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The Theatricality of Religious Rhetoric: Gao Xingjian and the Meaning of Exile

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“Becoming a recluse or feigning madness in ancient times can be a form of absconding and a method of self-preservation when there was no other option. Present society is not necessarily much more civilized. For those who refuse to be killed [by the political institution] or to commit suicide, the only option is to abscond, which is the only means of self-salvation—in the past or in present times.”
—Gao Xingjian¹

Artists in exile or in transit have produced some of the most exciting works, which is why intercultural theatre thrives in the contact zones among different ethnic, cultural, and performance traditions. Exile can take many different forms, ranging from moving across geopolitical borders, to escaping an oppressive government, to intellectual distancing of oneself from undesirable ideologies. Some of the better-known examples include Bertold Brecht, Eugenio Barba, Ariane Mnouchkine, Suzuki Tadashi, Ong Keng Sen, and Gao Xingjian. As Patrice Pavis points out, an intercultural theatre focusing on training and ideas from “the others’ homeground” can become “a form of resistance against standardization” and initiate “a search for a new professional identity.”² Works by playwrights in exile that traverse various “homegrounds” complicate the picture.

Snow in August, a Buddhist-inflected play by Chinese French Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian (1940–), stands out in the recent explosion of innovative plays about the diasporic experience. Addressing an intellectual rather than mass audience, the play redirects the transnational cultural flows between East Asia and Western Europe by

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¹ Gao Xingjian, *Meiyou zhuyi (Without Isms)* (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 1995), 21; English translation based on Mabel Lee’s version, with my revisions. See Mable Lee, “Gao Xingjian’s Dialogue with Two Dead Poets from Shaoxing: Xu Wei and Lu Xun,” in *Autumn Floods: Essays in Honour of Marián Gálík*, ed. Raoul D. Findeisen and Robert H. Gassmann (Berne: Peter Lang, 1998), 401–14.

² Patrice Pavis, “Introduction,” in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996), 15.

shifting the gravitational pull in intercultural theatre from a visual vernacular perceived to be universal, to forms of expression appropriated from traditional Chinese musical theatre. Gao uses the life story of a Chan Buddhist master and semi-autobiographical narrative as platforms for asking probing questions about the nature of exile and the relationship between art and politics.

While the project of Anglo-European modernity is often defined by the emergence and struggles of the individual against the society, Gao's stage works examine the moral agency of the collective by implementing what he calls "apolitical" personal voices as an oppositional force to institutionalized national identity. He does not so much aspire to cross cultural boundaries in drama as he tries to create a "total theatre"—an eclectic mixture of performance genres, voices, images, and artistic forms, including ink painting. The central paradox in the case of *Snow in August* is Gao's use of the tropes of self-exile and Buddhism. His desire to be seen as an individual rather than a "Chinese" artist in the limiting ethnographic imagination seems to be at odds with Gao's other claims about the role his stage works can play in transforming Chinese theatre. Further, his claim of apolitical self-exile and how marginality can be conducive to the production of good artwork seems somewhat problematic in the context of the premiere of *Snow in August* in Taipei after Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000.

This essay evaluates *Snow in August* in the context of Gao's theories of "cold literature" and total theatre. The play emerges from the convergence of two tropes that are usually strange bedfellows onstage: namely, religious rhetoric in secular drama and individualism. Some audiences were troubled by what they thought was Gao's gesture of being aloof to politics and the sometimes opaque performance techniques, such as the combination of movements distilled from *jingju* (Beijing opera) and atonal music, but this does not diminish the achievements of *Snow in August* as a bold theatrical experiment.

Gao is well-known for incorporating Chan Buddhist motifs into his paintings, dramatic and literary works over the past decades, and he has written extensively about his experience of alienation within China and exile in France. *Snow in August* compels us to ask: Why would a secular artist bring religious rhetoric to bear on his philosophical investment in the idea of exile? To answer the question, we will need to consider common expectations of an exilic artist's connection with his country of origin, which Gao reacted against, and his theories of exile and total theatre, as well as the religious rhetoric in the play itself.

Born in Jiangxi province in China in 1940, Gao is a prolific playwright, director, poet, novelist, and painter based in France and who writes in French and Chinese. For example, *Le Quêteur de la Mort* (*The Man Who Questions Death*) was first written and performed in French (2003; Gao translated it into Chinese as *Kouwen siwang* in 2004). An émigré since 1987, when he was enjoying a successful career in mainland Chinese theatre (collaborating with such prominent directors as Lin Zhaohua), Gao was honored with the title Chevalier d'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France in 1992. While his responses to intercultural theatre and the European avant-garde, especially the Theatre of the Absurd, and China's Nobel Prize complex are well-rehearsed stories, the same is not true of *Snow in August*, which is the first play Gao directed and produced after

receiving the Nobel.³ Written in 1997, it was not staged until 2002 in Taipei, when Gao was able to amass the resources needed to produce it, thanks in part to the new star power conferred by his being a Nobel laureate. The high-profile world premiere in Taipei was followed by a revival in Marseille during the “L'Année de Gao Xingjian” (2005), involving a much larger cast that included the original group of Beijing opera performers from Taiwan and a French chorus.

