countryside, he discovers that all of the mental posts from his childhood years are no longer there. The narrator therefore adopts another strategy: instead of a traditional root-seeking journey, he opts for an individualistic attempt of root-imagining. By letting go of all expectations and assumptions of his childhood memories, the narrator's root-seeking journey becomes an imaginative, spiritual wandering of the mind.

From "Buying a Fishing Rod," it can be derived that imagination is at the heart of Gao's appropriation of Chinese cultural roots. The narrator's vivid reconstruction of his childhood past demonstrates Gao's preference to "search" for cultural roots through imagination. In "Buying a Fishing Rod," Gao utilises his narrative technique of "flow of language" (*yuyan liu*) which he draws influence from the modernist prose technique of stream of consciousness. In the preface to *Wild Man*,

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<sup>361</sup> "Chidao de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjin zhongguo wenxue" [Belated Modernism and Today's Chinese Literature], in *Meiyou zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990], 105.

<sup>362</sup> Gao Xingjian, "Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather," in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York; Sydney; London: HarperCollins, 2004), 61-88.

Gao also establishes a relationship between cultural reimagination and modernist theatre:

In *Wild Man* my intention is to explore that alternative or “nonscholarly” side of Chinese culture which is based around the Yangzi River and which has hitherto received such scant attention from the academic world. I am not offering any proofs of the existence of that culture; I am merely sharing my belief in its significance for the anthropological study of Chinese civilisation. Chinese culture as a whole requires a new impetus to reestablish itself after years of stagnation and self-satisfaction. I turn to modern Western theatre as a rich source of inspiration in the belief that national culture should provide a basis for, but not a limitation on, the development of Chinese culture. I am sure the synthesis of Western and Eastern theatre is possible and believe that pursuing it may stimulate the theatre as a whole. I am grateful for the inspiration which modern Western theatre has given me.<sup>363</sup>

Despite possessing first-hand knowledge and experience of Chinese indigenous cultures and practices, Gao clearly states that *Wild Man* is not a project of cultural preservation or ethnographic research. In fact, he has no intent of proving their existence. Gao also implies that a systematic study and documentation of a nation’s cultural repository would only obstruct its continuous growth as a national culture. In order to inject a breath of fresh air into Chinese culture, Gao references modern Western theatre practices with regards to their handling of ancient cultural rituals. As Gao remarks elsewhere, there is no singular way of reinvigorating Chinese literature in a nationalistic way. As long as the outcome of the work presents the reality of

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<sup>363</sup> Gao, “The Playwright’s Preface,” trans. Bruno Roubicek, *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Autumn, 1990): 192-93.

China faithfully and truthfully, it is Chinese literature.<sup>364</sup> It is in the context of reimagining cultural roots that Gao synthesises Western avant-garde theatre (eg Artaud, Brecht) and Chinese theatre (eg *xiqu*, ancient exorcist ceremonial rituals). The result is what Gao coins as “omnipotent theatre” (*Quanneng xiju*).<sup>365</sup>

Gao’s omnipotent theatre, name-wise, clearly pays homage to Artaud’s total theatre (*théâtre total*). Artaud’s total theatre stems from his notion of theatre of cruelty (*théâtre de la cruauté*), which seeks to create a theatre where reality and theatre are indistinguishable. Yet Gao’s omnipotent theatre emphasises suppositionality (*jiadingxing*), which is the awareness that everything on stage is theatrically represented. The inclusion of singing and narration in Gao’s omnipotent theatre also appears to be reminiscent of the alienation effect found in Brechtian epic theatre. Brecht is most prominently known for his anti-illusionist theatrical concepts, and the tearing down of the fourth wall which separates the actors from the audience. But as I have discussed in Chapter Three, the suppositionality of Gao’s omnipotent theatre begins with the presumption that the fourth wall does not exist. Xiaomei Chen, therefore, observes that the theatrics in *Wild Man* are “at once Brechtian and anti-Brechtian, Artaudian and anti-Artaudian. It is at once both and yet neither.”<sup>366</sup>

*Wild Man* is subtitled as “multivocal modern epic theatre.” According to Quah Sy Ren’s interview with Gao, the term “epic theatre” is not used in the Brechtian sense, but closer to Greek and Roman epic poetry: “Although [Gao] has also extensively employed the narrative mode of Brecht’s epic theatre, his use of ‘epic’ in this context refers to a primitive poetic narration of national myth and legend, in

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<sup>364</sup> Gao, “Contemporary Technique and National Character in Fiction,” trans. Ng Mau-sang, *Rendition* (19-20) 1983: 55-58.

<sup>365</sup> Gao’s “Quanneng xiju” has been translated into English as “omnipotent theatre” and “total theatre.” I have opted the former to distinguish Gao’s theatrical vision from Antonin Artaud’s total theatre.

<sup>366</sup> Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-discourse in Post-Mao China* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002 [1995]), 96.

[Gao's] own words, 'the original meaning of epic, which describes the genesis of a nation, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.'<sup>367</sup> In the context of reimagining Chinese cultural roots, the "epic theatre" of *Wild Man* is one that considers indigenous cultural practices ("the genesis of a nation") as the subject of the play. Precisely, Gao's revitalisation of ancient Chinese cultures is conjoint with the revitalisation of Chinese theatre, that is "omnipotent theatre."

A typical feature of root-seeking literary works is to present the countryside as a site of "a complex of opposite values."<sup>368</sup> My reading of *Wild Man* now turns to the juxtaposition between the play's mythical layer and modern layer. The play is structured into three acts. The title of each act offers hints into the multiple storylines of *Wild Man*, but more importantly, the harmony and disharmony amongst them. Act I is titled "Weeding Grass with Gong and Drum, Flood and Drought." The first half of the title refers to the various singing and chants of folkloric songs by the character Old Singer and his assistants throughout the play. The topics of these songs include love, marriage, and rainmaking. The character Ecologist, however, is precisely troubled by the above issues. He is preoccupied by the task of resolving deforestation and its serious consequences of flooding in the city. This leaves him with no time to care for his wife Fang, and partially results in their separation. On the one hand, the folkloric perspectives of the Old Singer's songs contradict with the modern-day concerns of the Ecologist. On the other hand, the existence of the Old Singer's homeland in the forestry depends on the Ecologist's preservation work.

Act II is titled "*Epic of Darkness and the Wild Man*." The *Epic of Darkness* is a folk songbook. It contains lyrical songs that recount the origins of the Han people.

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<sup>367</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2004), 73.

<sup>368</sup> Hwang, "Introduction," *Ibid*, xxviii.



The songs are centred on Pangu, a mythical creature responsible for the separation of heaven and earth and ending of chaos and darkness.<sup>369</sup> After centuries of marginalisation by the Confucian-oriented governance in China, and also the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Old Singer is one of the remaining few individuals in the region that is fluent in the delivery of the *Epic of Darkness*. Aside from the character Schoolteacher's amateur documentation of the Old Singer's recitation of the *Epic of Darkness*, there are no efforts in preserving the songbook, and no resources are invested into the preservation of endangered folkloric traditions. On the contrary, there is a widespread fever amongst profit-hungry scientists, scholars, and journalists from China and abroad, for the pursuit of the mysterious creature "Wild Man." Although there have been several eyewitness accounts of the Wild Man, including one from a child Xi Mao, none of them are verified. The Wild Man is likely to be inspired by the mythical tales in the *Epic of Darkness*, especially Pangu. However, the social obsession with the Wild Man comes at the expense of the *Epic of Darkness*.

Act III is titled "*Team of Sisters and the Future*." *Team of Sisters* is a marriage folk song from the *Epic of Darkness*. The song is performed during the marriage ceremony of the character Xiang Mei, a village girl whom the Ecologist flirted with during his conservation work in the forestry. Although both the Ecologist and Xiang Mei had affection towards each other, the Ecologist was unable to act upon his feelings due to his attachment with the city, and the detachment from his primal self. In the final scene of *Wild Man*, the Wild Man appears on stage for the first time. The Wild Man looks and behaves exactly how the play has described: hairy, clumsy, and

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<sup>369</sup> Shouhua Liu, "A Follow-up Study on the Legend of Darkness," *Chinese Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2001): 309-27.

speaking an unintelligible language. But only the innocent Xi Mao has actually seen the Wild Man:

*They run onto an elevation at the back of the stage. XI MAO does a forward roll. He turns expectantly to the WILD MAN, who clumsily does the same. XI MAO runs, calling to the WILD MAN, who runs after him. They play hide and seek. XI MAO looks out from behind a stone. The WILD MAN sees him and runs toward him. XI MAO runs toward the elevation, and the WILD MAN follows. Gently, music starts and their movements slow down until they look as though they are in a slow-motion film. Then they perform a dance. XI MAO is nimble, the WILD MAN clumsy. When XI MAO and the WILD MAN play together, the WILD MAN tends to copy XI MAO's movements, even when in slow motion. The WILD MAN should always have his back to the audience. XI MAO draws back into an area of light at the rear of the stage, in front of a backdrop depicting the forest. All performers enter wearing masks, each mask expressing a different shade of emotion. The "happier" masks should be in the centre of the stage. All move slowly toward the WILD MAN, to the rhythm of the LUMBERJACKS' dance and the melody from the song of the TEAM OF SISTERS. The sad cries of the OLD SINGER are heard, gradually fading out. XI MAO is seen and faintly heard saying, "Xia, xia, shame, xia, xia, xia, xia. A shame, a . . . shame." Curtain.<sup>370</sup>*

The cross-influences of Western avant-garde and Chinese traditional theatrical practices are evident. The absence of dialogue and emphasis on free expression of movements, gestures and intonation are reminiscent of Artaudian total theatre; the

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<sup>370</sup> Bruno Roubicek, "Wild Man: A Contemporary Chinese Spoken Drama," *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 1990).

singing and dancing at the end of the scene achieve a *Gesamtkunstwerk*-like effect; Xi Mao's faint chanting of "Xia, xia, shame, xia, xia, xia, xia. A shame, a . . . shame" appears to be a detached commentary of the play, similar to the alienation effect in Brechtian epic theatre; the imaginary backdrop of a forest as well as the use of masks are an evocation of the suppositionality of Chinese *xiqu*.

Xi Mao represents the future of modern life, while the Wild Man symbolises the mythical world. A series of counterpoints are presented: Xi Mao is nimble, proactive, creative; The Wild Man is clumsy, passive, and imitative. Yet the interaction between the two are joyous. The culmination of the masks of emotions, Lumberjacks' dancing, the Team of Sisters' singing, and the Old Singer's crying convey a summary of how the modern and the ancient have been interwoven throughout the play. The future of the forestry, the ancient Chinese traditions, the pursuit of the Wild Man, and the love life of a modern individual, are all determined by the harmony and disharmony between the modern/rational and the mythical/spiritual.

The inclusion of modern social issues such as environmentalism and the clash between modern and tradition, is an obstacle to the realisation of Gao's creative reimagination of indigenous Chinese cultures through omnipotent theatre. However, *Wild Man* generates insights into how realism obstructs his theatrical vision of omnipotent theatre.

Near the end of the play, prior to the appearance of the Wild Man, Xi Mao was urged by his mother to go to bed. After the mother blows out the candle, the stage goes dark and electronic music is played in the background. Xi Mao and the Wild Man then appear on stage together. This suggests that the above scene is part of Xi Mao's imagination or dream. Furthermore, Xi Mao is the only child character in the play.

Considering how the Wild Man mimics and follows Xi Mao, it appears that Wild Man is more of an “imaginary companion” for Xi Mao, who has no real companions of his own age.

According to Gao, the titular character is “a symbol that embodies multiple layers of meaning.” If the Wild Man is viewed as a self-referential symbol of the play *Wild Man*, the illusive nature of the hairy creature becomes a commentary towards the pairing of the modern and the mythical. From the perspective of Xi Mao, it does not even matter whether the Wild Man exists or not. If the Wild Man represents the “roots” of Chinese culture, it is a product of one’s imagination. Hence, *Wild Man*, which was produced at the height of the Chinese root-seeking movement, is actually engaged in root-*imagining*. Is the search for ancient Chinese cultural roots, then, a faux issue? In this context, Xi Mao’s faint chanting of “Xia, xia, shame, xia, xia, xia, xia. A shame, a . . . shame,” appears to be a mournful critique of the Chinese root-seeking movement. If the aspect of imagination is lost in the reengagement of cultural roots, the outcome will veer towards a pastiche and collage of modern and traditional elements.

African American literature during the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s faced a similar debate. Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” (1973)<sup>371</sup> examines conflicting views towards the value and function of heritage. On the one hand, heritage is viewed as a sentimental item and functions as a personal memento. On the other hand, heritage is considered as a collective treasure that serves the function of exemplifying one’s African-ness. Jorge Luis Borges makes a similar point in the essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (1951), in which he refers to an

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<sup>371</sup> Alice Walker, “Everyday Use,” in *Major Writers of Short Fiction: Stories and Commentary*, ed. Ann Charters (Boston: St Martin’s, 1993), 1282-99.

adherence to a nationalist Argentinian form as “an appearance, a simulacrum, a pseudo problem.” For Borges, a “national” book is never purely or singularly national, but involves influences from various cultures. The problem of “tradition,” instead, lies in a nationalistic and restrictive framework of determination.<sup>372</sup>

In *Wild Man*, Gao questions whether anyone could have the authority to define rigidly the intellectual history of Chinese cultural traditions, not to mention to criticise such traditions for the purpose of allegorically criticising the present. As such, Gao proposes to return to a creative re-imagination of ancient Chinese roots. Like Xi Mao’s dream, indigenous Chinese tradition is most alive and interesting when it is imagined through pure and individualistic mindset, independent of isms.

## **Conclusion**

When Gao comments on how his plays staged in China were a “product of compromise,”<sup>373</sup> it is in fact consistent with his notion of cold literature. As I pointed out earlier, Gao always proclaims that his writings of “cold literature” are produced not outside of, but at the margins of society. Yet the margins remain intertwined with the ideological forces of society. If Gao is at the margins of Chinese society, or the New Era Chinese literary field, the structural censorship of realism will always be present in his plays. In my close reading of *Absolute Signal*, *Bus Stop*, and *Wild Man*, I observe that all of these plays are aesthetic representations of a simultaneous submission and rejection of Chinese realism. Gao’s premise is neither to wholly submit nor wholly reject the structural forces of the New Era Chinese literary field.

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<sup>372</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A Yates and James E Irby (New York, New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964 [1951]), 171-178.

<sup>373</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, Ibid, 86.

His plays in China are rather simply products of his artistic vision of without isms, and primarily seek to be reflexive of, and “escape” from, Chinese realism.

However, Gao does not believe that he can sustain his artistic career in a literary field which is supported by a political pole, and he requires the accumulation of political capital to do that. He understands that his artistic expression of reflexivity can only thrive in a literary field that encourages reflexivity. Based on Gao’s tumultuous history with the Chinese state, he understands that, unless he compromises, he has little chance of survival in a field like that of the New Era Chinese literary field. To be sure, Gao’s preference is not applicable to all artists based in China. An example of artistic production that thrives under soft state censorship is what Rossella Ferrari coins as “pop avant-garde.”<sup>374</sup> Would Gao follow the footsteps of his torchbearers like Meng Jinghui or Gao’s long-time artistic collaborator Lin Zhaohua, had he not exiled to Europe? Subjected to the forces of the literary, economic, and political poles, Gao could be pulled into different directions. As can be seen in Figure 2, Gao was trapped inside the “cage” of the New Era Chinese literary field with little mobility. While his plays served as spiritual escape in the “cage,” he had to physically leave China and the New Era Chinese literary field, and relocate to another literary field, to have a future as a writer. As I shall demonstrate in Chapter Five, Gao’s escape from structural censorship by way of reflexivity continues into his plays completed in France. In this sense, Gao’s plays in China and in France are not as different as the dividers of “pre-exile” and “post-exile” suggest.

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<sup>374</sup> Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (London: Seagull Books, 2012).