Snow in August is part of Gao's pursuit of a polyphonic total theatre that started with his third play, titled *Wild Man*. When *Wild Man* premiered in Beijing in 1985, it marked an important turning point in Gao's aesthetics. The play drew on the vocabulary of stylized movements and music of traditional Chinese *xiqu* theatre, departing from the era of his earlier plays, *The Bus Stop* (*Chezhan*) and *Alarm Signal* (*Juedui xin hao*), which showed strong influence from modern Western theatre, especially Antonin Artaud and Samuel Beckett.⁴ Both *Wild Man* and *Snow in August* feature performances and music that form a polyphony based on harmonies and disharmonies, and both plays are governed by an allegorical structure. In the former play, an ecologist and a reporter travel into the wilderness of modern China to look for the mythical “wild man,” while the latter features a Chan master's endless fleeing from the wilderness that is the human world. Gao did not plan on winning over his audience “by the art of dialogue” in *Wild Man*;⁵ rather, with the “total musical image” of a symphony in mind, he aimed to “realize a total effect of action through multi-voicedness, counter-points, contrasts and repetitions.”⁶ The significance of *Snow in August* is thus twofold: stylistically, it inherited and expanded the vision of total theatre that *Wild Man* tentatively explored; and thematically, it is a meditation on freedom and Gao's own ideological investment in the necessity of exile.

“Cold Literature”

The modern Chinese conception of drama is partly rooted in nationalism, and has recently been examined by leading scholars of theatre and cultural studies.⁷ In the early twentieth century, the new theatre—known under various names, ranging from *wenming xi* (civilized drama) and *xinju* (new drama) to *huaaju* (spoken drama)—was

³Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 13–22; Izabella Labedzka, *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre: From the Word to the Image* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2008); Claire Conceison, “The French Gao Xingjian, Bilingualism, and Ballade Nocturne,” *Hong Kong Drama Review* 8 (October 2009): 303–22; Ivy Yu-Shian Lin, “A Quest Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism as Counter-Enlightenment and Modernity's Other Being in the Practices of Antonin Artaud, John Cage, Tatsumi Hijikata, Kazuo Ohno, and Xingjian Gao” (Ph.D. diss., CUNY, 2009); Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Yingjin Zhang, “Cultural Translation between the World and the Chinese: The Problematics in Positioning Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 127–44; Djelal Kadir, *Memos from the Besieged City: Lifelines for Cultural Sustainability* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 177–93.

⁴Xiaomei Chen, “Wild Man between Two Cultures,” in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 89.

⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

⁶Gao Xingjian, “Guanyu yanchu de jianyi yu shuoming,” *Shiyue* (October) 2 (1985): 169; English translation from Chen, “Wild Man between Two Cultures,” 90.

⁷Claire Conceison, “Occidentalism (Re)considered,” in *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 40–67; Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

believed to be indispensable for social reform. As a new hybrid, Western-style theatre with localized contents, the medium itself became the message.⁸ In 1904, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), an important reformer of literature and drama who would later become one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, advanced arguments about the propagandistic values of a new theatre modeled on Western realist theatre:⁹ “The theatre [in China] should adopt some Western techniques. . . . It pays to implement the latest devices of lighting, sound, electricity, and many other scientific breakthroughs.”¹⁰ Chen connected the new aesthetics to a national salvation program, not to the aesthetic value of the new techniques. In this dichotomized synecdoche, a historically specific phase of Anglo-European theatre—realist representation—stood in for the progressiveness of the entire Western civilization. Chen exaggerated the social function of theater: “Only the reformed theatre can change the whole society—the deaf can see it, and the blind can hear it. There is no better vehicle for social reform than the theatre.”¹¹

In this context, the obsession with China,¹² rather than colonial conquests, became an important force propelling the development of Chinese theatre in modern times. As late as the 1980s, direct engagement with social problems was still one of the most important criteria by which to judge dramatic works. This holds true for even the most radical, hybrid forms of performance, such as the experimental theatre in China. Some experimental theatre works were criticized for their failure to fulfill their expected pedagogical role, to reflect social reality and educate the masses. According to Tan Peisheng, “we reject those dramas that depart from the truthfulness of life in pursuit of theatricality; we also do not approve [the experimental theatre’s] indulgence in [new] structures and [performing] techniques, which has divorced drama from [social] life.”¹³ This pragmatic character dominated mainland-Chinese theatre for most of the twentieth century, until alternative aesthetics emerged in post-Mao China and especially in the Chinese diaspora. In her study of early post-Mao China, Xiaomei Chen observes that theatre artists no longer naively seek out the authority of Western authors or traditions to validate their innovations, for “they often find themselves compelled by their own intense experiences to return to their own agenda of cultural rejuvenation and political

⁸Siyuan Liu, “Adaptation as Appropriation: Staging Western Drama in the First Western-Style Theatre in Japan and China,” *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 3 (2007): 411–29.

⁹Zhang Xiangbing, “Lun Chen Duxiu zai woguo xiqu gaige shi shang de diwei” (Chen Duxiu’s place in the history of drama reform in China), *Jinan xuebao* 3 (1986): 54–64; Fu Xiaohang, “Chen Duxiu de xiqu lunwen” (Chen Duxiu’s essay on drama), *Xiqu yanjiu* 8 (1983): 220–26.

¹⁰San Ai (Chen Duxiu), “Lun xiqu” (On Chinese music drama), *Anhui suhua bao*, 10 September 1904, reprinted in *Xin xiaoshuo* 2, no. 2 (1905) and *Zhongguo lidai julun xuanzhu* (Selected Chinese dramatic criticism), ed. Chen Duo and Ye Changhai (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1987), 460–62. The English translation is revised from Faye Chunfang Fei, ed., *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 117–18.

¹¹The English translation is from *Chinese Theories of Theater*, 120.

¹²In his essay “Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature,” C. T. Hsia writes that “[w]hereas every modern writer of England, America, France, and Germany . . . automatically identifies the sick state of his country with the state of man in the modern world, the [modern] Chinese writer sees the conditions of China as peculiarly Chinese and not applicable elsewhere. He shares with the modern Western writer a vision of disgust if not despair, but since his vision does not extend beyond China, at the same time he leaves the door open for hope, for the importation of modern Western . . . ideas and systems that would transform his country from its present state of decadence.” See Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 536.

¹³Tan Peisheng, *Lun xiqu xing* (Theatricality) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1981).

liberation."¹⁴ Paradigm shifts were underway in the 1980s, but Gao's theoretical and creative writings took the discourse to a different level, with its intense focus on the personal voices of authors—a level that was arguably disconnected from all political and cultural agendas. He sought personal salvation, not political liberation.

Gao's post-1987 theatre works challenge the national and nationalist paradigms. He coined the term "cold literature" (*leng de wenxue*) to describe his philosophy, which he defines as "a literature that regains its original nature." Cold literature differs from "the literature of moral teaching, of political criticism, of social engagement." He defines literature as "a personal affair."¹⁵ Gao's stance can be traced back to his time in China. According to him, he is primarily interested in using theatre as a medium to search for alternative voices that have been alienated in the process of modernization. Despite Gao's statements in interviews and in his theoretical writings that he does not seek to embody an authentic voice of the Chinese diaspora or China per se, the Nobel Prize has initiated heated debates about his identity politics.¹⁶ During his tenure as the resident playwright of the Beijing People's Art Theatre (*Beijing Renmin Yishu Juyuan*), Gao wrote and produced *The Bus Stop* (1981), *Alarm Signal* (1982), and *Wild Man* (1984); he also completed *The Other Shore* (1986), but did not get to see it produced before fleeing to Paris through Germany in 1987. During his time in China, Gao works were controversial both in form and content; nonetheless he had an audience that shared similar historical and cultural experiences, an audience that listened with patience.

Although Gao feared political attacks and prosecution in China, once he was in France, he found it difficult to deal with the excessive amount of freedom. A different type of pressure emerged. Seeing how fellow Asian diasporic artists catered to the European appetite for traditional Chinese cultural relics (especially the Chinese opera, *feng shui*, *qi gong*, and *kung fu*) that had become the hallmark of "Chinese-ness," Gao asked: "Can a Chinese intellectual living abroad preserve his spiritual independence without embracing a nationalist doctrine, or seeking solace in traditional Chinese culture?" Chen Duxiu and his contemporaries promoted a theatre driven by reformation agendas. However, nearly a century later, Gao observes that the Chinese diasporic artists often sell Chinese "antiques" that fuel and reinforce essentialized views of cultural difference. Gao criticizes the opportunist tendency, writing that "an artist . . . does not need to sponge a living off [his] ancestors [*chi zuzong de fan*]. . . . He should not sell himself as a local product or handicraft [*tu techan*]."¹⁷ Gao refuses to become a native informant;¹⁸ for him, "the most important thing for a writer is to keep aloof

¹⁴ Chen points out that the May 4th anti-imperialist and anti-traditionalist thrusts have dominated modern Chinese drama, but these different types of obsessions with "China" have also led to a paradox, "as the anti-traditional aspect of modern Chinese drama undermined its anti-imperialist dimension." See Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 291, 330.

¹⁵ Gao Xingjian, "Wo zhuzhang yi zhong leng de wenxue" (I advocate a cold literature, July 30, 1990), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, 18–20; Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater*, 186.

¹⁶ Kwok-kan Tam, "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and the Politics of Recognition," in *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 1–20.

¹⁷ Gao Xingjian, "Jinghua ye tan" (Evening talks in Beijing), *Zhongshan* 5 (1987): 198.

¹⁸ Gao's discontent with the role frequently assigned to writers in the exilic realm is shared by many diasporic intellectuals. One recent example is Sylvia Molloy's illuminating article on the topic, in which she recalls her experience as an Argentine and Latin American studying in France during the 1960s. Her dissertation advisor assigned her a dissertation topic: the reception of Latin American literature

above himself, that is, not selling the inheritance passed down from his ancestors."¹⁹ He champions the dearly bought opportunity to "record one's personal voice through arts and literature" after a century of nationalistic obsession, referring to the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Gao posits that literature provides the "fragile individual or writer" the opportunity to find his own voice.²⁰

Therefore, writing almost a century after Chen Duxiu's advocacy of a Western-style theatre informed by nationalist principles, Gao departs from the nostalgia for an "imaginary" China that is common not only among the early twentieth-century reformers, but also among his fellow Chinese diasporic artists. Reacting against the overt emphasis on the political dimensions of literature since the May Fourth Movement, Gao proposes his concept of cold literature, which is defined by its resistance to being "strangled by society in its quest for spiritual salvation." Because of its nonutilitarian nature, cold literature has to flee "in order to survive."²¹ His emphasis on artistic individuality and personal voice rather than collective cultural identity is most evident in his 1993 essay on nationalist myth:

Chinese intellectuals have never been able to separate the idea of the State from the idea of their own. They have been extremely timid in freethinking. . . . While there have been quite a number of heroes in the past century who willingly sacrificed themselves for the Party or the State, there have been extremely few who dared to challenge the entire society in defense of individual freedom of thinking and writing.²²