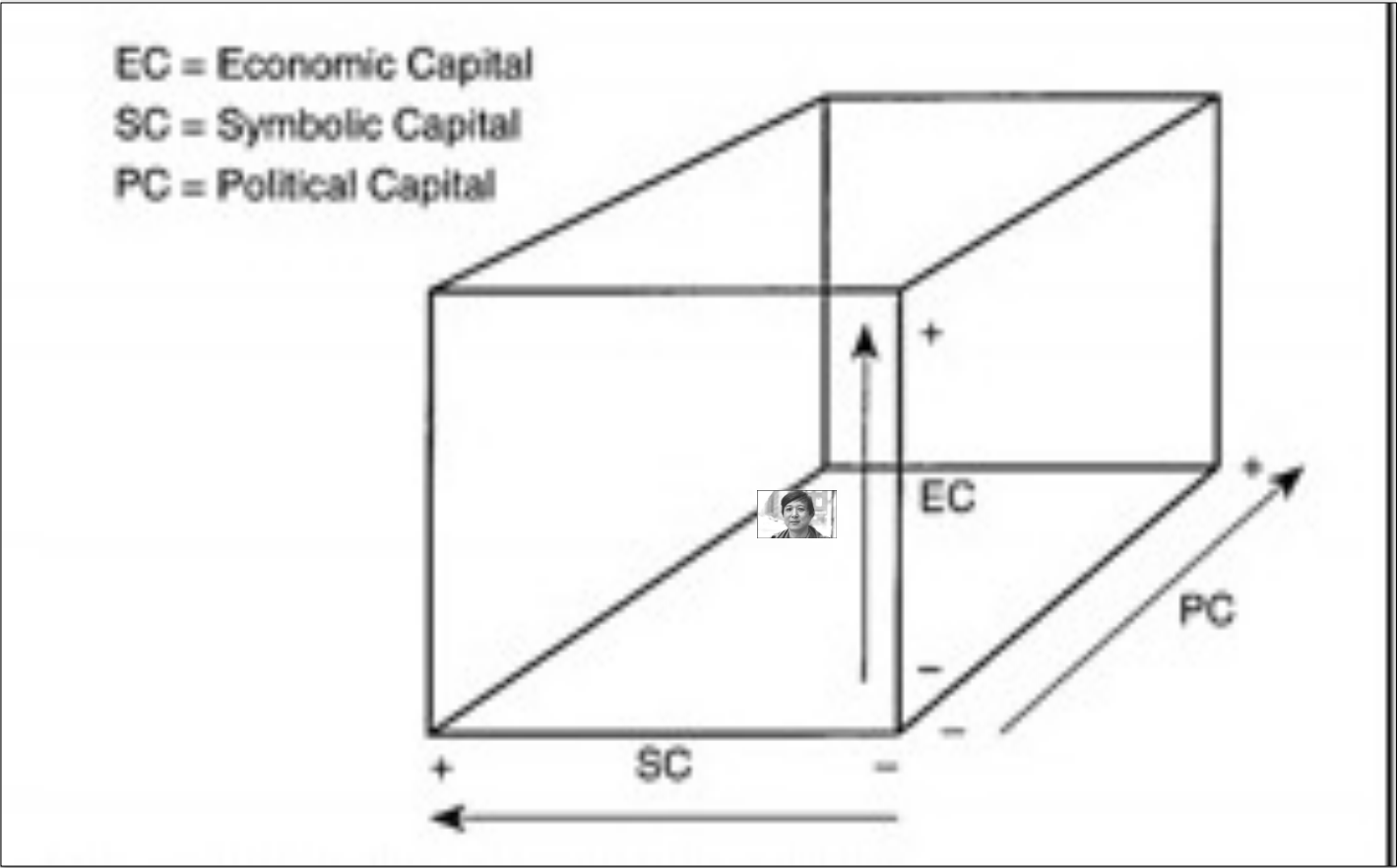


Figure 2 Gao Xingjian in China, before exile (adapted from Hockx 1999, 17)

## Chapter Five: Gao Xingjian's Escape from the World Literary Field

Henry Zhao observes that the typical Chinese exile writer faces a hybrid burden of emotional and practical pressures, or “utilitarian nationalism.”<sup>375</sup> On the one hand, Chinese exile writers “try to share a collective cause, so that they can have less freedom—a kind of self-denial of freedom in exchange for a sense of community.”<sup>376</sup> On the other hand, Chinese exile writers realise that

Westerners appreciate only things indigenously Chinese: traditional Chinese cuisine, herbal medicine, Feng-shui (geomancy), Qigong (meditation), Kungfu (martial art), Mahjong (gambling), Tai-chi (exercise), and, occasionally, traditional Chinese opera with all its colorful masks and exotic music. They have found that their works of art, which they were once proud of, are regarded as poor imitations, or, at best, similar to increasingly more uniform global models. In face of this harsh reality, the only way to survive as an artist is to turn to Chinese tradition, and if one wants to be successful, one has to try hard to sell it by making its indigenously more esoteric.<sup>377</sup>

While Zhao is surely sympathetic towards the Chinese exile artist's dire conditions in the West, he nevertheless holds an unfavourable opinion towards the practice of “selling” indigenous Chinese tradition for the sake of survival. The above elaboration on the self-Orientalist act of Chinese exile artists seeks to contextualize Gao Xingjian's rejection of being “an antique seller.” Months before his exile, Gao states in the conversation-essay, “Late-night talk in Beijing” (Jinghua yetan, 1987) that he

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<sup>375</sup> Henry Zhao, “The Freedom of Not Selling Antiques,” *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre* (London: SOAS University of London, 2000), 140.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.



refuses to sell himself as “a local product or handicraft” (*tu techan*).<sup>378</sup> Six years later, in the essay “Without isms” (*Meiyou zhuyi*, 1993), Gao reaffirms his stance of going against “selling ancestral property” (*bianmai zuzong de yichan*) through his artistic production.<sup>379</sup> Although Gao clearly states that he refuses to be a seller of indigenous Chinese tradition, his position with regards to the presence of indigenous Chinese tradition in his plays is not as clear as Zhao presumes it to be.

In contrast to Zhao’s singular critique of the self-Orientalism of Chinese artists, Rey Chow cites the alleged pandering to “foreign devils” in contemporary Chinese cinema as a key reference point to her theory of “film as ethnography.” She argues that the binary accusations of a “betrayal” of a “faithful” representation of Chinese culture are based upon an understanding of “China” that is constructed upon “the hierarchical criteria of traditional aesthetics.” Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s understanding of “translation” as necessarily going beyond the original text to reveal its “*intentio*,” Chow contends that contemporary Chinese film directors translate Chinese culture into a cinematic representation, and thereby liberating the subjectivity of Chinese culture from its nativists and Orientalist constructs. More specifically, filmic visuality is the breeding ground for a “new ethnography” that “turn[s] our attention to the subjective origins of ethnography as it is practised by those who were previously ethnographised and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographising their own cultures.”<sup>380</sup> If internationally-recognised film directors like Zhang Yimou manage to breathe new life into indigenous Chinese

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<sup>378</sup> Gao Xingjian, “Jinghua ye tan” [Evening talks in Beijing], *Zhongshan* 5 (1987): 198; qtd. in Alexa [Alexander] Huang, “The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 63, no. 3 (October 2011): 369.

<sup>379</sup> Gao, “Meiyou Zhuyi” [Without Isms], in *Meiyou Zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei, Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990]), 11.

<sup>380</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 181.

culture, Chow believes that it is worthy of the price of being deemed a “traitor” of an ethnocentrically-defined China.

Chow significantly shifts our attention from the external, national politics, to the internal, symbolic meaning of a text that features Chinese cultural elements. Yet this is not to say that the politics of the nation are no longer relevant to the discussion of Chinese cultural products. Pascale Casanova contends that the world literary space rewards disinterest from politics, including that of national politics. But such a denationalised space is still hierarchical and assigns symbolic value based on a nation’s distance from the literary Greenwich meridian (ie Paris, in the context of Casanova’s analysis, as I have also discussed in Chapter Three). As Casanova remarks: “the particular case of Paris, denationalized and universal capital of the literary world, must not make us forget that literary capital is inherently national.”<sup>381</sup> The nation continues to play an exceptional role in the reception of the artist on a global scale, especially for a Chinese exile artist like Gao. In fact, even Gao himself appears to be unsure about the relationship between his creative production and his native country, China. Gao claims in a 1998 interview that “China doesn't even appear in my dreams.”<sup>382</sup> It may seem that Gao has thoroughly cut ties with his motherland, and has become a French writer. Yet Gao confesses in another interview that his “China complex” has resurfaced after writing the play *Snow in August* and the novel *One Man’s Bible*.<sup>383</sup>

As I have established in Chapter Three, the doxa of the world literary field is Euro-American Orientalism. The nation’s allusive and seemingly unconscious

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<sup>381</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. MB DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>382</sup> Quah Sy Ren, *Gao Xingjian and Chinese Transcultural Theatre* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2004), 12.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

influence towards Gao as an agent in the world literary field confirms Arif Dirlik's argument that Orientalism is an "epistemology of power."<sup>384</sup> In his review of Edward Said's study of Orientalism, Dirlik observes a lack of agency that is attributed to non-Western subjects within the discourse of Orientalism. While there is a power hierarchy between Euro-Americans and non-Euro-Americans, Dirlik contends that such power relations should be separated from their collaborative construction of Orientalism. Following Foucault's notion that power is everywhere, the Oriental Other can Orientalize themselves as a means of gaining power in the Oriental discourse.

Is Gao's compliance with the world literary field's doxa of Euro-American Orientalism, then, necessarily a contradiction to his rejection of being a "Chinese antique-seller?" Through the lens of structural censorship, the means of accumulation of capital, or habitus, is different for each agent. The act of "selling" of ancient Chinese cultural practices and rituals, is not the result of a passive domination by the Eurocentric forces of the world literary field. Instead, there is the presence of what Chow describes as the "subjective origin" in the self-Orientalising of the Orient. However, one must be careful not to over-exaggerate the subjectivity behind self-Orientalism, and conflate it with a complete detachment and freedom from the influences of the Orientalist doxa. While Chow's "film as ethnography" offers an important reevaluation of Chinese cultural products in the global context, critics must avoid falling into a state of Bourdieusian *illusio* or being blinded by the narcissism of Gao's chaotic self. As I have elaborated in Chapter Three, Bourdieu and Gao therefore both place reflexivity at the heart of their works. And in the case of Gao's

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<sup>384</sup> Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," in *History and Theory*, vol. 35, no.4 (1996): 99.

plays, they are infused with the aesthetics of reflexivity that serve as Gao's escape from structural censorship.

Several of Gao's pre-Nobel creative works, which were completed outside of China, have direct references to Chinese culture: *Of Mountains and Seas* is Gao's ambitious attempt at narrativising the fragmented ancient Chinese text *The Classics of Mountains and Seas (Shanghai jing)*. By adapting a canonical mythogeographical text, Gao reflects on the Orientalist construction of ancient Chinese mythology. *City of the Dead*<sup>385</sup> is a re-presentation of the well-known tale of Zhuang Zhou's testing of his wife's fidelity. Through an adaptation of a famous story in traditional Chinese theatre, Gao reflects on the Orientalist appropriation of Daoism in the West. *Snow in August* is a loose adaptation of the Chan Buddhist classical text, the *Platform Sutra*. Gao's adaptation of this essential Chan Buddhist text serves as a reflection of reverse-Orientalism at play in the presentation of Chan Buddhism in the West.

### ***Of Mountains and Seas: Revisiting Mythology as Escape***

In the performance suggestions appended to his play, *Of Mountains and Seas*, Gao Xingjian proclaims to restore the "innocence in ancient Chinese mythology" through his theatrical adaptation of several Chinese myths -- most prominently, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.<sup>386</sup> He identifies the longstanding influence of Confucianism in Chinese culture as the main culprit in Chinese mythology's loss of its supernatural and fantastical nature, or its "true look and characteristic."<sup>387</sup> The Chinese term *shenhua* (mythology), however, derives from the Japanese *shinwa*

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<sup>385</sup> The first draft of *City of the Dead* was completed in July 1987, months before Gao left Beijing. He wrote two more drafts in 1990 and 1991 while he was settling in Paris. See Lee. "Gao Xingjian: Autobiography and the Portrayal of the Female Psyche," in *City of the Dead and Song of the Night* (Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 2015), xiv;

<sup>386</sup> Gao Xingjian, "On Performing *Of Mountains and Seas*," *Of Mountains and Seas*, trans. Gilbert Fong (Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2008 [1991]), 97.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

which, conceptually, translates the Western concept of “mythology.”<sup>388</sup> Some critics have therefore considered twentieth-century studies of Chinese mythology, which often compare Chinese myths with myths of India, Greece, and northern Europe,<sup>389</sup> as a Western-centric construction. In this sense, Gao’s aim of returning Chinese mythology to its pure origins appears to have little to do with the restoration of ancient Chinese roots, and perhaps more with self-Orientalism. A close-reading of *Of Mountains and Seas*, though, reveals that Gao’s approach towards Chinese mythology emphasises creativity rather than authenticity. The play’s Storyteller is less concerned with the preservation of Chinese myths than with their creative reimagination. In his narration of the mythical tale of the birth of ancient Chinese civilisation, the Storyteller’s performance is informed by Gao’s aesthetics of reflexivity, namely suppositionality and tripartite acting. Such theatrics offer a space of reflexivity about the Orientalist construction of Chinese mythology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Yuan Ke, author of the influential Chinese myths sourcebook *Gu shenhua xuanshi* (*Myths of Ancient China: An Anthology with Annotations*, 1979), Confucianism deems the anti-social and fantastical elements of Chinese myths as negative social influences.<sup>390</sup> While Chinese myths have been circulated through a rich oral tradition, systematic textual preservation of these oral tales has been historically neglected.<sup>391</sup> When Chinese myths are documented, they are often historicised and rationalised to support Confucianist-oriented social and political doctrines.<sup>392</sup> An example of Confucianist rationalisation can be found in a

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<sup>388</sup> Lihui Yang, Deming An, and Jessica Anderson Turner, “Introduction,” *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>390</sup> Yuan Ke, “Foreword,” in *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* by Anna Birrell (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) xi.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>392</sup> Yuan Ke, “Qianyan” [Preface.] In *Gu Shenhua xuanshi* [Exegeses of selected ancient myths] (Beijing: Remin wenzue chubanshe, 1979), 3-9.

conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zigong with regards to the legend that the Yellow Emperor has four faces.<sup>393</sup> Confucius explains that the “four faces” historically refer to the fact that the Yellow Emperor sends four officials into four directions to administrate his land respectively. While Confucius’s interpretation is valid, it also turns the myth of the Yellow Emperor’s four faces into historical fact. Any other literal or figurative interpretations of the Yellow Emperor’s four faces are rejected by Confucius’s historicised reading.

Nevertheless, Chinese folklorists argue that Chinese myths have largely remained in “pristine condition” precisely because they are not unified as a coherent narrative by literary writers, unlike Greek mythology.<sup>394</sup> For example, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an ancient text written during the Warring Period and Han Dynasty (467-221 BC), introduces an enormous range of flora, fauna, mythology, and lore of regions inside and beyond China’s ancient frontiers. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is more of a mytho-geographical text than a mythological literary text. Unlike *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek mythology, Chinese mythology, on its own terms, has never prominently existed as literature.<sup>395</sup>

It is important to note that Homeric epics are fundamentally rooted in oral storytelling rather than writing. The Greek term “mytho” has various meanings including “speech,” “story,” and, later, “myth” or “fable.” The key difference between

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<sup>393</sup> In *Taiping yulan*, “Huangdi Xuanyuan Shi,” Confucius’s disciple Zigong said: “Should we give credence to the idea that in the past the Yellow Emperor had four faces?” Confucius replied: “The Yellow Emperor took four people who were in accord with him and sent them to govern the four directions .... This is why they say ‘four faces.’” qtd. in Mark Csikszentmihalyi, “Reimagining the Yellow Emperor’s Four Faces,” in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, ed. Martin Kern (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005), 226.

<sup>394</sup> Yuan Ke, “Foreword,” *Ibid*, xii.

<sup>395</sup> Zong-xian Zhong observes that similar attempts of structuring Chinese mythology is rare: Li Ruzhen’s *Flowers in the Mirror*, Zhong Yulong’s *The Romance of Ancient Myths*, and Yuan Ke’s *Myths in Ancient China* are the only identifiable examples to date. See Zong-xian Zhong, “Mountains and Seas”-A Chinese Rock Musical DVD Booklet, *Mountains and Seas*”-A Chinese Rock Musical (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 2014).