As an émigré, Gao turned the gaze away from the ideological China to an aestheticized personal voice. He further elaborated this position in his Nobel lecture in December 2000, emphasizing that he wanted to use the opportunity to "speak as one writer in the voice of an individual." He goes on to argue that "literature can only be the voice of the individual. . . . Once literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party or the voice of a class or a group, it can be employed as a mighty and all-engulfing tool of propaganda. Such literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature, and becomes a substitute for power and profit."²³

While Gao's advocacy for apolitical drama is not unprecedented in traditional China and, in fact, demonstrates links to the tradition of "recluse literature" that emphasizes political aloofness, he insists that artistic creation should not contain any traces of political passion; an artist may be politically active, but his work should not employ

in France. Despite having trained in French and knowing very little about Latin American literature, she "was . . . assigned the role of the native informant, a role [she has] been asked to play more than once since then." See Molloy, "Postcolonial Latin America and the Magic Realist Imperative: A Report to the Academy," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 370–79.

¹⁹ Gao Xingjian, "Meiyou zhuyi" (Without isms), *Wenji bao* 1 (1995): 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gao Xingjian, "Wenxue de liyou" (The case for literature), trans. Mable Lee *PMLA* 116, no. 3 (2001): 605.

²² "Guojia shenhua yu geren diankuang" (Nationalist myth and individualistic madness), *Mingbao yuekan* 8 (1993): 16 (English translation revised from Henry Y. H. Zhao's *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism* [London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000], 128).

²³ Gao, "Wenxue de liyou," 594.

political rhetoric.²⁴ There is a crucial difference between Gao's and pre-modern Chinese notions of self-exile: Gao sees withdrawal from society not as an alternative form of political intervention, but as a prerequisite for artistic creation and freedom. As he reasoned in his Nobel lecture: "if the writer sought to win intellectual freedom the choice was either to fall silent or to flee," and since language is the only medium for writers, "not to speak for a prolonged period is the same as suicide."²⁵

As such, Gao's aesthetic program demonstrates connections with Bertolt Brecht and the tradition of Theatre of the Absurd, but he consciously fosters an individualistic and personal voice within his works. For example, Western sourcing is the focus of the heated debates during the 1980s about his plays *Bus Stop* and *Wild Man*. Gao firmly denied parallels between the motifs and structures of the former and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Theatre of the Absurd,²⁶ suggesting instead that "it is definitely unhealthy to consume only one type of vitamin."²⁷ His anti-establishment stance and "avoidance of identification with the center" have turned marginality into an asset that helps him find a personal voice.²⁸

Snow in August as Total Theatre

Snow in August is an illuminating case in point. It chronicles the life of Huineng (633–713), the illiterate Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism. In both hagiographical and literary accounts, Huineng's lifestory revolves around his self-exile from the establishment, both political and religious. The story is attractive to Gao, because fleeing is also a prominent theme in his creative writing. Being an outsider to the established order, Huineng lives in exile and becomes known for his anti-establishment stance. Defending the value of marginality, he is uncompromising in his refusal to serve politics—both within and beyond his religion.

The Taipei production of *Snow in August*, directed by Gao himself, was a major milestone in jingju theatre and Taiwanese performance culture. The production budget of \$27,769,700 (in New Taiwan Dollars [NT\$] equivalent to US\$852,877), underwritten by Taiwan's Council of Cultural Affairs (CCA), was unprecedented in Taiwan and made *Snow in August* one of the most expensive performances in the world, excluding European operas in major cities. Ticket prices ranged from NT\$200 (US\$7) for students to NT\$3,000 (US\$100); the box-office income, according to a report of the CCA, was NT\$7 million (US\$214,987). It is no coincidence that Gao's publications and theatre works, which are banned in mainland China, found a ready home in Taiwan, an island with multiple cultural roots and an appetite for experimental works. Theatre in Taiwan, like literature and art, has experienced a process of hybridization that is "a synthesis of heterogeneous forces and contending visions."²⁹ Although *Snow in August*

²⁴ Lee, "Gao Xingjian's Dialogue with Two Dead Poets from Shaoxing," 413.

²⁵ Gao, "Wenxue de liyou," 594.

²⁶ Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, 19.

²⁷ Gao Xingjian, *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* (In pursuit of modern drama) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 60 (English translation by Sy Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004], 47).

²⁸ Gilbert C. F. Fong, trans. and ed., "Introduction: Marginality, Zen, and Omnipotent Theatre," in Gao Xingjian, *Snow in August* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), xiii.

²⁹ Michelle Yeh, "Introduction," in *Frontier Taiwan: An Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*, ed. Michelle Yeh and N. G. D. Malmqvist (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 50–51.

embodies these heterogeneous forces, its artistic achievements were not universally understood. The production raised some eyebrows, and critics in Taiwan were taken aback in particular by Gao's decision to use jingju actors but directed them to "liberate" themselves from conventions. This attitude is understandable, because the production challenged a number of theatrical and narrative conventions.