Greek mythology and Chinese mythology, then, is whether a writer/poet like Homer is present to write down the myths. Chinese myths, in contrast, have been preserved as “literary amber, in a disorganised way in a number of miscellaneous books.”<sup>396</sup>

In this sense, while the *surface* premise of the play *Of Mountains and Seas* is to return Chinese mythology back to its origins of purity, its *underlying* premise is to fill the void of Homeric epics in Chinese culture and mythology.<sup>397</sup> Indeed, Gao describes his writing process as “somewhat like an archaeologist trying to restore the hundreds of broken pieces of a Grecian urn to its original condition.”<sup>398</sup> Gao’s task is to produce literature, a play, that organises Chinese mythology in a literary form. Through this production of the play *Of Mountains and Seas*, Gao believes he is restoring the innocence of Chinese mythology, which has been traditionally subjected to Confucianist interpretations, historicisations, and rationalisation. The “innocence” which Gao seeks to restore in Chinese mythology is its diversity, richness, and mutability, or in Homer’s terms, *polytropon*. By turning Chinese mythology into literature, Gao is instilling literariness into Chinese mythology, thereby returning the idea of “fiction,” “story,” “fable” and “tale” back into Chinese mythology.

Gao appears to follow the common argument in Chinese mythology studies that Chinese myths are either fragmented and scattered in Confucianist-influenced historical texts or appropriated in philosophical texts of various schools of thought. Recent scholarship, however, has offered an Orientalist-critique of Chinese mythology studies, and by extension, of Gao’s mythmaking. At the heart of this critique are the very notion of “mythology” and its introduction into Chinese studies. Robin McNeal’s survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese folklorist studies reveals that the

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<sup>396</sup> Yuan Ke, “Foreword,” *Ibid*, xii.

<sup>397</sup> Gao confirms this intent in the DVD booklet of the rock musical adaptation of *Of Mountains and Seas* (2012).

<sup>398</sup> qtd. in Gilbert Fong, “Purity of Origins,” in *Of Mountains and Seas*, *Ibid*, x.

project of constructing “Chinese mythology” started with the importation of the Western notion of “mythology” by New Culture movement scholars like Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, and Mao Dun.<sup>399</sup> The basis and foundation of the introduction of the notion of “mythology” into Chinese studies allude to Greek myths “themselves and the various uses that analysis of these myths had been put to by historians, literary critics, and comparative anthropologists [...]”<sup>400</sup> Mao Dun’s study of Di Jun, for example, is based on Zeus.<sup>401</sup> McNeal ultimately argues of a dual task for the construction of Chinese mythology: to establish empirical history as modern nation-state and to establish myth as a discipline comparable to European literature, thereby thrusting Chinese culture onto the world stage.<sup>402</sup> Lihui Yang also observes how some scholars of Chinese mythology identify/highlight a mythologising of Chinese history based on the Western conception of mythology rather than a Confucianist historicisation of Chinese mythology.<sup>403</sup> In short, the Orientalist critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese mythology studies argues that Chinese folklorists are imposing Western notions onto Chinese culture, out of their admiration for Greek mythology. Such an imposition feeds into the Orientalist view that China is a “mythless” society unless it meets the Western expectations of mythology.<sup>404</sup>

Gao has specifically acknowledged the contributions of Lu Xun and Yuan Ke as important precursors for his own research on Chinese mythology and the writing of his play *Of Mountains and Seas*.<sup>405</sup> Following the aforementioned Orientalist critique, Zhang Ni remarks in response to Gao’s premise of writing *Of Mountains and Seas*:

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<sup>399</sup> Robin McNeal, “Constructing Myth in Modern China,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 71 (2012): 681

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid, 682.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid, 684.

<sup>403</sup> Yang, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, Ibid, 13.

<sup>404</sup> Anne M. Birrell, “Studies on Chinese Myth Since 1970: An Appraisal, Part 1,” in *History of Religions*, vol. 33, no. 4 (May, 1994): 381-82.

<sup>405</sup> Gao, “On Performing *Of Mountains and Seas*,” Ibid, 97.



To return to Gao's comment on the "broken pieces of a Grecian urn," why must we search Chinese soil for such an urn? Why would that be relevant to recovering the unadorned and uncontaminated origins of Chinese civilization? The strife between gods and demons, all engulfed in chaotic, brutal power struggles as enacted in Gao's *Of Mountains and Seas* is altogether too Olympian. In contrast to the roots-seeking writers, Gao vehemently denied Chinese nationalism. However, he could not seem to escape the shadow of Western Orientalism and Chinese internal Orientalism, both converging in the nationalist agenda of Chinese folklore studies.<sup>406</sup>

For Ni, Gao's brief comparison of Chinese mythology as "broken pieces of a Grecian urn" is indicative of his imposition of Christian monotheist categories into China's past. As such, she declares Gao's *Of Mountains and Seas*, and his proclamation of recovering grandeur myths in Chinese civilization, as a self-Orientalist project that panders to the Orientalist expectations of the Western audience by re-presenting Greek, Olympian mythology as ancient Chinese mythology. Building on her criticism of Gao's self-Orientalism, Ni further argues that Gao is "indisputably indebted to the intellectual leanings of modern China," particularly the roots-seeking literary movement during the 1980s New Era period. She contends that Gao's roots-seeking attempts in *Wild Man*, *Soul Mountain*, and *Of Mountains and Seas*, are destined to fail because they are based on a 20<sup>th</sup>-century "modern invention" of ancient Chinese past.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Zhang Ni, *The Pagan Writes Back: When World Religion Meets World Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 163.

<sup>407</sup> Ni, *The Pagan Writes Back*, Ibid, 157. From the perspective of Bourdieusian cultural capital, Ersu Ding makes a similar point and argues that Gao's cold literature and transcultural aesthetics covertly exploit Orientalism and Chineseness in the European literary market. See "Myth Making and Its Socio-Economic Functions," *Parallels, Interactions, and Illuminations: Traversing Chinese and Western Theories of the Sign* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 142-44.

At the heart of Ni's Orientalist critique of Gao is the presumption that he is seeking to represent ancient Chinese culture and history in his creative works. However, if mythology is essentially fiction, it should not be evaluated on the basis of cultural or national authenticity. Instead, the play's success in attaining Gao's goal of "restoring the innocence of ancient Chinese mythology" should be measured by its creativity. Gao's prime task is mythmaking, as opposed to mythmaking for a nation. Gao's emphasis of individualistic creation over collective nation is worth quoting at length:

I am not saying that every Chinese writer must thoroughly revisit our civilisation's traditions and cultures. But when we are on the topic of "carrying the torch of our tradition," everyone can have their own interpretations. Most important is that each of us have our own individual interpretations. Let's stop parroting those cliché conclusions. It is such a difference in interpretation that results in different paths of creation. Tradition is only tradition. A critique or rehash of tradition will not replace creativity. A contemporary writer should build on his interpretation of tradition and give it a new form and meaning. I have never accepted the label of "modernist," nor do I consider myself as "roots-seeking." I am most comfortable being situated at the cross roads of East-West cultures and histories, and the present time.<sup>408</sup>

By presenting Chinese mythology in a literary narrative, as opposed to historical or philosophical contexts, Gao aims to restore the "innocence" in ancient Chinese mythology. Indeed, if Gao's priority was to search for the roots of ancient China, he would simply be historicising Chinese mythology once again. As I have argued in

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<sup>408</sup> Gao Xingjian, "Chidao de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjian zhongguo wenxue" [The Belated Arrival of Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature], in *Meiyou Zhuyi* [Without Isms] (Taipei, Linking Publishing Press, 2001 [1990]), 105, translation my own.

Chapter Four, Gao's omnipotent theatre is not a preservation of roots, but a creative *reimagination* of roots. Ancient Chinese culture is reconstructed by narrativisation as well as theatrics inspired by Western avant-garde and Chinese *xiqu* traditions. By "restoring the innocence of ancient Chinese mythology," Gao is not claiming to restore the original version of Chinese myths. Instead, Gao is restoring the diversity, richness, and mutability of Chinese mythology through a creative reimagination of Chinese myths in *Of Mountains and Seas*.

Even in the context of modern studies of Chinese mythology, Gao is drawing from the fruits of the comparative mythology approach of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese folklorists, which is the discovery of fragmentation as the uniqueness of Chinese mythology. Although Gao claims that his play is based on one text, *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*, it is evident that he also draws from other ancient texts.<sup>409</sup> For example, the details of the myth of "Yi Shoots the Ten Suns to Avert Disaster" in Act I are drawn from *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* and *Huainanzi* (The Master of Huainan);<sup>410</sup> the myth of "The Battle between the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor" and "Chi You Attacks the Yellow Emperor" in Act II are drawn from *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*, *The Master of Huainan*, *Lushi Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü), and *Liezi* (Master Lie);<sup>411</sup> the myth of "Yu Controls the Flood" in Act III is drawn from *Chuci* (Songs of Chu), *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*, and *Shangshu* (Documents of Antiquity).<sup>412</sup> Continuing with the tradition of Chinese mythology as preserved as "literary amber," Gao draws from multiple ancient texts to construct his myth, entitled "Of Mountains and Seas." With multiple texts

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<sup>409</sup> Gao, "On Performing *Of Mountains and Seas*," *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>410</sup> Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid*, 131-32.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

cross-referencing specific Chinese myths, Gao's *Of Mountains and Seas* retains a measure of Chinese mythological authenticity.

The lack of a unifying force, such as a poet or writer, also contributes to the relative pristine condition of Chinese mythology. Anna Birrell observes that “because China lacked a Homer or a Hesiod, a Herodotus or an Ovid, who recounted myth and shaped its content and style, early Chinese myth existed as an amorphous, untidy congeries of archaic expression.”<sup>413</sup> In *Of Mountains and Seas*, Gao introduces the Storyteller with the dual goal of structuring Chinese mythology without compromising its authenticity: The main purpose of the Storyteller, for Gao, is to piece together the scattered fragments of Chinese mythology:

*Of Mountains and Seas* is a collage of fragmented pieces of Chinese mythology. There must be a means of organising these pieces together. I have therefore introduced a Storyteller figure. Storyteller pieces them together through his storytelling, or skips past the pieces if they are not able to be pieced together. The Storyteller's approach to piecing together Chinese mythology, and the organising system which he represents, in fact is derived from the ancient folkloric tradition of orality and singing. The Storyteller serves the same function as the poet of Greek ancient epic, like Homer. The Storyteller is the personification and medium of ancient civilisation of humans. Since *Of Mountains and Seas* is written for a modern audience, I reject all interpretations with regards to ideology. The Storyteller therefore only shows and does not judge. If there is any judgement, it is that of an aesthetic judgement: tragedy, comedy, farce, absurdity.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>414</sup> “Introduction by Gao Xingjian,” in *Mountains and Seas—A Rock Musical*. NTNU Graduate Institute of Performing Arts, 2014. DVD, translation my own.

Gao's inspiration for the Storyteller is not limited to ancient Chinese mythology, but ancient mythology and folklore in general. He compares the role of the Storyteller to that of a mythological (epic) poet like Homer. At the same time, the Storyteller, according to Gao, "only shows and does not judge." Such an observation alludes to Gao's artistic vision of without isms.

Indeed, the Storyteller appears as a surrogate for Gao.<sup>415</sup> At the very beginning of the play, the Storyteller indicates his preference for theatricality and fiction in his myth-telling:

STORYTELLER: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our show. My goodness a full house. Anyone knows what's on tonight? It's called *Of Mountains and Seas*, uncut and unabridged! (Beats the gong once.) *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* is a very ancient book [...]. It tells of impossible but weird and wonderful things [...]. They all look human, but they're not. They're all mighty talented, though a little lacking in love and morality. [...] They say it's always difficult to start something, but all good shows have got to have a good beginning, haven't they? (Beats the gong, now broken, continuously. Exit)<sup>416</sup>

The Storyteller establishes at the very onset that this is a theatrical performance, or a "show." He also highlights the mythical qualities of *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* as filled with "impossible but weird and wonderful things." The title of the play draws attention to the preference of strangeness too. The Storyteller names his story as "Of Mountains and Seas" as *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* is the most representative ancient text that records the weird and incredible aspects of Chinese

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<sup>415</sup> Gilbert Fong remarks that the Storyteller is the playwright's surrogate since he is always "overseeing the proceedings and at the same time fashioning them to shape the play's structure." See "Purity of Origins," in *Of Mountains and Seas*, x.

<sup>416</sup> Gao, *Of Mountains and Seas*, Ibid, 7.

mythology. At the same time, the Storyteller reminds the audience that despite these things resemble that of humans, they are not, and hence should not be understood in human terms. This reminder paves way for the Storyteller's overall reflexivity towards the influence of isms from the audience and the Storyteller himself. The beating of the gong throughout his narration is from the Chinese *xiqu* instrumental tradition, and further evokes the suppositional atmosphere of the play. The Storyteller is constantly reminding the audience, and also himself, that they are watching a play, and he is telling a story of a play. The gong serves the crucial auditory cue that the audience is watching theatre.

The Storyteller also indicates his preference for the mythical near the end of the play, albeit in a subtler manner. The Storyteller sings and recites the tale of how Yu the Great kills Aide Willow, conquers several parts of the Heavenly Kingdom, and falls in love with a Pretty Maid. Yu suddenly reveals himself as a yellow bear, and chases Pretty Maid. Pretty Maid is so shocked that she turns into a stone. Yu yells "open, open" and a baby appears from the lap of Pretty Maid. But the Storyteller abruptly stops as he realises that he had skipped over an important part of the story of Yu:

STORYTELLER: Members of the audience, the last scene is actually a postscript.<sup>417</sup> I was carried away and got ahead of myself. Now let's get back to our play.<sup>418</sup>

Prior to the bizarre case of Yu becoming a yellow bear, Yu the Great officially becomes the Emperor. The ending of the play portrays Yu ordering Hiker to measure the size of his ruling land: five hundred million, one hundred and nine thousand, eight

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<sup>417</sup> Gilbert Fong translates *houhua* as "this scene happens later." However, I understand *houhua* as "postscript," which denotes the supplementary nature of the scene in relation to the main plot.

<sup>418</sup> Gao, *Of Mountains and Seas*, Ibid, 94.

hundred paces. From a historical perspective, Yu's coronation is the most important event as it depicts the beginning of Chinese dynastic history. However, it appears that the Storyteller does not view Yu's coronation as Emperor as important. This shows that the Storyteller prefers the weird and incredible more than history. According to Gao, the Storyteller is modelled around "the ancestral worship ceremony of the Miao people, the chanting of the sutra of the Yi people, the folk singing in Jingzhou and the singing-talking love songs of the Lixia River in northern Jiangsu."<sup>419</sup> In contrast to a rigid and singular narrative approach, the Storyteller's interchanging of singing and reciting allows him a degree of spontaneity in his narration. Such spontaneity appears when the Storyteller is more enthusiastic about the myth of Yu as a yellow bear than the historical event of Yu as the Emperor.

Despite telling myths of ancient China, the Storyteller demonstrates a sense of comparativeness too. Before telling the stories of the wars and the conflicts of the emperors of Heaven of East, West, North, South and the Middle, he makes a comparison with the Bible:

STORYTELLER: [...] Ladies and gentlemen, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is not like the Bible of the West. Here, Heaven is vast and boundless. How can such a big Heaven be monopolised by one master? How can such a big Heaven be monopolised by one master? [...] There's got to be some division of labor. All the emperors in Heaven, and there are many of them, are supreme and the highest—how can they put up with one another and live in peace? Well, we storytellers have only one thing going for us—we know how to shoot off our mouths.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Gao Xingjian, "On Performing *Of Mountains and Seas*," Ibid, 98.

<sup>420</sup> Gao, *Of Mountains and Seas*, Ibid, 11-12.

The Storyteller has an intended audience in mind. He perceives that his mythtelling is received by a modern audience that has some prior knowledge about ancient Western culture and religious practice, such as God in the Bible. This sense of implied readership paves way for his narration to be explicitly or implicitly comparative, especially with Western mythology. As the Storyteller attempts to rationalise the presence of multiple emperors in Heaven as “division of labour,” he is cautious about his position as a mythteller and as a human. He therefore engages in a moment of self-deprecation and remarks that he only knows “how to shoot off our mouths.”

As can be seen in point 6 of his performance suggestions, Gao pays great attention to the configuration of the Storyteller’s delivery and appearance.<sup>421</sup> An important part of the preservation of Chinese mythology lies in its oral tradition. Lihui Yang remarks that “by obtaining relevant knowledge and telling myths to others, [mythtellers] pass on myths from generation to generation and spread myths to many places. Mythtellers endow meaning and life to myths.”<sup>422</sup> At times, Gao demonstrates the integral role of a mythteller in the shaping of a myth by endowing him an intradiegetic stage presence:

[...Enter CHANG E. She looks around.

STORYTELLER Follows her at a distance. In his left hand he is carrying an earthenware jar and in his right he is holding a chopstick. he beat the jar once.]

[...]

[STORYTELLER quietly sneaks up behind CHANG E. He beats the jar once again.]

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<sup>421</sup> Gao, “On Performing *Of Mountains and Seas*,” 98.

<sup>422</sup> Yang, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, Ibid, 27.



CHANG E: (Turns around in shock.) I don't know why, but I feel uneasy. I hope it's only my suspicious nature, but the whole thing still sends shivers down my spine. I could've sworn that an earthenware jar was standing here. He wouldn't let it out of his sight for one second even when he was drinking or making merry. but now it's nowhere to be found.

[STORYTELLER again beats the jar once. he turns to one side and holds the jar in front of CHANG E in his outstretched hand, at the same time giving her a sidelong look.]

CHANG E: So, it's here! Wait! How come it's facing this way? (Takes the jar in her hand)

[Exit STORYTELLER tiptoeing.]<sup>423</sup>

The myth of "Chang E Escapes to the Moon" accounts of how Chang E stole Yi the Archer's no-death fruit and fled to the moon. Yi, who is Chang E's husband, was gifted the no-death fruit from the Queen Mother of the West. Chang E eats the fruit and escapes to the moon. She is punished for her thievery and is transformed into a toad. While the myth itself does not detail her intention, the play depicts Chang E stealing the fruit because she believes Yi wants to abandon her. She speculates that by eating the fruit, Yi will return to Heaven without her. In the Storyteller's version of the myth, Chang E is insecure about her marriage with Yi, and therefore commits the crime. The Storyteller's gesture of showing the earthenjar that contains the fruit to Chang E, indicates his authorship in shaping the story.

Without isms, as I have defined in Chapter Two, is not a claim of literal absence of isms in Gao's creative work. It is rather a demonstration of awareness

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<sup>423</sup> Gao, *Of Mountains and Seas*, Ibid, 63-64.

towards the inevitable prevalence of isms. Under the doxic influence of Orientalism, Gao is compelled to produce Chinese mythology in the vein of Greek mythology to meet the expectations of the world literary field. However, an Orientalist critique of Gao is only valid if one considers *Of Mountains and Seas* as a preservation or restoration of an “authentic” and “original” face of Chinese mythology. While Gao’s preparation for the writing of the play *Of Mountains and Seas* resembles that of an archaeologist, he is first and foremost a writer who has written a play based on Chinese mythology. Gao has remarked that “I am China. China is inside me, and *that* China has nothing to do with me.”<sup>424</sup>

### ***City of the Dead: Revisiting Daoism as Escape***

Several critics, like Karyn Lai and JJ Clarke, have noticed how Daoism, especially its tenet of “*yin*” and “*yang*,” has been appropriated for the Western feminist cause of addressing and dealing with the subjugation of women.<sup>425</sup> However, it is pertinent to be cautious about a fossilized application of Daoism to feminism. First of all, the references to *yin* as feminine and *yang* as masculine are metaphors and analogies rather than formative gender attributes. Secondly, *yin-yang* do not infer a hierarchy between female and male, even though the yielding of *yin* is preferred over the asserting of *yang*. Instead, *yin-yang* are in harmony rather than in conflict.

In this paper, I examine how Gao Xingjian’s *City of the Dead* (*Mingcheng*) clarifies our understanding of Daoism through a retelling of “Zhuangzi Tests his

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<sup>424</sup> Andrea Shen, “Nobel Winner Affirms the ‘Self’: Gao Remains Apolitical in His Approach to the Creative Enterprise,” *Harvard Gazette* 08 March 2001, original italics.

<sup>425</sup> Karyn Lai observes how the perceived femininity in Daoist thought are/is often highlighted by scholars as advantageous in the development of “a feminine approach to ethics and socio-political philosophy.” See Karyn Lai, “The Daodejing: Resources for Contemporary Feminist Thinking,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (June, year): 131-32; J. J. Clarke remarks that Daoism’s problematisation of power and domination, as well as its preference to yielding and permissiveness, has “unsurprisingly drawn the attention of feminist theorists.” See J. J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 111.

Wife,” (*Zhuangzi shi qi*) a famous tale in Chinese culture that is also notorious for its underlying sexism. Gao’s adaptation is unique as it features Zhuangzi’s wife as the lead character throughout *City of the Dead*, and especially in the second half of the play. Critics have contended that Gao’s decision to give a significant voice to Zhuangzi’s wife is a means of subverting the Confucianist moral code and its oppression of women. In my reading, however, I identify Gao’s priority as in reevaluating Zhuangzi’s insights pertaining to the cyclical reversion of life and death, and the unnecessary distinction between reality and dream. Through a close reading that pays special attention to Gao’s theatrical techniques of tripartite acting and suppositionality, (*jiadingxing*) I find *City of the Dead* is reflexive about the dangers of misappropriating Daoism for social advocacy, such as feminism.

The genealogy of *City of the Dead* embodies at least three incarnations: Chinese theatre (*xiqu*), Ming-dynasty vernacular story, and Zhuangzi’s writings. The story of the influential Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, testing his wife’s fidelity, is adapted under a variety of names such as *Hudie meng* (“The Butterfly Dream”), *Zhuangzi shan fen* (“Zhuangzi Fanning the Grave”), and *Po guan ji* (“Breaking Open the Coffin”). For example, the adaptation in the *chuanqi* form comes from a short story by Feng Menglong, a Ming dynasty poet and novelist. In Feng’s short story, entitled *Zhuangzi xiu gupen cheng dadao* (“Zhuang Zhou Drums on a Bowl and Attains the Great Dao”), Zhuangzi experiences the “butterfly dream” and subsequently embarks on a travel to seek the Dao. During his travels, he marries three times, and his current wife is Tien. In the midst of his return from his travel, Zhuangzi encounters a widow fanning the grave of her dead husband. The widow tells Zhuangzi that according to her husband’s will, she can only remarry when the grave of her dead husband becomes dry. Zhuangzi, who possesses magical powers after studying the

*Daodejing*, dries the grave with ease. Zhuangzi later shares this story with his wife Tien. She responds with great disgust. She also announces with great dignity that she will never remarry after Zhuangzi's death. In order to test his wife's compliance with feudal moral codes, Zhuangzi uses his magical powers again to pretend to be dead, and then he himself transforms into the Prince of the nation Chu. The Prince of Chu and Tien soon engage in mutual seduction which eventually escalates to marriage. Yet on the day of the wedding, the Prince of Chu suddenly falls ill, and informs Tien that the only cure is the brain of a fresh corpse. Tien seeks the brain of Zhuangzi who is supposedly dead. Once she opens the coffin, Zhuangzi comes out and ridicules Tien for her lack of fidelity. In shame and guilt, Tien commits suicide. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, feels no remorse towards his cruel and absurd behavior. He, instead, plays the coffin like a drum to celebrate.

Feng's adaptation incorporates, on a surface level, Zhuangzi's approach to life, death, and bereavement, as well as the lack of distinction between reality and dream. In Chapter 18 *Zhile* ("Utmost Pleasure") of the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi's wife dies. Instead of mourning and drowning in sorrow, Zhuangzi celebrates his wife's death by improvising a drumming and singing performance. Explaining from a Daoist view, Zhuangzi argues that everything originally comes from nothing, and the death of his wife is merely following such a cycle of reversion. There are no grounds to be unhappy. In the "Butterfly Dream" from the Daoist text *Qi Wu Lun* (*On the Equality of Things*), Zhuangzi illustrates his insights about the distinction (or lack thereof) between reality and dream. Zhuangzi wakes up from a dream of him being a butterfly. But upon waking up, he is unsure whether he was dreaming that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly that is dreaming he was Zhuangzi. The

experience problematizes the distinction between real and unreal, and reality and dream, for Zhuangzi.

The ultimate objective of Feng's short story, however, is to remind Chinese women to demonstrate their absolute loyalty to their husbands, even after their death. As such, in both Feng's short story and its subsequent theatrical adaptations, the references to the "Playing the Drums and Singing" and "Butterfly Dream" serve only as decorative purposes, and perhaps even as a mockery towards the impracticality of Zhuangzi's teachings.

Gao's *City of the Dead* is one of many contemporary attempts of retelling the tale of "Zhuangzi Tests his Wife."<sup>426</sup> In Scene I, the tale of "Zhuangzi Tests his Wife" is roughly retold in its entirety with little changes to its plot. At the beginning of the play, the actor playing Zhuang Zhou addresses the audience in the manner of Brechtian alienation effect. He steps out of his character and tells the audience that the story of "Zhuangzi tests his wife" is a cruel story. He also clarifies that there is "absolutely nothing to do with the contemporary world," thereby preaching to the audience that what is on stage is not real.<sup>427</sup> Near the end of Scene I, two groups of women and men respectively sing commentaries regarding Zhuangzi's cruel joke on his Wife. Evoking the singing aspect of Brechtian alienation effect, the singers become surrogates for the audience and pass moral judgement towards Zhuangzi as foolish, cruel, stupid, dubious.<sup>428</sup> They are all sympathetic to his Wife, who is portrayed as a victim of feudalist, patriarchal values, particularly of the "*Sancong*"

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<sup>426</sup> See Chang Lan-fen's unpublished Masters' thesis *A Study on the Contemporary Story of "Zhuangzi's Trial on His Wife" —based on the scripts of Si Song Wei Zih-Yun Wu Jhao-Fen and Gao Sing-Jian* (2006).

<sup>427</sup> Gao Xingjian, *City of the Dead*, trans. Gilbert CF Fong, in *City of the Dead and Song of the Night*, trans. Gilbert CF Fong and Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2015 [1987]), 5.

<sup>428</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, *Ibid*, 23-24.

(Three Obediences).<sup>429</sup> However, a study of the tripartite acting performance of Zhuangzi and his Wife, suggests a more complex scenario.

The character Zhuangzi has three voices. While being a narrator, the actor playing Zhuangzi constantly inserts comments regarding Zhuangzi's intent and actions. This actor, who performs Zhuangzi in the spirit of the original "Zhuangzi tests his wife," also voices out the character's internal thoughts too, as a third voice. An example of this tripartite-style performance is found in the seduction between Zhuangzi, after transforming into the Prince of the nation Chu, and his Wife:

ZHUANG: You said that I could look at the shoes, but why not the feet as well?

WIFE: You're impossible. Give you an inch and you take a mile. You're so naughty. You don't seem like a prince to me!

ZHUANG: (*To himself*) She's such a flirt, and she obviously enjoys playing the harlot! Zhuang Zhou, you really should have your way with her. She's not your wife for nothing, after all. (*Aside*) Zhuang Zhou considers himself transcendental and rising above everything, but he still can't escape from this vile skin keg of a man!

WIFE: (*Backs away, but trying to be enticing with every step. To herself*) Look at him, he's like a house on fire. I hate him for it, but I love him too. Today, I'm going to make him abandon all his princely dignity

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<sup>429</sup> According to *Kongzi jiyu*: "Women are the ones who follow the teaching of men and thereby grow in their ability to reason. Therefore, for women there is no appropriateness to be self-reliant but there is the way of threefold dependence. When they are little they follow their fathers and elder brothers, when they are married they follow their husbands, when their husbands die they follow their sons and do not remarry." qtd from Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007), 90.

and prostate himself before my garnet-red skirt. (*To Zhuang*) Your  
Highness—<sup>430</sup>

The tripartite performance induces what Quah Sy Ren describes as “interreferential reading.”<sup>431</sup> Although the dramatic action is Zhuangzi’s seduction of Wife, the tripartite performance provides different perspectives beyond the main narrative—Zhuangzi’s cruelty towards his Wife. In the above example, Zhuangzi’s internal thoughts (“To himself”) reveals that Zhuangzi is succumbing to his primal desires for Wife. The commentary on Zhuangzi (“Aside”) further derides his lustfulness as a “vile skin keg of a man.” Based on Wife’s vocalization of her internal thoughts (“To herself”), though, she is not passive in the process. She adopts a “hard to get” strategy to conquer the heart of Zhuangzi/Prince of the nation Chu. Through this multiplicity of perspectives, the premise of the original “Zhuangzi tests his wife” is deconstructed. Zhuangzi and Wife are mutually seducing each other. While Zhuangzi is testing Wife’s fidelity, Wife is also testing Prince of the nation Chu’s nobility as a royalty of a nation.

To be sure, Zhuangzi is lustful and cruel. Yet there is little evidence suggesting that the Zhuangzi in Gao’s play seeks to control Wife through the Confucian moral code. Wife, instead, is a victim of Zhuangzi’s search of the Great Dao, in which such a search involves the cruel exploitation of patriarchal values. At the beginning of *City of the Dead*, Zhuangzi remarks on his difficult search for the Great Dao, and refers back to the famous Daoist tenet: “the Way that can be spoken is not the eternal way.”<sup>432</sup> He suddenly reveals that he misses his Wife.<sup>433</sup> This implies that Zhuangzi views his emotional ties to Wife as a burden to his pursuit for the

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<sup>430</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, Ibid, 17.

<sup>431</sup> Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, Ibid, 135.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, Ibid, 5.

Daoist state of “*xiaoyao*” (freedom). Zhuangzi then impulsively devises a most outrageous prank on his Wife. This suggests Zhuangzi’s perception that the pursuit of the Great Dao requires him to go beyond conventional practices, such as playing a prank on his Wife.

The prank, however, goes tragically and fatally wrong. Following the conventional tale of “Zhuangzi tests his wife,” Wife in Gao’s play commits suicide out of rage and vengeance towards Zhuangzi’s cruel prank. Upon the suicide of his Wife, Zhuangzi seemingly attains insights of transcending categorical thinking: he muses about the unnecessary distinction between dream and reality; He also muses about the unnecessary distinction between life and death. The context of such realizations, however, is that Zhuangzi is greatly saddened, and has become mentally unstable:

ZHUANG: (*Softly to all, point at WIFE’s body*) A butterfly.  
(*Pointing at himself*) A scorpion,  
(*Jokingly to all*) Love or lust, it doesn’t matter. We’re all just actors on a stage.

[...]

(*Lost*) Whether it’s life or whether it’s death, you, and you alone, can only ever face it. Alive or dead.

[...]

ZHUANG: (Shouts) You’re the scorpion, I’m the butterfly! (*Guffaws madly*)

[...]

(Suddenly stops laughing) Am I dreaming? Is this a dream or is it not a dream? Is it that I am Zhuang Zhou dreaming that I am



a butterfly or is it a butterfly dreaming that it is Zhuang Zhou?  
Is it that Zhuang Zhou dreaming he is a butterfly is a butterfly's  
dream? Is it that a butterfly dreaming that it is Zhuang Zhou is  
Zhuang Zhou's dream? Is it that Zhuang Zhou dreaming that he  
is a butterfly is a butterfly dreaming that it is Zhuang Zhou, or  
is it that a butterfly dreaming that it is Zhuang Zhou is Zhuang  
Zhou dreaming that he is a butterfly? Or is it that Zhuang Zhou  
dreaming that he is a butterfly is a butterfly dreaming that it is  
Zhuang Zhou and Zhuang Zhou's dream is not a butterfly's  
dream, or is it...

[...]

*ZHUANG ZHOU is motionless, his head lowered.*<sup>434</sup>

The problem of Zhuangzi's search of the Great Dao is his inability to transcend categorical thinking. The essence of the Daoist tenet of "the Way that can be spoken is not the eternal Way" is a transcendence of all identifiable categories, since the Great Dao is never identifiable through categories. The pursuit of the Great Dao should, therefore, be an act of inaction (*wuwei*). Zhuangzi, however, misreads the aforementioned saying as a prompt for unconventional action. Evidence of Zhuangzi being entrapped by categorical thinking lies in his patriarchal assumptions throughout his prank: he exploited patriarchal values to prove Wife's infidelity is as poisonous as a scorpion, but in turn he realizes that he is also cruel like a scorpion for perpetuating such patriarchal values. Zhuangzi attempts to utilize patriarchal values to release himself from emotional ties. What he gains instead is the realization that his actions are venomous like a scorpion. The tragic ending to Zhuangzi's testing his wife implies

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid, 24.

the dangers of a misappropriation of Daoism. Even for someone like Zhuangzi, categorical thinking can easily seep into one's pursuit of Daoism.