During the rehearsal and in interviews with the media after the premiere, Gao emphasized the hybrid nature of his production. Achieving "four unlikes [*si bu xiang*]" was his primary goal: that the piece should be unlike Western opera, despite the use of a ninety-member symphony orchestra; unlike jingju, despite a cast made up of mainly jingju performers, including such celebrated actors as Wu Hsing-kuo; unlike dance, despite its many dance pieces choreographed by Lin Hsiu-wei; and unlike *huaju* (Chinese spoken drama), despite its use of speech and various forms of realism. The performance could not be categorized as jingju, *huaju*, or any other known form of theatre presentation—Asian or European. Contributing to the innovative presentation was Gao's decision to use jingju music and movements—a highly developed stylization system—as the site of his experiment. Gao proposed a theory of "*quanneng de xiju*," which has variously been translated as "omnipotent theatre" by Gilbert Fong and "total theatre" by Sy Ren Quah. It is a modern theatre of music, dialogue, and movements that combines performing idioms from past and present and from different cultures.

According to Gao, one of the merits of total theatre is its ability to resist categorization of being one genre or a theatre belonging to only a single culture. However, the playbill calls the production a "*geju*" (song drama, a common Chinese translation for Western opera), and Quah and other critics have attributed this move to "an informed decision by [Gao] to posit the play closer to the Western genre than the Chinese one."³⁰ Gao insists that this form of performance eschews definable cultural locations. Commenting on his decision to commission the Chinese French composer Xu Shuya (1961–)³¹ to compose music for *Snow in August*, Gao pointed out that both he and Xu have worked hard to resist the "pastiche strategy" employed by many Chinese composers that senselessly combines jingju-style music with Western music, which Gao condemns as an opportunist act, like "selling antiques passed down from one's ancestors." He commended Xu's effort to "transcend the East–West divide," to "dissolve East and West," and to compose a piece that belongs to Xu alone.³² However, Gao also evokes an essentialized notion of cultural difference when explaining his choice to incorporate *jingju* elements into the performance: "The story of Huineng is of epic proportions, on a par with any drama from the pen of Shakespeare. In fact, *Snow in August* melds Eastern and Western cultures. The form is like that of Shakespearean or Greek tragedy, but the spirit can only have come from the wisdom of the East."³³

Gao is aware of the contradictions in his categorical statements. He has undergone and is still going through various stages of transculturation. Back in 1998, he firmly

³⁰ Quah, *Gao Xingjian*, 199.

³¹ A Chinese diasporic composer based in France, Xu was born in Changchun and studied composition with Zhu Jian'er and Ding Shande at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music before leaving China to pursue his career in Europe.

³² Chou Mei-huei, *Xuedi chan si—Gao Xingjian zhidao Bayue xue xianchang biji* (Chan thoughts in snow—notes from the rehearsal of *Snow in August* directed by Gao Xingjian) (Taipei: Lianjing, 2002), 109–11.

³³ Fong, "Introduction," xiii.

denied his connection to the geo-cultural and ideological China; while in self-exile in France, “China doesn’t even appear in [his] dreams any more.”³⁴ However, cultural membership or the lack thereof is never a straightforward matter. In January 2000, commenting on the Chinese connections in *Snow in August* and *One Man’s Bible*, he stated that “I thought I am through with my China complex. But it reemerged. . . . The dying embers may flare up again.”³⁵

The production, which Gao claimed to be the ultimate realization of his total theatre, complicates these questions. *Snow in August* employed a minimalist stage set, with enlarged images of Gao’s own ink paintings featured as the backdrop in some scenes to form “multilevel visual imagery,” including the scenes in which Huineng flees for his life after becoming the Sixth Patriarch.³⁶ The jingju performers, trained by Gao to undo their jingju background, abandoned the stylized jingju vocal expression and spoke in the vernacular, a mode commonly employed by huaju actors. They also sang to Xu’s atonal music played by the symphony orchestra. Their presence was complemented by modern dance movements of acrobatics and the ensemble performers in the last scene.

In addition to the visual feast, Gao used polyglossia to help the production achieve the effect of multiplicity aurally;³⁷ indeed, the most successful part of the production was perhaps its polyglossic and multivocal dimension. For example, Huineng, played by veteran jingju actor Wu Hsing-kuo, was joined by tenor Fang Weichen and baritone Gao Xinjia, both of whom participated only in vocal roles. These three separate voices (of Wu, Fang, and Gao), singing with techniques from completely different traditions, converged to convey Huineng’s thoughts. Other characters, including Boundless and Singsong Girl—all performed by jingju performers—were joined by their respective European operatic counterparts, such as coloratura and mezzo-sopranos. The chorus of fifty voices, which resembled a Greek chorus, further diversified the vocal scene in the performance and provided contrast to the now-fragmented jingju-based singing by the main performers. Many questions remain unanswered; for example, could the performers, who were now uprooted from the tradition they trained in, find their own voices in this polyglossic theatre? Would formulaic, stylized performing idioms necessarily be restricting and unimaginative? Did this vision of total theatre not essentialize cultural difference?

To answer these questions, one has to consider the central theme of the play—exile. *Snow in August* and Gao’s own theories tackle the relationship between personal voices and nationalistic and political agendas. His works posit the possibility of an alternative aesthetics that disconnect the literary from the sociopolitical and refute the burden of the collective, which Gao believes will annihilate the creative self. While he may not always practice what he preaches in his theoretical writings, Gao’s transcultural literary career marks an important departure from a long Chinese tradition that has given primacy to nonpersonal causes in art, and from a postcolonial world that inadvertently endorses such a view of politics and literature. While Gao ambitiously embraces the possibility that art should be personal and therefore transcend all boundaries and

³⁴ Quah, *Gao Xingjian*, 190.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Fong, “Introduction,” xvi.