In Scene II of *City of the Dead*, Wife is in the otherworld (*mingcheng*), awaiting her sentence by the Judge. According to Gao's performance suggestions, he conceives of the otherworld as "evolved from Daoism and the primeval shamanism among the Han people of the Yangtze River district over a long period of time."<sup>435</sup> Unlike the Western conception of hell, the Daoist otherworld is less of a permanent torture and retribution than a mid-way stop. The Judge of the otherworld evaluates whether the dead can progress in the celestial hierarchy, or to relegate one to the tortures of the "*diyu*" (hell) until merit from descendants to set one free.<sup>436</sup> In addition, the otherworld is marked by bureaucratic elements. Similar to the living world, the otherworld's bureaucratic order involves bribes too. For example, one wild ghost in *City of the Dead* begs for a retrial, so that he can "have a place to rest [his] feet."<sup>437</sup> The Judge discovers that the ghost's name is not in the Record of Life and Death. His death was a wrongful one. But the Judge refuses to redress the judgement. The wild ghost proceeds to bribe the Judge. The Judge swiftly changes the sentence of the wild ghost to a position as a guard. The wild ghost is no longer wild and he is content.<sup>438</sup>

Similarly, Wife pleads to the Judge that her death was a wrongful death, and she was a victim of Zhuangzi's cruel prank. The Judge claims that his judgement only concerns the dead, not the living. He disregards Zhuangzi's involvement in Wife's

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<sup>435</sup> Gao, "On Performing *City of the Dead*: Some Suggestions and Instructions," in *City of the Dead and Song of the Night*, *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>436</sup> Amy Lynn Miller, "Hell," in *Encyclopedia of Daoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (New York: Routledge, 2008) 69-71.

<sup>437</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid*.

death, and makes his judgement based on her suicide, which is a sin in Daoism.<sup>439</sup> The Judge orders to have Wife's tongue cut off, preventing her from further defending herself. Wife's case is then brought to The Red-faced King and goddess Lady Ma, the two most powerful figures in the otherworld. Initially Lady Ma condemns Zhuangzi for his cruelty, but in light of the fact that Wife committed suicide, she offers no sympathy either.<sup>440</sup>

The Judge, the Red-faced King, and goddess Lady Ma, amongst other characters in the otherworld, are lopsidedly critical towards Wife's suicide. While one could interpret the otherworld as an extension of the injustice which Wife faces in the living world, Gao reminds us that the otherworld should not be taken literal. Gao suggests that the play's otherworld is not a place of "retribution and reincarnation."<sup>441</sup> Instead, the characters should be portrayed as a group of "strange yet funny gods, demons and spirits"<sup>442</sup> Such a suggestion conveys to both actors and audience that the seemingly cruel treatment of Wife in the otherworld should not be wholly evaluated against the values of the real world. At the very least, the audience should defer their judgement until the end of the play.

Wife, devastated by her experiences in the real world and in the otherworld, ultimately cleanses her organs. Compared to Wife's hysterical suicide, she is somewhat calm during this gruesome act of self-harming. As the stage directions reads: "Naked, WIFE stumbles to the edge of the stage. Kneeling with her face towards the audience, she clasps her hands into a fist in front of her stomach. Then she closes her eyes, lies supine and proceeds to draw out bloody intestines from inside

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<sup>439</sup> According to the 39<sup>th</sup> rule of *One Hundred and Eighty Rules of Lord Lao (Laojun shuo yibai bashi jie)*, a work of moral instructions attributed to Laozi, "you should not commit suicide."

<sup>440</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, Ibid, 42-52.

<sup>441</sup> Gao, "On Performing *City of the Dead*: Some Suggestions and Instructions," Ibid, 61.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

her stomach.”<sup>443</sup> A female’s cleansing of organs is a recurring event in Gao’s work. In the semi-autobiographical/travelogue *Soul Mountain* (1990), the narrator tells the story of how a Grand Marshall witnesses a mendicant nun pulling out her intestines, carefully washing them and putting them back into her stomach.<sup>444</sup> The nun’s action manages to “enlighten” the ambitious Grand Marshall to avert his plans of plotting a *coup d’État* against the state. Yet the cleansing of organs may also allude to the origins of Xuanwu, who was a butcher, but felt too sinned for killing so many animals that he went to the river and cleansed his organs to cleanse his sins.<sup>445</sup> Similarly, Wife is cleansing her own sins, sorrows, and regrets. As she confesses to the judge: “A husband should never, ever play a trick on his wife; a wife should never ever trust her man lightly; a woman should never ever love truly; and she should never, never sacrifice her life for love.”<sup>446</sup>

During Wife’s gruesome and bloody process of cleansing her organs, the characters A Man and A Woman engage in a melodic and polyphonic dialogue. They appear to be detached from the play’s main narrative, and expressing the thoughts of the audience. Like the audience, they are overwhelmed by Wife’s cleansing of organs; they respectively remark on Zhuangzi’s responsibility against Wife from male and female perspectives:

A MAN: (Walks away and acts as if he is thinking) If you’re guilty, it’s only because you’re a man—If you were born a man, it was only because you were guilty—If you’re guilty, it’s only because you’re guilty—wrong, if you’re guilty it’s only because a man is you—If a man is you, it’s only

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<sup>443</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, Ibid, 56.

<sup>444</sup> Gao, *Soul Mountain* trans. Mabel Lee (Adobe E-Reader Edition: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001 [1990]), 283-85.

<sup>445</sup> Benebell Wen, “Xuanwu,” in *The Tao of Craft: Fu Talismans and Casting Sigils in the Eastern Esoteric Tradition* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 303-04.

<sup>446</sup> Gao, *City of the Dead*, Ibid, 45.

because –wrong, as a man, you’re guilty because men are guilty–  
wrong again, if the guilty one is a man, and you’re a man, then you’re  
wrong because of this–

A WOMAN: (As if talking to herself) She says she remembers what he said to  
her she’ll never forget what he said, she says he even asked her what  
he had said to her she’ll never forget what was it that he said? She says  
she’ll never again believe she’ll never again listen never again be  
willing never again talk about all this now everything has lost its  
meaning.<sup>447</sup>

Both the male and female perspectives fail to clearly identify the source of  
responsibility. A Man is trapped in a perpetual state of confusion that revolves around  
the notion of “man is inherently guilty.” A Woman cannot forget Man’s involvement  
in the tragedy, yet the death of Wife means that “everything has lost its meaning.”  
However, when the male and female perspectives are simultaneously considered, a  
deeper understanding of the ideological influence of the patriarchy is formed.

As a subject in a patriarchal society, the character A Man is unable to detach  
himself from its values and therefore fails to truly grasp the nature of Zhuangzi’s  
wrongdoing. Although the character A Woman remarks that Wife is a victim of the  
patriarchy, her insights are meaningless since Wife responded through suicide. Wife  
commits suicide because she has allowed her egotism and solipsism to restrict her  
understanding of Zhuangzi’s actions. More specifically, Wife allowed her anti-  
patriarchal and anti-misogynistic sentiments to guide her decision to commit suicide.  
Wife’s cleansing of organs can therefore be viewed as an act of letting go of her ego,  
and resorting to introspection.

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid. 57.

The end of *City of the Dead* features Zhuangzi playing the drum, and expressing his realization of the cyclical reversion of life and death.<sup>448</sup> By alluding to Zhuangzi's tale of "playing the drum" at the end of the play, Gao is collapsing the difference between Wife's experience in the living world and in the otherworld. In both settings, Wife faces cruelty and social injustice: the living world is patriarchal, which gives Zhuangzi a means of exploitation; the otherworld is corrupt and close-minded, which results in unfair judgements. Yet direct confrontation will only result in tragedy. Wife's cleansing of organs in the otherworld can be translated as introspection in the living world.

Gao Xingjian's creative work and artistic vision have long been associated with Daoism and Chan Buddhism. Yet Gao rejects the label of Daoism and Chan Buddhism: "The non-action of Daoism and the non-worldliness of Chan Buddhism are both too passive for me. I want to do something. I am neither Daoist nor Buddhist. I only draw inspiration from their emphasis on self-reflection."<sup>449</sup> In this sense, Gao is not against the appropriation of Daoist thought for sociopolitical actions, such as Western feminism. What he is critical, and cautious about, is the lack of self-reflection throughout the process. With regards to a reflection of patriarchal values, Daoism appeals to Western feminist thought for its implications of the complementary relations between "yin" and "yang" as representative of female and male traits respectively. However, Daoist texts, such as the key text *Daodejeng*, does not directly address issues pertaining to feminism or gender or women at all. It is more constructive to focus on how the Daoist notion of complementarity of pairs of

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>449</sup> Gao, "Without isms," trans. Mabel Lee, 76.

opposites can be a continuous source of inspiration within the field of feminist thinking in contemporary Western philosophy.<sup>450</sup>

Overall, my reading of *City of the Dead* prompts a reflexivity towards how western Orientalism involves a misunderstanding indigenous cultures for practical purposes, like social justice advocacy. Critics generally agree that *City of the Dead* converts “Zhuangzi Tests his Wife” from an endorsement of patriarchal values, to a critique of patriarchal values and social injustice in general.<sup>451</sup> By closely examining Gao’s use of suppositionality and tripartite acting, I have argued that the first half of the play is not about Zhuangzi’s patriarchal oppression of Wife. Instead, it is a reflection about the misappropriation and misunderstanding of Daoism. If the first half of the play is not about patriarchal oppression, the second half of the play no longer can be understood as Gao giving voice to the female character Wife for the sake of subverting the patriarchy. Rather, I find *City of the Dead* as a play that juxtaposes opposites: male vs female; living vs otherworld; Confucianism vs Daoism. Such juxtapositions ultimately result in inconclusiveness, and pave way for the audience for deeper introspections about the complementary nature of Daoism.

### ***Snow in August: Revisiting Chan Buddhism as Escape***

In a discussion with Liu Zaifu about *Snow in August* and its contribution to the introduction of Chan/Zen Buddhism into the Western world, Gao Xingjian remarked:

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<sup>450</sup> Karyn Lai, “The Daodejing: Resources for Contemporary Feminist Thinking,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 27, no.2 : 131-53.

<sup>451</sup> For example, Mabel Lee does not pay attention to the neutral acting of the characters Zhuang Zhou and Wife, and therefore reaches the conclusion that Zhuang Zhou represents Gao’s view that “men possess a flippant and cavalier attitude to their female sexual partner or partners.” Jessica Yeung similarly overlooks Gao’s aesthetics of reflexivity in the first half of the play, and contends that Gao relies on “a lazy conformity to a basically misogynist trope” to subvert the patriarchy. See Mabel Lee, “Gao Xingjian: Autobiography and the Portrayal of the Female Psyche,” in *City of the Dead and Song of the Night*. Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 2015. xiv; Jessica Yeung, “Plays 1986-1990: Portraying the Individual,” in *Ink Dances in Limbo: Gao Xingjian’s Writing as Cultural Translation*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2008. 111-16.

Ever since Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki lectured on Zen Buddhism at Columbia University, as well as at other American and British universities, there has been plenty of research on Zen Buddhism in the West. Yet these studies tend to be intellectual-oriented. Zen Buddhism is not a subject of knowledge [*xuewen*]. While scholars and writers in the West are interested in Zen Buddhism, they may never grasp the essence of Zen. Zen turns philosophy into a life experience and an aesthetic. This is what makes Zen stand out.<sup>452</sup>

Gao tellingly mentions Daisetz Teitaro (DT) Suzuki in his overview about the reception of Chan/Zen Buddhism in Euro-America. Suzuki, throughout the 1950s and 60s, was essentially the “face” of Chan/Zen Buddhism in America. As Gao points out above, Suzuki’s lectures at Columbia, alongside his writings, were fundamental in introducing Chan/Zen to the West. Suzuki’s impact was most prevalent amongst educated and well-read readers in America, as evident by its influence upon “Beat Zen” writers like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac.<sup>453</sup>

Through numerous lectures all across America, and over 30 books in English, Suzuki promoted a type of Chan/Zen that in retrospect can be described as “Suzuki-Zen.”<sup>454</sup> According to Suzuki, Zen is *satori* (enlightenment), and *satori* is Zen: “*Satori* is the *raison d’être* of Zen, and without which Zen is no Zen.”<sup>455</sup> In order to attain *satori* and Zen, Suzuki outlines two complementary ways: Zen verbalism and Zen bodily action. Zen verbalism is an articulation of Zen. Yet the language used to express Zen does not follow stable linguistic structures. Instead, the instability of

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<sup>452</sup> Gao Xingjian and Liu Zaifu, “Liu Zaifu, Gao Xingjian Bali dui tan” [Liu Zaifu and Gao Xingjian: A dialogue in Paris], in *Lun chuanguo* [On Creation] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2008), 301; translation my own.

<sup>453</sup> Juhn Ahn, “Popular Conceptions of Zen,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr (New York: Gale, 2003), 924.

<sup>454</sup> Jorn Borup, “Zen and the Art of Inverting Orientalism: Buddhism, Religious Studies and Interrelated Networks,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion Vol 1* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2004), 451-88.

<sup>455</sup> DT Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series (London: Rider and Company, 1949), 261.



meaning in the verbal articulation of Zen is what Suzuki describes as “living words.”<sup>456</sup> These words are not “cut off from its roots,” but words which “when understood leads immediately to the understanding of hundreds of thousands of other words or statements given by the Zen masters.”<sup>457</sup> Zen bodily action refers to lived experience. Although Zen verbalism is also part of lived experience, Suzuki highlights how an actional attainment of Zen requires the involvement of the “body.”<sup>458</sup> *Satori* cannot be completely articulated through words, and requires inner awakening. Such an awakening may come from lived, bodily, actional involvement. As one of the stories Suzuki cites, one needs to jump into the river to see how deep the Zen river is.<sup>459</sup>

Another key concept in Suzuki-Zen is *mushin* (no-mind), which is “the mind negating itself, letting go itself from itself, a solidly frozen mind allowing itself to relax into a state of perfect unguardedness.”<sup>460</sup> While Suzuki states that “*mushin* [...] is where all arts merge into Zen,”<sup>461</sup> Gao remarks that “Zen turns philosophy into a life experience and an aesthetic.”<sup>462</sup> Suzuki’s emphasis on detachment in Zen overlaps with Gao’s own priority towards detachment for the purpose of reflexivity. Henry Zhao’s study of Gao’s psychological plays as “Modern Zen Theatre” draws Gao closer to Suzuki. For Zhao, Gao’s psychological theatre can be described as “Zen-*xieyi*,” which appropriates Zen practices and notions like *satori*, *gong’an* (stories of Chan Masters enlightening their disciples), and the Four Noble Truths (essence of the teachings of the Buddha), to portray an intrinsic and suggestive type of anti-realist

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<sup>456</sup> Suzuki, “What is Zen?,” *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1959), 8.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>460</sup> Suzuki, “Zen and Swordmanship I,” *Zen and Japanese Culture*, *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>462</sup> Gao Xingjian and Liu Zaifu, “Liu Zaifu, Gao Xingjian Bali dui tan,” *Ibid*, 316.

theatrical experience for the audience. Similar to Suzuki's understanding of Zen as *satori*, the ultimate goal of Zhao's modern Zen theatre is to "provid[e] the audience with an opportunity to reach enlightenment by reminding them of their ability to 'illuminate themselves.'"<sup>463</sup> Curiously, Zhao admits that his analytical conception of "modern Zen theatre" is in fact "non-Zen."<sup>464</sup> For example, Zhao acknowledges the skepticism of Buddhism towards language's ability to convey meaning,<sup>465</sup> but later concedes that Gao has created a sort of "plain language" that carries "meaning in meaningless."<sup>466</sup>

I argue that Zhao's conflicted reading of "modern Zen theatre" is partially based upon a reverse Orientalist construction of Zen. As I have discussed in the opening section of this chapter, the representation of the Orient is a reciprocal process between the West and the Orient. The Orient also plays a proactive role in the construction of the Orientalist image in the West. While the Orient is romanticised as superior to the West, the inverted Orient is a constructed version with the West's superiority in mind. A common feature in both Orientalism and reverse/inverted Orientalism is the essentialisation of the Other. Indeed, Zen scholars have in recent years problematized Suzuki-Zen as a product of an inversion of Orientalism.

According to Bernard Faure, one of the leading critics that challenges Suzuki-Zen:

If the Western standpoint represented an Orientalism "by default," one of which Buddhism was looked down upon, Suzuki [...] represent[s] an

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<sup>463</sup> Zhao, *Towards a modern zen theatre*, Ibid, 214.

<sup>464</sup> Zhao, Ibid, 173.

<sup>465</sup> A fundamental principle of Zen is that it is something that cannot be spoken about (*Chan bu ke yan shuo*).

<sup>466</sup> Zhao, Ibid, 192-97.

Orientalism “by excess,” a “secondary” Orientalism that offers an idealised, “nativist” image of a Japanese culture deeply influenced by Zen.<sup>467</sup>

Examples of Suzuki’s inverted-Orientalism include dehistoricising Zen from its genealogical roots in India and China, thereby presenting Zen as “the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion. Every intellectual effort must culminate in it, or rather must start from it, if it is to bear any practical fruits;”<sup>468</sup> and through a comparison between Western Christianity, Suzuki presents Zen in a Japanese nationalist light that “touts the cultural homogeneity as well as the moral and spiritual superiority of the Japanese vis-à-vis their peoples.”<sup>469</sup> Although Suzuki contributes thought-provoking insights, they are presented under the assumption of identifiable and essential features of Zen as a religious tradition and practice, as if there is only one “real” Zen.

As I shall demonstrate in my close-reading, Act I and II of Gao’s *Snow in August* symbolises a reverse Orientalist understanding of Chan/Zen. These two acts adapt the *Platform Sutra*, a fundamental Chan/Zen text, and contains biographical stories about the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. Similar to Suzuki’s Zen stories, the stories about Huineng serve the function of explaining to the audience about *satori*. In fact, Suzuki’s *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind* (1949) is precisely focused on examining Huineng and the Platform Sutra.<sup>470</sup> However, the play takes a dramatic turn in Act III: the temple, constructed by the followers of Huineng, burns down. The chaotic scene, from a theatrical perspective, is highly suppositional and features tripartite acting from the characters Writer and Singsong Girl. Actors and audience are induced to

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<sup>467</sup> Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53.

<sup>468</sup> Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series, Ibid, 268.

<sup>469</sup> Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 136.

<sup>470</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Doctrine of No Mind* (London: Rider and Company, 1949).

proactively and collaboratively construct the carnivalesque destruction of the temple. If the temple symbolises a Suzuki/Orientalist version of Chan/Zen, the burning down of the temple, is Gao's reflexive observation of the Orientalist expectations towards *Snow in August*.

A central theme of Act I and II is Huineng's negotiation of the internal and external. On the one hand, Huineng's understanding of the Dharma (the basic principles of the universe) does not depend on extraneous objects or actions. The word of the Dharma is precisely to self-salvage, and not rely on any extraneous source, including Huineng's sermons. Yet in order to convey such a message, Huineng needs to embrace the external as a platform and spread the Dharma to others. This negotiation between the internal and the external requires a mindset of nonattachment that avoids one from becoming immersed into either absolutes, or what Suzuki refers to as the doctrine of *mushin*.

In Act I Scene Two, Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch, asks his disciples to write a *gatha* (a verse) regarding their understanding of the Dharma. He will then assess who is worthy to receive his robe and bowl and become his successor. Shenxiu, Hongren's highest-ranking disciple, is expected to take his Master's place. He produces a *gatha* that emphasises on the importance of diligence in the training of Buddhism. In response, Huineng, produces a *gatha* that highlights the importance of emptiness in *Dharma* training:

The *bodhi* is not tree,  
Nor the mind a mirror bright,  
Buddha nature is always pure,

Where can any dust alight?<sup>471</sup>

While Shenxiu describes the pursuit of enlightenment (Bodhi) as an act that requires attentive sweeping of “dust” collected on the body and the heart-mind, Huineng questions the presence of “dust” collection on the body and the heart-mind, since neither of them exist as external objects. After reading both *gathas*, Hongren recognises Huineng, an illiterate, as having attained the most advanced understanding amongst all his disciples.

Through the *gong’an*-style of questions and answers, Hongren gives Huineng further teaching. After Hongren thinks that Huineng has attained enlightenment, Hongren decides to pass the robe and bowl to Huineng. However, Huineng questions the necessity of these “extraneous” objects. Hongren explains to Huineng the important purpose of the robe and bowl (ie proof of the existence of Dharma), and Huineng immediately accepts them:

HUINENG: The Dharma is transmitted from mind to mind. What then is the use of this robe?

HONGREN: The robe is proof of the Dharma, which is the genesis of the robe. It has been passed on from generation to generation, so that the lamp of the mind will not be extinguished.

HUINENG [sic]: (Receives the robe and the alms bowl with both hands and bows) My heart-felt gratitude to the Master!<sup>472</sup>

It could be argued that before the passing of the robe and bowl, Huineng sees through all categories except his own categorical understanding of the Dharma. Huineng’s

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<sup>471</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, trans. Gilbert Fong (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), 16; it should be noted that the more authoritative translation of Huineng’s famous verse by Philip B Yampolsky reads: Bodhi originally has no tree,/The mirror also has no stand./Buddha nature is always clean and pure;/Where is there room for dust?/ See Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of The Sixth Patriarch* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), 132.

<sup>472</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 21.

initial rejection of institutional practices is to understand Buddhism as “passive nihilism.” In *The Will To Power* (1901), Nietzsche alludes to Buddhism to explain his concept of passive nihilism as “[...] the weary nihilism that no longer attacks; its most famous form, Buddhism; a passive nihilism, a sign of weakness. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that the previous goals and values become incommensurate and no longer are believed.”<sup>473</sup> At the core of Nietzsche’s misinterpretation of Buddhism is his understanding of the Buddhist pursuit of Nirvana in a strictly literal sense. Nietzsche understands Nirvana as the extinguishing of desires as solution to pain in life: an “innocent rhetoric, which belongs to the realm of the religio-moral idiosyncrasy” and that it has “the tendency of hostility to life.”<sup>474</sup> Nietzsche finds this “decadent” because it subscribes to the unreal notion that desires can be extinguished. For Nietzsche, human desires are something that is inherent to man. Nietzsche, however, fails to understand the Buddhist notion of non-self. In Mahayana Buddhism, which is the root of Chan Buddhism, Nirvana can be defined as a “freedom from a way of thinking, a type of self-definition and self-consciousness (and freedom from the attitudes generated by this way of thinking).”<sup>475</sup> As opposed to an extinguishing of desires from the self, non-self is the notion that the notion of self does not exist from the very beginning. By accepting the bowl and robe for the purpose of “deliver[ing] all the unenlightened from their sufferings” and to ensure “the lamp of the mind will not be extinguished,” Huineng is committed to continuously achieving and sustaining emptiness. He therefore avoids performing a nihilistic turn with his Buddhist practice, and practises what he demonstrates in his gatha as cited earlier.

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<sup>473</sup> qtd. in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 590.

<sup>474</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” in *Twilight of the Idols with the Antichrist and Ecce Homo*, trans. Antony M Ludovici (London: Wordsworth Edition, 2007 [1895]), 98.

<sup>475</sup> Luis O Gomez, “Nirvana,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Ibid, 601.

Although the robe and the bowl serve as a crucial corrective for Huineng, it does not mean he is dependent on them. In Act I Scene 3, when Huineng is chased after by a mob who thinks he has stolen the robe and bowl, he swiftly breaks the bowl. Curiously, the mob obtains sudden enlightenment and is convinced Huineng is the real Sixth Patriarch. As the Dharma is within Huineng, even the breaking of the bowl, which is an extension of the patriarch, only further affirms Huineng's status as patriarch. In Act II Scene 3, Yinzong, a Tang Dynasty Chan Meditation Master, attempts to convince Huineng to give a lecture to the followers at the temple. Huineng originally refuses, considering once again the necessity of external objects like language and the robe in the transmission of the Dharma. But Yinzong convinces him that Huineng is the true successor of the Dharma, and the robe is the evidence of that. With such an authority, the followers will have the belief that the Dharma is within everyone.

Huineng's understanding of the Dharma as detached and formless comes under great challenge in Act II Scene 4. The Empress Dowager seeks to institutionalise Huineng by inviting him into the Royal Palace and to deliver sermons exclusively for her in a grand temple built for Huineng. Huineng declines such an invitation. Even though the Empress has committed merciful acts such as investing resources into spreading the Buddhist cause, Huineng is not tempted:

HUINENG: Building temples, almsgiving, and patronage are merely meritorious work. But true merits reside in the Dharma body, not in the field of merits itself. Realising our nature is known as *gong*; equality and righteousness are known as *de*. Together they make up *gongde*, which means merits. In our heart, we should see Buddha nature; in our behaviour, we should be respectful. In all our thoughts we should

espouse equality and righteousness, then the merits will be full and abundant.<sup>476</sup>

While the Dowager has fulfilled acts of merits, this does not mean she is anywhere close to attaining the Dharma. For Huineng, this act of privatising him is an act of selfishness and an act to demonstrate power, which has little to do with Huineng's ultimate cause: spreading the word of the Dharma. As such, Huineng rejects this type of external support.

Huineng's contact with the Dharma and his religious leadership role as the Sixth Patriarch have always been based upon a tension between the internal and the external. While such tension serves as opportunities for Huineng to espouse his teachings of the Dharma as non-action, non-striving, and no-mind, he ultimately considers the shortcomings of external objects more harmful to one's learning of the Dharma. When Huineng dies, he does not follow tradition and does not pass the symbols of the patriarchate to another person:

HUINENG: What's the use of holding on to the robe if there is no Dharma?

Ever since the beginning, there has never been anything. The kasaya robe, like all things, is extraneous to the self. If someone takes the robe and almsbowl and stirs up trouble, then our order will be destroyed. After I'm gone, there will be heresies that will wreak havoc everywhere. But there will also be people who will be willing to brace slanders, and willing to sacrifice their lives to promote the cause and the teachings of our order.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 52.

<sup>477</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 56.



Huineng's decision to break away from the patriarch tradition is centred upon the Dharma. Instead of following the Zen/Chan institutional practice for the sake of adhering to tradition, Huineng boldly asserts once again that the external objects do not carry the Dharma. Even the kasaya robe is only proof of the existence of the Dharma, not the Dharma itself. In addition, Huineng is unable to identify an individual worthy of succeeding the patriarch. And an unworthy successor would only cause chaos amongst his followers over power and prestige. Nevertheless, Huineng appears to be cautiously optimistic, and believes that the absence of a patriarch would result in the spreading of the word of the Dharma to become a responsibility of all individuals.

Act I and II serve as an elucidation of Gao's understanding of the Dharma as empty. Gao's reflection of how Chan figures in his artistic production is most obvious in the presence of the mysterious Writer character. In the end of Act II Scene 3, after Huineng delivered an entire sermon about self-salvaging, the Writer randomly appears and asks if Huineng can teach him the Dharma:

WRITER: Master, can you teach me too?

HUINENG: Teach you what?

(WRITER draws a circle on his head with his hand)

HUINENG: Sinner! Come back some other day.

WRITER: Where can I find you?

HUINENG: If you really want to find me, you'll know where to find me (Exit laughing).<sup>478</sup>

The circle which the Writer draws on his forehead is known as "enso" in Chan/Zen Buddhism. The moment of hand-drawing a circle in an uninhibited brushstroke

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<sup>478</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 47.

represents the freeing of the mind. The Writer is therefore asking Huineng if he can teach him about enlightenment. Huineng is angry because the Writer's request is so oblivious with regards to the teachings of the Dharma as self-salvaging. A dialogue with the Singsong girl offers greater insight into the mindset of the Writer:

SINGSONG GIRL: Mister, are you in a hurry to go to the capital for the civil examination? Or are you one of those talented scholars longing for recognition?

WRITER: I'm doing nothing at present, just spending my life playing games. But I can't really get myself to sever my ties with the world either. I'm still a man of the world.<sup>479</sup>

Although the Writer is not striving for fame and prestige, he remains perplexed by factors external to his philosophy as a writer. Such a concern echoes Gao's own negotiation with the world literary field. Like the Writer, Gao points to Chan/Zen Buddhism for enlightenment and relief from his self-Orientalism. Huineng's response is a reflection for Gao that Orientalism, or the China complex, has never left him. It is only his lack of awareness of Orientalism that gives him the illusion, or blind spot, that his psychological plays have transcended Orientalism.

Huineng dies by the end of Act II. In Act III, set in a Chan/Zen temple, the laymen and monks continue to explore and chant Huineng's teachings. A series of *gong'an*-style dialogues between "This Master," "That Master," "One Master," "Another Master," "Quite Master," "Nice Master," "Right Master," and "Wrong Master" are presented. The Chan/Zen Masters are evidently fluent in Chan verbalism. Their lay followers religiously follow the chants of the Chan/Zen Masters.

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

Meanwhile, two odd characters, the Writer and the Singsong girl, stand out from this coherent picture of devout Chan/Zen studying.

The presence of the Writer and the Singsong girl act as detached perspectives. The Writer asks the Old Master about the whereabouts of the Bodhisattva. The Old Master says there are no Buddha statues in a Chan temple. The Writer agrees that Buddha is within all of us, but not all of us are Bodhisattvas. The Old Monk replies: “Learned audience, the house of Buddha provides deliverance for all sentient beings. Whoever wants to become a Bodhisattva, step right in!”<sup>480</sup> The laymen come into the Chan/Zen temple with the hopes of becoming a Buddha. The Writer, however, is worried that the teachings of Huineng have been misappropriated. The Singsong girl participates in Act III largely through singing:

Snow in August/How strange it is/Cao Mountain is quiet and serene/A  
beautiful shadow/Cavorts with the clear and crisp wind/Look at the snowy  
mountain top/There is meaning for us to know/ In the green grassland/A place  
to seek out your thoughts/ Look again/ Even insensate stones think of moving/  
And try to send us a little message/The way of Heaven/They say it’s  
enlightenment/ It is but one big mass of nothingness.<sup>481</sup>

The Singsong girl contributes an alternative to Chan/Zen verbalism by delivering the Zen notions of nonattachment through musicality. The utilisation of singing is also comparable to Brechtian alienation effect. Since nonattachment is at the heart of Chan/Zen and enlightenment, it is arguable that the use of musical techniques, as a means of detaching the audience from the immersive experience of the theatrical performance, is a more effective form to convey the spirit of non-attachment.

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<sup>480</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 62.

<sup>481</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 66.

While the laymen and monks are devoted in their adherence to Huineng's teachings of the Dharma, the Chan/Zen temple burns down. The Laymen and monks consider Layman A and the cat as disruption, and perpetrators of the destruction of the Chan/Zen temple. They seek to capture the cat and Layman A, but the harder they chase them, the more chaos unfolds. Meanwhile, the temple is on fire, but everyone is too busy trying to capture the cat and Layman A. As they carry out their pursuit, they are chanting Huineng's teachings. Ultimately, the temple burns down because no one is putting out the fire. The Big Master, who is the most senior amongst all the Masters of the temple, concludes: "Go! Go! Go! The worship hall has become a mad playhouse. This is no place to linger. Go away and make your own living! (Exit)"<sup>482</sup> Although the various Masters and laymen are well-versed in Chan/Zen verbalism, they react in a highly dualistic way when a cat appears in the Chan/Zen temple. They have not managed to translate the teachings of nonattachment into their actional behaviour. This results in the burning down of the temple.

Although Huineng preaches "all sentient beings are Buddha," at the heart of such a statement lies in what Gao refers to as "*pingchang xin*" (normal heart),<sup>483</sup> or the detachment of the mind, body, and soul. This can be seen from Huineng's response to Shenhui's mischief during his sermon in Act II Scene 3. While the Laymen and monks consider Shenhui as causing disruption, Huineng remarks the lectures are "serious, but it's also not serious. Mental state comes from the mind. If the mind is free, then it will be purified and beget wisdom."<sup>484</sup> Similarly, the Laymen and Monks regard the cat as "bad karma" to the Buddhist temple. However, Huineng would say it is simply a natural part of life. In this sense, the monks and laymen have

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<sup>482</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 71.

<sup>483</sup> Gao and Liu, "Liu Zaifu, Gao Xingjian Bali dui tan," Ibid, 321.

<sup>484</sup> Gao, *Snow in August*, Ibid, 40.

yet to fully detach themselves in their search for the Dharma. And the burning down of the temple alludes to how dangerous a misappropriation of Chan/Zen Buddhism is, or what Liu Zaifu describes as “*kuang chan*” (mad Chan).<sup>485</sup> Gilbert Fong casts a more positive light towards Act III. He considers the carnivalesque portrayal of Chan/Zen temple as “the actualisation of life as it should be lived [...] the embodiment of [the spirit of a saintly patriarch] among the people in their everyday lives.”<sup>486</sup> Instead of viewing the events in the Zen /Chan temple as chaos, he describes them as “a kaleidoscope of human activities,”<sup>487</sup> from the contemplation of the Buddha, to the cat-chasing and burning down of the temple. For Fong, it is only when an individual can continue leading his life as usual that he can find Buddha and enlightenment.