³⁷ Gao Xingjian, “Yao shenmeyang de xiju” (What kind of drama do I want?), *Lianhe wenxue* 41 (1988): 137.

translated subjectivity, the amalgamated performing idiom of *Snow in August* also reaffirms the difficulty of such goals.

The Necessity of Exile

The playwright's autobiography adds another layer of significance to the play. Gao delineates a radical form of individualism through Huineng's continuous acts of fleeing. Between 1983 and 1984, Gao fled political attacks and went to search for minority cultures untouched by socialist-realist agendas in rural southwestern China. A few years later, in 1987, he moved to France for good and continued to develop his "aesthetics of fleeing."³⁸ This final act of fleeing—like Huineng's actions—is both physical and metaphorical. Huineng's life begins in exile, although not by choice. In act 1, Huineng states in a monologue that his father "offended the court and [his] parents became exiles in Canton, a place far away from civilization."³⁹ The play opens on a rainy night. Huineng delivers firewood to a temple inhabited only by a nun and asks to stay to listen to her chanting. The nun, Boundless, denies Huineng's request. Although Huineng may be sincerely eager to learn her chanting, it was not appropriate for Boundless as a woman to spend time alone with a male woodcutter late at night.⁴⁰ The conflict in the first act arises from youthful Huineng's "alternative-ness," not from his nonconformist attitude, which is yet to be developed. His intense pursuit of truth separates him from the woodcutter community; however, because he is illiterate, Huineng cannot be accepted into the established order of religious learning. As Boundless reasons: "If you don't know any words, how can you understand what I am chanting just by listening?"

In the next scene, Huineng's admission into Chan Buddhism immediately leads to his prolonged process of fleeing. As soon as the Fifth Patriarch passes down his robe and alms-bowl to Huineng and proclaims him as his successor, he urges Huineng to flee, because many would kill for the position. This next phase of exile takes him to the hunters' community in the mountains, and finally to the Dharma Nature Temple, where the abbot, Yinzong, recognizes him as the legendary Sixth Patriarch (act 2, scene 1). Huineng gives his first lesson in the pulpit (act 2, scene 3) before deciding to flee again, because "if [he] stay[s], the temple will lose its peace and quiet."⁴¹ He thus dodges the invitation by prefect Wei Ju to preach at occasions organized by city officials. An imperial invitation arrives not too long after Huineng retreats to the mountains, and this time it is a direct order from the Empress Dowager herself. Huineng again refuses the invitation to fame and opportunity to preach his own Chan doctrines. He burns the *kasaya* robe and soon passes away. Death becomes the ultimate form of fleeing.

Huineng is presented as a thinker, not a religious leader;⁴² he is an individual who develops a philosophy of detachment.⁴³ In act 1, scene 3, to highlight his detachment

³⁸ Mabel Lee, "Nobel in Literature 2000 Gao Xingjian's Aesthetics of Fleeing," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2003), available at <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1> (accessed 1 June 2011).

³⁹ Gao, *Snow in August*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴² Chou, *Xuedi chan si*, 95.

⁴³ Both Gao and his critics seem to agree that *Snow in August* is not a religious morality play that promotes Chan Buddhism, even though Gao shares the skepticism toward language; see Fong, "Introduction," x.

from secular representations of the sacred as embodied by the *kasaya* robe and alms-bowl passed down from the Fifth Patriarch, Huineng smashes the latter into pieces in the face of Huiming, who has been resentfully pursuing Huineng after Huineng's surprise succession as the Sixth Patriarch. In another scene, Huineng burns the *kasaya* robe—the symbol of the physical and metaphorical location of the enlightened Chan master. He is attempting to convince the empress that his refusal is not a symbolic gesture, but a genuine desire to avoid becoming “a figurehead of state orthodoxy.”⁴⁴ The robe, a signifier, cannot replace the signified—truth, or dharma. When Huineng asks the Fifth Patriarch (in act 1, scene 2), “what the use of the robe is,” since the *dharma* can only be transmitted from mind to mind, Hongren gives a practical answer: so that the unenlightened can see the “lamp of the mind” and follow it.⁴⁵ Before entering nirvana, Huineng tells his disciples that obsession with the robe will only destroy the Zen faith: “What's the use of holding on to the robe if there is no *dharma*? . . . The *kasaya* robe, like all things, is extraneous to the self.”⁴⁶

After Huineng enters nirvana, the temple falls into a frenzied chaos, with various monks, masters, singsong girls, and laymen claiming attainment of the dharma. In the midst of this chaotic scene, with a cat mewing and fire set by arsonists, Layman H comments on the danger and absurdity of the zealous pursuit of a “center,” or a dedicated, unchecked piety toward any doctrine: “Are you the center, or am I the center? Everybody loves to play God! Who wants to be a mere plaything? . . . Who is circling around whom?”⁴⁷ Gao's Nobel lecture echoes Layman H's observation and challenges the notions of the utilitarianism and global marketability of literature: “A person cannot be God, certainly not replace God; . . . he will only succeed in creating more chaos and make a greater mess of the world. . . . I thank all of you for awarding this most prestigious prize for works that are far removed from the writings of the market.”⁴⁸

Gao indicates that he is drawn to Huineng not as a religious leader, but as a person with sharp perception of his self-nature. Huineng is “unwilling to play the role of a messiah.” Gao continues to argue that “Huineng only guided people and inspired them to realize their own natures. . . . The point is not who will save who, but to go out and save yourself!”⁴⁹ Throughout his career, he emphasized that a “writer cannot fill the role of the Creator so there is no need for him to inflate his ego by thinking that he is God.”⁵⁰ Gao has focused intensely on self-salvation rather than national salvation, and he has gone to great lengths to maintain his marginality.