The difference in interpretation of the chaos in Act III is a testament to Gao’s aesthetic of reflexivity in his portrayal of Huineng’s thoughts. Rather than representing Chan Buddhism in conclusive terms, Gao resorts to reflexivity and reflection. Through the portrayal of a chaotic temple as a “mad playhouse,” Gao is not passing moral judgement towards either the actions of the Laymen and Monks, or the destruction in the temple. Instead, interpretation is left for the audience. Liu’s reading of the chaos as “mad Chan” points to the importance of non-self and detachment. Gilbert Fong, on the other hand, focuses on the reality of life as unpredictable and hence the importance of non-abiding. If Chan Buddhism is something that cannot be spoken about, then one should talk about what Chan Buddhism is not. Such an apophatic theological approach is precisely the escape which I find Gao cultivating in his plays: an aesthetic representation that is reflexive and not conclusive of all aspects of life, including Chan/Zen Buddhism.

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<sup>485</sup> Gao and Liu, “Liu Zaifu, Gao Xingjian Bali dui tan,” *Ibid*, 321.

<sup>486</sup> Gilbert Fong, “Introduction: Marginality, Zen, and Omnipotent Theatre,” *Snow in August*, *Ibid*, xv.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid*.

## Conclusion

In “Reflections on Exile” (1984), Edward Said describes the relationship between nationalism and exile as akin to the interplaying mechanism of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic.<sup>488</sup> Although exile allows the artist to be detached from the restrictions of nationalism, it causes a series of internal sufferings precisely due to the very absence of attachment to the nation: resentment towards non-exiles; jealousy towards other individuals in exile; and loneliness as a result of being left out of one’s homeland.<sup>489</sup> Such pains, however, also grant the exile writer an original “contrapuntal” awareness towards his surroundings:

While it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions. Seeing “the entire world as a foreign land” makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that is contrapuntal.<sup>490</sup>

Said describes the unique insights informed by the exilic positionality as “a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture.”<sup>491</sup> The modern Western world, in particular, is viewed as “spiritually orphaned and alienated.”<sup>492</sup> Yet Said warns against the fetishisation of the exilic experience. Due to the aforementioned sufferings of exile, Said remarks that exile writers may resort to cultivating a “triumphant ideology” of exile that would unify them and avoid the unbearable pain of brokenness and loneliness. Exile, therefore, becomes a return to a state of restriction. When exile

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<sup>488</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002 [1984]), 140.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid*, 139-140.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

becomes a fetish and is no longer painful, the exile artist will subsequently lose touch with his original contrapuntal awareness of the world.

In light of Said's warning against the fetishising of exile, Gao's experience as an exile writer is balance between his artistic freedom and the Orientalism in the world literary field. Gao has only expressed his distaste towards the role of a native informant of Chinese cultural traditions, but not the subjective act of incorporating Chinese cultural traditions into his work. Through a close-reading of the aesthetics of reflexivity in *Of Mountains and Seas*, *City of the Dead*, and *Snow in August*, I observe Gao's reflection on, and reflexivity of, Orientalist expectations from a Eurocentric audience. Although Gao makes direct references to and appropriations of Chinese mythological text *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*, the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*, and the Chan/Zen Buddhist sutra *Platform Sutra*, he is simultaneously drawing attention to their Orientalised reception in Euro-America. Far from fetishising exile, or falling into a state of Bourdieusian *illusio* in the world literary field, Gao utilises the aesthetics of reflexivity to evoke awareness in the actors, audience, and Gao himself, about the doxic rules of Orientalism. By prioritising artistic expression ahead of socio-political concerns, Gao consistently "escapes" the ideological censorship of the world literary field.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion: The Nobel as Divider**

This project has examined what I describe as Gao Xingjian's escape from censorship in the six plays he completed before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000. Since the poststructuralist intervention into the understanding of freedom of speech and censorship, dominant notions of censorship as an external force of repression have been challenged and gradually replaced by an emphasis on censorship's multiplicity and generative effects on expression. Gao is aware of censorship in the most covert sense. The 1980s New Era offered Chinese writers unprecedented freedom for cultural experimentation and exploration. Like his peers, Gao certainly took advantage of this loosened restrictions, as evident by the presence of non-realistic and absurdist techniques in the plays he completed in China. Yet Gao was equally reflexive about the limitations of the pursuit of Chinese modernism, which I have identified as the Chinese state's prevalent expectation of realism. After Gao left China for Europe in 1987, he became a self-imposed exile writer in Euro-America, where he further expanded on his theatrical experimentations and produced two strands of plays: the more universalized and abstract "psychological theatre," and the more indigenous and allegorical "epic theatre." While freedom of expression is supposed to be a fundamental human right in Euro-America, Gao remained conscious about the Orientalist expectations which non-Western writers are subjected to.

In order to highlight how realism in China and Orientalism in Euro-America are structural forces that both censor and induce Gao's theatrical expression, I have studied the plays which Gao completed in China and in France within the New Era Chinese literary field and the world literary field respectively. Gao's response to the structural censorship of Chinese realism and Western Orientalism in his pre-Nobel plays is what I describe as "the aesthetics of reflexivity." Suppositionality and



tripartite acting are trademark features of Gao's plays. Although these theatrical techniques are more related to performance than text, Gao's theatrical vision is to write plays with the intent of performance. As such, the language of Gao's dramatic texts is interwoven with theatricality. It is well-known that Gao draws as much from twentieth century modernist theatre as traditional Chinese theatre to cultivate an intercultural, and even transcultural, theatre. However, if the structural forces of Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism are prevalent in all of Gao's plays, I argue it is equally important to recognize that Gao's transcultural aesthetics is imbued with the spirit of non-attachment and reflexivity.

In each of the six plays I have examined, Gao has allocated a marginal space that allows for actors and audiences to observe the manifestations of Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism from a detached positionality. These marginal spaces emerge from the transcultural theatre techniques of suppositionality and tripartite acting that also serve as Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity. In the plays completed in China, these marginal spaces are in the form of the rail-track sound (*Absolute Signal*), the silent action of the Silent Man (*Bus Stop*), and Xi Mao's imagination (*Wild Man*); in the plays completed in France, these marginal spaces come in the appropriation of mythology (*Of Mountains and Seas*), Daoism (*City of the Dead*), and Chan/Zen Buddhism (*Snow in August*). Such an acute reflexivity towards structural forces is what Gao refers to as the "Third Eye," and what I have further theorized as "an observation of an observation." Although Gao's aesthetics of reflexivity do not remove structural censorship from his plays, they allow actors, audiences, and Gao himself to observe structural censorship from a detached position. And this continuous cultivation of detachment is what constitutes as Gao's never-ending "escape" from censorship.

While proclaiming that the writer's best position is at the margins of society, Gao has never shied away from awards, funding, commissions, and patrons. Well before Gao won the 2000 Nobel Prize in literature, he was supported by the Chinese state-funded Beijing People's Art Theatre and was a member of the Chinese Writer's Association.<sup>493</sup> Likewise, in France, Gao received the 1992 *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. Several of his plays were also commissioned by the French capital. In order to survive in the literary field, Gao accumulates economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital. In order to continue creating and staging his plays, Gao has negotiated with structural censorship throughout his entire career, before and after exiling to Europe.

Yet the Nobel Prize poses an extent of structural censorship that is unprecedented in Gao's career. The Nobel Prize in literature is one of the world's highest honours for a writer, and brought Gao accolades, recognition, greater influence, and about 615,000 British Pound Sterling in prize money. As the first Chinese-language writer to win the Nobel Prize, coupled with labels of "exile writer" and "literary dissident,"<sup>494</sup> the extent of media and critical attention Gao faced became feverish, especially during the first few years after the award. Gao has claimed that his exile to Europe allowed him to leave behind his homeland and readers, and enjoy the luxury of patiently experimenting and refining his use of language in his creative work.<sup>495</sup> Such solitude and anonymity vanished once the Swedish Academy announced Gao as the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 2000. Gao has been

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<sup>493</sup> To be clear, Gao had little choice as a professional and publishing playwright. During the New Era, there was no alternative to the state system. Yet the point I wish to establish is that Gao did not adopt an absolute hardline stance towards censorship, and certainly not a literary dissident as some critics have portrayed him to be.

<sup>494</sup> See Belinda Kong's overview of the Western media's politicization of Gao. Kong, *Tiananmen Fictions outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 36-7.

<sup>495</sup> Gao, Xingjian, and Yang Lian, "The Language of Exile: When Pain Turns to Gain," trans. Ben Carrus, *Index on Censorship* 31-3 (2002): 115-16.

much aware of this himself. A year after winning the Nobel Prize, Gao found that he had been “disappearing as a person and becoming a symbol.”<sup>496</sup> He also revealed to Liu Zaifu that he had to embark on a “second escape” from the “public’s halo, flowers, prizes, and crown.”<sup>497</sup> If Gao’s “first escape” refers to the aesthetics of reflexivity in his pre-Nobel plays, his “second escape” as a Nobel Prize winner then constitutes a reflexivity of a different type of censorship.

In addition to the sudden surge in economic capital, what has crucially changed the course of Gao’s artistic career upon winning the Nobel Prize is the presence of a type of capital which he had never experienced before: celebrity capital. Gao was hardly unknown during his time in China and in France. He was one of the leading figures of Chinese avant-garde theatre, and a respected painter in the West.<sup>498</sup> Yet Gao’s sphere of influence was primarily within literary and arts circles. After winning the Nobel Prize, Gao became a celebrity who attracted vast amounts of media and public attention. Olivier Driessens defines celebrity capital as “recognizability,” or “accumulated media visibility which results from recurrent media representations.”<sup>499</sup> One may intuitively associate media attention with individual achievement or prestige. Yet Driessens clarifies that celebrity capital is not a subset of symbolic capital. The latter means attention through prestige. The former simply refers to media attention, and mediated representation.<sup>500</sup> As David Giles observes: “The brutal reality of the modern age is that all famous people are treated like celebrities by the mass media, whether they be a great political figure, a worthy

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<sup>496</sup> Chen Li, “Gao Xingjian: Life as a Literature Laureate.” BBC World Service, 17 March 2001. Accessed 10 June 2017. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/highlights/010316\\_xingjian.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/highlights/010316_xingjian.shtml)

<sup>497</sup> Liu 222-223.

<sup>498</sup> Between 1987 and 1999, Gao was part of nearly 30 solo or group painting exhibitions in galleries and museums all across Europe, America, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. See Liu Zaifu, *Zailun Gao Xingjian* [Revisiting Gao Xingjian] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2016), 218-34.

<sup>499</sup> Olivier Driessens, “Celebrity capital: redefining celebrity using field theory,” *Theory and Society*, 2013, 42 (5), pp. 11.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

campaigner, an artist ‘touched by genius’, a serial killer, or Maureen of Driving School.”<sup>501</sup> Celebrity capital is not necessarily attached to prestige and recognition.

The celebrity capital which Gao accumulated from winning the Nobel Prize was largely a product of the Chinese and Western media. At one level, Gao was (mis)constructed as a “dissident” that ties with “concrete ideological content, namely, that of pro-democracy activism.”<sup>502</sup> At another level, Gao’s cultural identity as “Chinese” was constantly repudiated and reaffirmed.<sup>503</sup> The Chinese and Western media’s politicization of Gao and his Nobel Prize win was further enhanced by the Chinese state’s Nobel Prize complex. Since the Chinese state did not wish to recognize a “dissident” writer as a Chinese writer, Gao’s Nobel Prize was perceived as a misrecognition and nonrecognition of China’s status in the global cultural landscape, or what Tam Kwok-kan refers to as “politics of recognition.”<sup>504</sup> As a result, Gao’s celebrity capital as a Nobel Prize winner was laced with controversy at both the individual and national level, and often overshadowed Gao’s contributions to Chinese and world literature.

While the Swedish Academy was accused, most prominently by the Chinese state media, of allowing politics to override aesthetics in the selection,<sup>505</sup> such complaints only made the Nobel Prize even more influential. James F English observes how cultural prizes are based on the myth of the existence of a pure, disinterested artist.<sup>506</sup> The public considers the duty of cultural prizes to recognize

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<sup>501</sup> David C Giles, *Illusions of immortality: A psychology of fame and celebrity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 5.

<sup>502</sup> Kong, *Tiananmen Fictions outside the Square*, Ibid, 37.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>504</sup> Tam Kwok-kan, “Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and the Politics of Recognition,” in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed. Tam Kwok-kan (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>505</sup> Helier Cheung, “Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian: ‘I’ve had three lives.’” *BBC News*. November 22, 2013. Accessed June 04, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24952228>.

<sup>506</sup> James F English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

pure artists. Yet the recognition of the artistic achievements is only one of the “realities” of cultural prizes. The other function of cultural prizes is an “instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital.”<sup>507</sup> An “economy of prestige” is therefore formed where the results of cultural prizes are frequently the target of criticism; yet the prizes remain needed by society. In the case of Gao’s Nobel Prize win, the Chinese state media’s complaint only further increased the importance of the Nobel Prize, especially to the Chinese state, and produced even more celebrity capital for Gao.

Since Gao’s experiences of structural censorship before and after the Nobel Prize are of a different level and nature, I propose to use the Nobel Prize as a periodic divider, and as an alternative to the trope of exile that has been most commonly used in the periodization of his creative trajectory. Numerous scholars have adopted the terms “pre-” and “post-exile” to distinguish Gao’s plays published before and after leaving China.<sup>508</sup> The use of a divider, pre- and post-, signifies that the event – exile, in this instance – is a turning point. However, Gao’s physical exile to Europe is in fact part of his “escape” from structural censorship. As I have elaborated in Chapter Four, it is Gao’s reflexivity of Chinese social and aesthetic realism in the 1980s China that allows him to discover that the New Era Chinese literary field is not suited for his artistic expression. However, it is only after Gao ensures his freedom of conscious expression, such as reflexivity in his creative production, that he can make a conscious attempt at escaping from unconscious control of expression. Gao’s physical

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>508</sup> See Terry Yip Siu-han and Tam Kwok-kan, “Gender and Self in Gao Xingjian’s Three Post-Exile plays,” in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed. Tam Kwok-kan, 215-234; Chang Hsien-tang, “A Kind of Resistance-Gao Xingjian’s Attitude on Postmodern,” *Bei Taiwan Xuebao* 3, 2008; Alexa Huang, “The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile,” *Theatre Journal*, 63 (2011) 365-379; Mary Mazzilli, *Gao Xingjian’s Post-exile Plays: Transnationalism and Postdramatic Theatre* (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 5.

escape from the totalitarian censorship in China was therefore motivated by his greater escape of structural censorship.

In Liu Zaifu's examination of Gao's artistic career, not much significance is placed on Gao's physical exile, either. Liu opts to trace the various stages of Gao's "spiritual escape" from his internal prison (*jingshen yueyu*) in a three-tier framework.<sup>509</sup> At the first tier, Liu finds that Gao escapes from "political ideology," and more specifically "Marxist ideology." At the second tier, Gao escapes from "the West's empty slogans of human rights and liberalism." At the third tier, Gao escapes from the Nietzschean "Superman" and the over-expansion of the self. The first and second tiers of spiritual escape signify Gao's return to the state of human, while the third tier indicates a return to the state of a "fragile" human.<sup>510</sup> Worth noting is that Liu does not present Gao's spiritual escape in a linear timeline, which suggests that Gao's spiritual escape has always been in progress, regardless of which literary field Gao inhabits. Indeed, my close reading of the pre-Nobel plays also suggests that Gao's response towards the structural censorship of Chinese realism and Euro-American Orientalism has been a consistent escape through the aesthetics of reflexivity. To be clear, I am not conflating Chinese realism with Euro-American Orientalism. They are different logics of censorship within two different literary fields. What I do argue in this thesis, though, is that Gao escapes from the censoring forces of both fields through redefining censorship as a productive and reflexive expression.