The irony, of course, is that after being awarded the Nobel Prize, Gao's works, which were once indeed “far removed from the writings of the market,” became instant best sellers. After “the frail individual's weak voice that is hardly worth listening to and that normally would not be heard in the public media has been allowed to address the world,” the voice became recognizable, worldly, no longer personal, and most certainly

⁴⁴ Gao, *Snow in August*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁸ Gao, “Wenxue de liyou,” 594, 601.

⁴⁹ Chang Meng-jui, “Shashibiya ye fengkuan: Gao Xingjian tan *Bayue xue hua shiji yanchu*” (Shakespeare will be thrilled, too: Gao Xingjian's talk about the premiere of *Snow in August*), trans. Phil Newel, in *Ronghe donxi, chaoyue chuantong: Bayue xue pojian er chu* (Fusing East and West, transcending traditions: *Snow in August* breaking out of its cocoon) (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs, 2002), 13.

⁵⁰ Gao, “Wenxue de liyou,” 598.

not “frail.”⁵¹ Gao the writer and Gao the intellectual could not be reconciled; fleeing would have to take a different route and form, which is why *Snow in August*—written in 1997 though not produced till 2002, two years after the Nobel Prize—embodies some of Gao’s anxieties.

Gao’s career is marked by various acts of fleeing from politics and any form of confinement or endorsement. There is a cost to maintaining one’s marginality, but he capitalizes on solitude and makes it one of the most important themes in his novels and dramas. In particular, Gao flees from the common and suffocating frameworks for literary creation, including nationalism, dissident politics, and racial and cultural labels; he argues that “for a writer to emphasize a national culture is problematic, [because] a writer’s creativity should begin with what has already been articulated in his language and addresses what has not been adequately articulated.”⁵² Huineng’s pursuit of a true understanding of his self-nature and personal voice coincides with Gao’s conception of literature as the ultimate articulation of individualism.

Commenting on *Snow in August*, he elaborates on his rationale to dramatize Huineng as a thinker: “Huineng is truly a leading thinker. . . . He does not even pass down the *kasaya* robe and alms-bowl, the quintessential symbol of his religion. His denouncement of *lianwu* [fetish of or obsession with material objects] is unprecedented in the history of Buddhism.”⁵³ Huineng is illiterate and does not have any schooling, yet he is capable of understanding the most difficult Buddhist sutras and philosophy; he also has the most earnest yearning for truth.⁵⁴ This legend sets up a framework for alternative-ness and dissident unorthodoxy; however, Gao carefully depoliticizes it in his dramatic adaptation. While Huineng harbors anti-establishment sentiments, he does not endorse any political views, including those that align with his own.

The last scene of *Snow in August* (act 3) dramatizes the perils of blind piety to any one single school of thought. The monks and laymen paraphrase Huineng, and all claim to have attained Chan transcendence while playing practical jokes on one another and performing acrobatic feats. This scene demonstrates Gao’s uneasiness with the possibility that one’s beliefs, however undoctinaire they may be, can be indoctrinated and become counter-productive to one’s pursuit of total freedom and individualism. *Snow in August* is an allegorization of Gao’s own act of fleeing; he posits the possibility and consequences of the eternal process of fleeing. Two years before he penned *Snow in August*, Gao wrote: “When we have already escaped the oppressive power of religion, politics, or nation-state, we suddenly find ourselves in the prison house of ‘self.’ We are imprisoned by it, and we want to flee from it. History has shown that fleeing is the only way to save oneself.”⁵⁵ He qualifies this intense gaze upon the self by distinguishing it from “unbridled egotism.” Gao argues that the writer should not

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 596.

⁵³ Chou, *Xuedi chan si*, 94.

⁵⁴ One of the most important sources for Huineng’s biography can be found in the sections on the Fifth and Sixth patriarchs in the first volume (of twenty) of *Wu deng hui yuan* (Five lamps merged in the source) by Song Dynasty monks Pu Ji and Hui Ming, published in 1253; see Pu, *Wu deng hui yuan*, Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu (Facsimiles of the Wenyuange Edition of the *Compendium of All Books*), Four Storehouses series no. 1053 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1985).

⁵⁵ Gao, *Meiyou zhuyi*, 125.

attempt to become a messiah, guide, or prophet, for "what is important is to live in the present, to stop being hoodwinked, to cast off delusions, . . . to scrutinize the self, [which too] is total chaos and while questioning the world and others one may as well look back at one's self."⁵⁶