If Gao's spiritual escape is a never-ending journey, one can expect his escape from the censoring forces of the Nobel Prize to be rooted in reflexivity, as well. As I

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<sup>509</sup> Liu Zaifu, "Gao Xingjian he ta de jingshen zhi lu" [Gao Xingjian and his spiritual path], in *Lun Gao Xingjian* [On Gao Xingjian] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2004), 8-10.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

have stated earlier, Gao is well-aware of how the Nobel Prize has impacted his career. Although he claimed that a “second escape” was necessary, Gao has also taken advantage of the newfound prestige and influence he has gained as a Nobel Prize winner. Gao converts his celebrity capital into social capital and symbolic capital by accepting honorary doctorates and awards granted to him by universities and institutions around the world.<sup>511</sup>

The twenty-first century explosion of translations and specialized academic studies of Gao’s work is also largely the result of the “Gao fever” initiated by the Nobel Prize effect. According to Gao’s own estimation, a total of 318 books have been written either by Gao himself or about him; his Nobel Prize-winning novel *Soul Mountain* has been translated into 40 languages and, as a painter, he has held over 80 exhibitions, many of which were solo exhibitions.<sup>512</sup> Gao’s increasing tendency to present himself as a public intellectual hints, as well, to his intention to convert celebrity capital into political capital. Personal freedom and its relation with literature is a recurring theme in Gao’s post-Nobel talks. While Gao has been discussing the dual threat of commercialism and politicization of literature since the early 1990s, his post-Nobel talks are adamant that literature has lost its individuality in the age of globalization. A survey of his lecture collection, *Freedom and Literature* (Ziyou yu wenxue, 2014), finds Gao repeatedly tackling political correctness, commodification

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<sup>511</sup> These honours include the *Ordre national de la Légion d’honneur* (2000), National Sun Yet Sen University Honorary Doctorate (2001), Provence University Honorary Doctorate (2002), Chinese University of Hong Kong Honorary Doctorate (2002), American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award (2002), Elected Fellow of the *Académie des Cultures des monde* (2003), National Taiwan University Honorary Doctorate (2006), Lions Award by the New York Public Library (2006), leader of the Sri Chinmoy Meditation Centre in Edinburgh (date), *Université libre de Bruxelles* Honorary Doctorate (2010), *Fondation du Mérite européen* Gold Medal (2010), *La Médaille d’or de la Renaissance française* (2012), and most recently, National Taiwan Normal University Honorary Doctorate (2017). See Gao Xingjian, “Gao Xingjian chaungzuo nianbiao” (Bibliography of Gao Xingjian), in *Ziyou yu wenxue* (Freedom and Literature), 2014, 186-209.

<sup>512</sup> Gao, “Houji” [Postscript], *Ibid*, 165-68.

of literature, and the loss of aesthetics. For example, in the essay “Calling for a Cultural Renaissance” (Huhuan wenyi de fuxing, 2014), Gao observes:

Amidst the flirting of ideology and political power, even the discipline of philosophy is at risk of losing its detached objectiveness. As for literature, its capacity of aesthetics judgement has been replaced by a subservience to political correctness and a catering of the market. A cultural renaissance is a return to aesthetics, a return to humanism and emotions, a return to life, a return to human nature, a return to spirituality.

Such a cultural renaissance depends on the consciousness and awakening of the writer and the artist. Of course, such an awakening is not restricted by nation or region, nor limited by language and form. Regardless of the location, as long as the writer and the artist possesses a sober perspective, he will naturally discover a way to express it.<sup>513</sup>

For Gao, the first step towards the recovery of literary freedom is the individual awakening of the artist. Once the artist manages to return to aesthetics and individualistic expression, a cultural renaissance will naturally emerge. In recent years, Gao has repeatedly called for Taiwan to lead a “cultural renaissance” (*wenyi fuxing*) on the global stage.<sup>514</sup> Such remarks could easily be mistaken as words from a high-level official of a government’s Ministry of Culture. It is also worth pondering about the socioeconomic nature of such a cultural renaissance. Gao’s perceived renaissance is transnational, transmedial, and translingual, but is it able to transcend the political and capitalistic forces that govern literary and cultural institutions? Is

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<sup>513</sup> Gao, “Huhuan wenyi de fuxing” ([Calling for a Cultural Renaissance], *Ibid*, 88. Translation my own.

<sup>514</sup> Gao, “Taiwan yu wo” [Taiwan and I], *Programme of Gao Xingjian Festival, National Taiwan Normal University*, 2017.



Gao's post-Nobel call for a cultural renaissance merely a return to the modernist myth of art's autonomous status within the tradition of art for art's sake?

By being without isms, Gao is able to produce cold literature at the margins of society and to be reflexive about the "bigger picture" of censorship. Can Gao maintain a detachment from isms after accepting the Nobel Prize? Focusing specifically on Gao's big-budget post-Nobel production of *Snow in August* in 2002, which was sponsored by the Taiwanese-government, Alexa Huang observes that "Gao the writer and Gao the intellectual could not be reconciled", and hence the production "embodies some of Gao's anxieties."<sup>515</sup> It is worth asking whether Gao's post-Nobel creative works are reflexive about the unique censorship of celebrity capital. And if they are, how do they differ from Gao's pre-Nobel creative works?

Existing readings of *A Man Who Questions Death* (2004),<sup>516</sup> Gao's first post-Nobel play, suggest that the play does not touch on the restrictions of stardom. Instead, it returns to Gao's recurring theme of "the individual's fate in society as a collective, as well as idealism in the pursuit of freedom in that predicament."<sup>517</sup> Similarly, close readings of *Ballade Nocturne* (2010)<sup>518</sup> do not consider the impact of celebrity capital, and rather the marginalization of the female voice is highlighted. In short, existing discussions appear to have omitted the influence of fame in Gao's post-Nobel plays.

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<sup>515</sup> Alexa CY Huang, "The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 63 (2011): 376.

<sup>516</sup> Quah Sy Ren, "Multivocality as Critique of Reality: Fate and Freedom in Gao Xingjian's *The Man Who Questions Death*," in *Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian's Writings*. ed. Michael Lackner and Nikola Chardonnens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 171-84; Shelby Chan, "Trap Revisited: *The Man Who Questions Death* and the Tragedy of Modern Man," *Ibid*, 241-58.

<sup>517</sup> Quah, "Multivocality as Critique of Reality," *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>518</sup> Claire Conceison, "The French Gao Xingjian, Bilingualism, and *Ballade Nocturne*," *Hong Kong Drama Review*, no. 8 (2009): 303-22; Todd Coulter, "An Individual in Night: *Ballade Nocturne* and Gao's Philosophical Woman," in *Transcultural Aesthetics in the Plays of Gao Xingjian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105-13; Mary Mazzilli, "Latest Postdramatic Attempts at Transnationalism," in *Gao Xingjian's Post-Exile Plays: Transnationalism and Postdramatic Theatre*, *Ibid*, 181-218.

Assuming that his post-Nobel plays indeed have not been reflexive of the Nobel effect, one should then examine other forms of Gao's creative expression. The Swedish Academy introduces Gao as a "writer of prose, translator, dramatist, director, critic and artist," but one could argue that the Nobel effect has most impacted Gao's literary identities as a novelist and playwright. He has not published any novels or short stories since the novel *One Man's Bible* (1999). Moreover, whereas Gao completed a total of fourteen plays between 1981 to 1997, he has only managed to complete two after winning the Nobel Prize.

Much of Gao's post-Nobel literary output has been in the realms of poetry and film, yet neither field is acknowledged in the Swedish Academy's profile. It is also telling how Gao announced his retirement as a publishing writer in 2014, opting to focus his attention on painting instead.<sup>519</sup> While Gao's post-Nobel plays do not demonstrate any significant awareness of the censoring impact of the Prize, his first film *Silhouette/Shadow* (2006) offers a highly personal insight into Gao's life as a Nobel Laureate.

Gao describes *Silhouette/Shadow* as aesthetically informed by a cinematic technique that he describes as "tripartite film" (*san yuan dianying*). For Gao, a "tripartite film" is a film where images, sounds, and verbal speech are simultaneously autonomous from one another while complementing, combining, and contrasting with one another to produce new meanings.<sup>520</sup> By having these three key components of cinema situated in such an independent yet complementary relationship, Gao is translating his preference for detachment and in-betweenness in his literary works into

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<sup>519</sup> "Gao Xingjian retires, but refuses to stop writing." Centre of Public Affairs." National Taiwan Normal University. Accessed June 05, 2017.  
<http://pr.ntnu.edu.tw/newspaper/index.php?mode=data&id=18992>.

<sup>520</sup> Gao, "Concerning *Silhouette/Shadow*," in *Aesthetics and Creation*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York: Cambria press, 2012 [2007]), 180-83.

his cinema. In fact, the artistic vision of *Silhouette/Shadow* can be traced to Gao's poem "*L'Errance de l'oiseau*," (The Wandering Bird), first written in French in 2003, then re-written by Gao into Chinese in 2009. According to Jianmei Liu, the poem embodies Gao's understanding of individual emancipation as coming from a Daoist carefree attitude of *xiaoyao* (free and unfettered spirit) but filtered with a Chan/Zen Buddhist mindset of "*pingchang xin*" (normal heart). Gao's poem describes how the state of being "free as a bird" comes from the process of converting negative experiences like exile, escape, and self-marginalization into positive ones through a free-spirited, detached mental state of mind.<sup>521</sup> In *Silhouette/Shadow*, this free mental state is portrayed through the tripartite film technique whereby each dimension is suggested by a distinct use of colors: multicolor (reality), warm and cold hues (psychological state), black and white (pure inner mind/imagination).

On the surface, *Silhouette/Shadow* revolves around Gao's participation in the three major events for the *l'Année Gao* (The Year of Gao) in 2003, organized by the City of Marseille. The Year of Gao features the staging of the play *The Man Who Questions Death*, the exhibition of the painting "*L'Errance de l'oiseau*," and the staging of the play/opera *Snow in August*. Although Gao denies that *Silhouette/Shadow* is a documentary, it is based on a mini-documentary directed by French filmmakers Alain Melka and Jean-Louis Darmyn, who followed Gao's rehearsal and production of the creative works featured in The Year of Gao. What make *Silhouette/Shadow* an unusual documentary film, are the seemingly random interjections of scenes depicting two levels of Gao's psychological state. For example, the film begins with Gao travelling first in a car, and then on foot, walking along rail

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<sup>521</sup> Jianmei Liu, *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 219.

tracks. These shots are in cold shades of color, and feature Gao in a contemplative state, as can be seen from his emotionless expression. B-roll footages where Gao gently smiles for the camera, or is simply walking, are in brighter colors. Moments later, a mysterious woman wearing a *qipao*, filmed in black and white, is seen standing in front of the ocean. Next, there are scenes shot in cold shades of color wherein the camera follows Gao's walking to a desolate space that features an abandoned house with some doors locked. The visuals continue to be in cold shades of color as the documentary films Gao's production of his painting *L'Errance de l'oiseau*. The background music, however, does not necessarily serve to enhance the visual cues described above. Xu Shuya's hypnotizing soundtrack and Bach's *Mass in B Minor* seem to belong to a different set of logic. Verbal language in *Silhouette/Shadow* serves less of a communicative purpose than as part of the larger portrayal of Gao's experience as a Nobel winner during the Year of Gao. For example, verbal language appears for the first time after 13 minutes into the film, where a man recites Gao's poem "*L'errance de l'oiseau*."

The portrayals of the psychological and imaginary states are important because they offer key contextual information about Gao's participation in the Year of Gao: Gao's health deteriorated dramatically during his preparation for the event, which resulted in Gao taking a break for a year, and he even deferred the staging of *Snow in August*. Fiona Sze-Lorrain argues that it was a combination of the external pressure Gao was subjected to during the Year of Gao and the internal pressure caused by his obsessive artistic pursuit that led to his health problems.<sup>522</sup> Gao's health scare, and his flirting with "death," have manifested themselves in scenes depicting

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<sup>522</sup>Fiona Sze-Lorrain, "Contextualising Gao Xingjian's Film *Silhouette / Shadow*." *MCLC Resource Center*, January 2008. <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/lee/>

Gao's internal state of mind. For example, the black and white scene where Gao encounters a figure wearing a black hood is a direct reference to the character Death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).<sup>523</sup> Gao's juxtaposition of death, artistry, and fame is presented through the aesthetics of his tripartite approach towards cinema. Detachment is infused into each of these themes, allowing the audience to take up a writerly role in making meaning out of death, artistry, and fame. In this sense, *Silhouette/Shadow* is a continuation of Gao's escape from structural censorship, particularly the censorship of celebrity capital as a Nobel Prize winner.

In conclusion, and as a potential future development of the research carried out in this thesis, one may wish to speculate how Gao's relationship with the Nobel Prize compare to the experience of the second Chinese-language writer to win the Nobel Prize— Mo Yan. Both Gao and Mo Yan emerged as established writers during the 1980s Chinese New Era literary period. Yet both also became victims of Chinese state censorship and state-induced self-censorship at some point of their careers. While Gao gave up his celebrity writer status and went into voluntary exile to Europe in 1987, Mo Yan stayed in China and eventually became one of the most commercially and critically-acclaimed writers in the country. Nevertheless, upon winning the Nobel Prize, both writers were consecrated by the world literary canon for their contributions to modern Chinese literature and world literature.

Despite their similar experiences with literary institutions, the two writers have seemingly distinctive artistic visions. Gao prioritizes individualistic reflection over storytelling. Although he proclaims that the writer's most suitable position is at the margins of society, Gao is disinterested but not indifferent to his sociopolitical

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<sup>523</sup> Swedish director Ingmar Bergman is one of Gao's favourite directors, alongside Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Andrei Tarkovsky. See Fiona Sze-Lorrain's "'Cinema, Too, Is Literature': Conversing with Gao Xingjian," *MCLC Resource Center*, March 2008. <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/sze/>.

surroundings. In contrast, Mo Yan regards himself as a “storyteller” (*jiang gushi de ren*)<sup>524</sup> He strives to tell critical and subversive stories. By adopting various approaches, including magical realism, allegory, and satire, Mo Yan is equally political as he is creative.

The difference between the two writers’ artistic visions appears to be echoed by the response to their Nobel Prize wins. Gao was celebrated by overseas and diasporic Chinese readers as the first Chinese-language writer to win the Nobel Prize. But for mainland Chinese officials and state-oriented critics, as well as postcolonial critics from the West, Gao’s Nobel Prize win was evidence of Euro-American denial and exclusion of contemporary Chinese literary achievements. Mo Yan was the only Chinese Nobel laureate who is neither in exile nor in jail.<sup>525</sup> The Chinese state heralded him as a worthy representative of Chinese literature on the global stage. Yet critics of literary censorship, like German writer and 2004 Nobel laureate Herta Müller, have denounced the win as a “catastrophe” and a “slap in the face for all those working for democracy and human rights.”<sup>526</sup>

Eight of the 18 members of the Swedish Academy were involved in deciding both Gao’s and Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize awards.<sup>527</sup> Despite the apparent differences in background and artistic vision, what did the Swedish Academy recognize in Gao that they also recognize in Mo Yan? Building on Liu Zaifu’s binary comparison of Gao’s “coldness” (*leng*) and Mo Yan’s “hotness,” (*re*)<sup>528</sup> I argue that at the heart of both

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<sup>524</sup> Mo Yan, “Mo Yan - Nobel Lecture: Storytellers”. *Nobelprize.org*. trans. Howard Goldblatt. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 25 Jun 2018.

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)

<sup>525</sup> Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, but died in detention in July 2017.

<sup>526</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/26/mo-yan-nobel-herta-muller>

<sup>527</sup> “Tema Svenska Akademien,” *Project Runeberg*. Web. 2 Apr 2018.

<http://runeberg.org/tema/swedacad.html>.

<sup>528</sup> Liu, Zaifu. “Gao Xingjian Mo Yan yitong lun” [A Comparative Study of Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan]. *Ming Pao Monthly*. Dec 2014. [http://mingpaomonthly.com/高行健莫言異同論\(劉再復演講、潘淑陽記錄\)](http://mingpaomonthly.com/高行健莫言異同論(劉再復演講、潘淑陽記錄))

writers' artistic visions is a simultaneous appropriation and rejection of institutional influences, which I tentatively call "warm literature."

For Liu Zaifu, the significance of awarding the Nobel Prize to Gao and Mo Yan is the recognition of the Chinese language, or in Liu's words, "a victory for our mother language" (*women muqin yuyan de shengli*).<sup>529</sup> While Liu's emphasis on the Chinese language remains tied to the national heritage and culture of China, Shih Shu-mei's notion of the "Sinophone" focuses on the language and the text, rather than the politics of the nation.<sup>530</sup> The Sinophone framework, however, is also a form of politics of recognition, and privileges the condition of exile, diaspora, minoritization, and hybridity. This puts literary works at risk of being studied as sociological products. In order to go beyond the current understanding of the Nobel's recognition of Chinese-language writers as a Hegelian master-slave dialectic, future research will need to compare Gao's and Mo Yan's distinct literary responses to institutions. In other words, a closer examination of their literary works and overlapping aesthetic of "warm literature" will be crucial to understanding the recognition (and misrecognition) of these two writers and of Chinese-language literature in the world literary field.

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Shih Shu-mei, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119.1 (2004): 27.

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