Further, Gao sees the process of fleeing not as a dissident gesture or a means of resisting totalitarian politics, but as a path to self-salvation. Drama is a means to self-salvation that transcends politics. He refuses the playwright's public role as a spokesman for humanity who engages in political intervention, or what Edward Said succinctly summarizes as the responsibility of an intellectual in public life on many occasions. While Gao's proposal for apolitical literature is clearly a reaction to the pragmatic character and nationalist overtone of Republican, revolutionary, and post-Mao Chinese literature, he is also responding to the late-twentieth-century context that Said evokes, whereby "the writer took on more and more of the intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and in supplying a dissenting voice in conflict with the authority."⁵⁷ It is from this responsibility of social engagement that Gao flees, because he has been sensitized to self-aggrandizing claims of various forms of political intervention. He views exile, or self-imposed exile, as the only possible site of enunciation. Said observes that the reason why writers in most societies are given a separate, honorific place is because "many people still feel the need to look at the writer-intellectual as someone who ought to be listened to as a guide, as a leader of a faction . . . or group vying for more power and influence."⁵⁸ Gao's works stand in sharp contrast to this now commonly accepted, postcolonial, anti-imperialist view of the role of writers. A deep distrust of social conscience led him to champion "personal conscience":

Writers are not the conscience of the society, just as literature is not a mirror held up against the society. A writer is a person feeling at the peripheral of the society, an outsider, and an observer, who observes with a pair of cold eyes. Writers need not become the conscience of the society, for there has been enough of it. He does nothing more than writing, cultivating his own conscience, and being responsible to none other than himself.⁵⁹

The paradox, of course, is that Gao's self-exile has been viewed as a political statement. It has to be acknowledged that Gao left China because he was not accepted by the censoring authority. While his works may be marginal or invisible to a Chinese readership, they enjoyed great success in France and other parts of the world even before he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Gao's post-exile career is a living example of transculturation that creates a new center of artistic gravity; the configuration of this center may not be based on nationalist sentiments, as it demonstrates an erosion of the collective. However, this new center has not escaped the shadow cast by the cultural and ethnic background of its creator. The paradox arises from the duality of exile: writing in French and Chinese and working to bring elements from more than one culture into his stage works, Gao has to negotiate the interstitial space between different cultural realms, even as he creates a personal voice that is not associated with a nation-state.

⁵⁶ Gao, "Wenxue de liyou," 596, 598.

⁵⁷ Edward Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁹ Gao, *Meiyou zhuyi*, 23.

Huineng echoes Gao's theory of apolitical drama and has been regarded by many as the author's alter ego. Liu Zaifu, one of China's most articulate intellectuals and a close friend of Gao, views *Snow in August* as an autobiographical play.⁶⁰ To read *Snow in August* solely in light of its playwright's career may be problematic, but it is fair to say that the authorial presence can be seen in Huineng's and Gao's experiences of fleeing from political oppressions and the lure of cross-cultural artistic marketability in an age of globalization. Gao resists the urge to "sell the antiques" passed down from one's ancestors, a nationalistic collective.

Conclusion

Whether Huineng, arguably Gao's ideal personality, is an escapist, or nihilist for that matter, depends partly on stage representations of the play. Huineng's philosophy does not seem to be the point of contention; rather, the focus of the debates was on Gao's cultural politics. Lin Heyi, a professor of traditional Taiwanese theatre and then chair of the drama department of National Taiwan University, criticized Gao's haphazard mixing of disparate cultural elements. In particular, she criticized the seemingly random choice of cultural "relics" (*yiji*), such as the high-soled jingju shoes for Huineng that came to symbolically represent the idea of China, as opposed to the large symphony orchestra. The jingju performers' movements, intentionally distilled from jingju and many other performing idioms that were completely foreign to them, came off as "senseless" and rigid.⁶¹ On the other hand, John Yaw-Herng Hu, one of the first Taiwanese producers and scholars to work with Gao, points out that Gao's most important contribution is his dramatization of philosophical issues (*zhexue xijuhua*).⁶² *Snow in August* suggests that, equally important, is Gao's articulation of the religious and the personal in an increasingly politicized secular world. Shunning the masses, he deploys a religious rhetoric that eschews the collective.

Art has become Gao's religion rather than the other way around, as evidenced not only by *Snow in August*, but by his earlier works like *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*. The act of fleeing and constant search for a personal space through art carries important symbolic meanings. While the Taipei production of *Snow in August* was met with fierce criticism by cultural and theatre critics in Taiwan, the playscript was very successful, and one of the production's leading actors, Wu Hsing-kuo, was gratified by the experience. Wu spoke highly of the new paths charted by *Snow in August* for jingju actors, who possess flexible bodies and a full range of skills, such as singing, dancing, acrobatics, and movements, that can be adapted for works not in the jingju tradition.⁶³ Religious rhetoric has a special place in Gao's theatre, because the religious discourses constructed by him are venues wherein heterogeneous values and performance styles are negotiated. To borrow Rustom Bharucha's characterization of theatrical interculturalism, religion in Gao's works "evokes a back-and-forth movement, suggesting the swing of a

⁶⁰ Liu Zaifu, *Xiandai wenxue zhuzi lun* (Modern literary masters). (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16, 67–68.

⁶¹ Lin Heyi, "Yao shenmo yang de juzuo"—ping Gao Xingjian *Bayue xue* zai Taibei de shouyan ("What kind of drama do I want?"—The premiere of Gao Xingjian's *Snow in August* in Taipei), *Ziyou shibao*, 23 December 2002, 36.

⁶² Cited in Liu, *Xiandai wenxue zhuzi lun*, 66.

⁶³ Wu Hsing-kuo, personal communication (interview) with author, 16 August 2011.

pendulum" not between cultures, but between individual freedom and responsibility.⁶⁴ *Snow in August* invites theatre artists to further dialogues about a "modern theatre" that seeks to redefine a personal voice that can only be globally articulated.

⁶⁴Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World* (London: Routledge, 1993), 241.

