

The Other Shore

Plays by Gao Xingjian

Translated by
GILBERT C. F. FONG

Written by the First Chinese Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature

The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian

Translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong

© The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1999

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

ISBN 962-201-862-9 (Paperback)

ISBN 962-201-974-9 (Hardcover)

First edition 1999

Second printing 2000

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Sha Tin, N. T., Hong Kong

Fax: +852 2603 6692

+852 2603 7355

E-mail: cup@cuhk.edu.hk

Web-site: www.cuhk.edu.hk/cupress

Printed in Hong Kong



Introduction

You're a stranger, destined to be a stranger for ever, you have no hometown, no country, no attachments, no family, and no burdens except paying your taxes.

There is a government in every city, there are officers in every customs station to check passports, and man and wife in every home, but you only prowl from city to city, from country to country and from woman to woman.

You no longer need to take on any town as your hometown, nor any country as your country, nor any woman as your wife.

You have no enemies, and if people want to take you for an enemy to raise their spirits, it's purely their own business. Your only opponent — yourself — has been killed many times; there's no need to look for enemies, to commit suicide, or to do battle in a duel.

You have lost all memories, the past has been cut off once and for all.

You have no ideals, you've left them behind for other people to think about ...

Gao Xingjian: Weekend Quartet



Gao Xingjian has been hailed as the first Chinese playwright to enter world theatre. His plays in fact have been performed more often outside China than inside it, in France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the U.S., and in overseas Chinese communities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. While his plays have been condemned and subsequently banned in China, they have been heaped with kudos and honours in Europe. Individually, they have been applauded as “archetypal” and “extremely modern and poetic,” as creating “a new and delicate language for the stage,” and above all, as constituting a “*théâtre de l’absurde à la zen*.” In 1992, he was awarded the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in France, where he now resides. This can be seen as pointing to the fundamental differences in the idea of theatre and the arts in China and the West, the former rigidly subscribing to a set of utilitarian and political rules on what is legitimate and permissible — exactly the kind of constraints on artistic freedom that Gao Xingjian finds disconcerting. In fact, living in exile seems to have shaped and strengthened Gao Xingjian’s convictions, and provided the impetus for the development of his ideas about the theatre. The questions may be asked: is there an essential “Chineseness” in his works? Does he, like many contemporary Chinese writers living overseas, still look to Chinese artistic and cultural traditions for inspiration? And in what manner has his exile and living as a marginalized member of society influenced his thinking and the creation of a “self-conscious” theatre?

Born in 1940 at the height of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) in Ganzhou 赣州 in the Province of Jiangxi 江西, Gao Xingjian spent his youth growing up under the Communist regime that took over China in 1949. His mother, an amateur actress, introduced her young child to the art of traditional Chinese theatre. She also urged him to write, telling him to keep a diary of the happenings of his young life. At ten, he had already finished his first story and drawn some cartoons as illustrations. “I locked myself in my own little room, feeling happy about myself and my work.”¹ (Gao Xingjian is proud of his accomplishment as a painter. Exhibitions of his paintings have been held regularly around Europe, in the United States, and in Taiwan and Hong Kong.)

Gao Xingjian went to the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute at seventeen as a French language and literature major. When in college, he

became a member of the drama society and acquainted himself with the works of European dramatists such as Stanislavsky, Brecht and Meyerhold. He also developed into an avid reader of literature, saying that it was there that he could “discover the meaning of life.” After his graduation in 1962, he worked as a French translator for the foreign language journal *China Reconstructs*. During the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977), he was at one time the leader of a Red Guard brigade, but was later banished to the countryside to work alongside the peasants and the masses.

For Gao Xingjian, the sufferings he witnessed during the Cultural Revolution were exactly like those he had read about in the great books of literature. Driven by a desire to “decipher the meaning of the cruel reality around him,” he kept writing in secret and, to avoid detection, he wrapped his manuscripts in plastic sheets and buried them in the ground.² (It has also been reported that he had to burn a dozen or so of his playscripts and short stories to escape punishment.) Instead of serving the Party and the masses, for him writing was to be the means to self-knowledge and understanding of the value of human existence. This individualistic stance was of course anathema to the official dogma of socialist realism. With aspirations to become a published writer, he tried to avoid officially tabooed topics, even though he felt himself hemmed in by the restrictions imposed on him and his fellow writers. This dilemma apparently tormented the fledgling writer who, working under constant surveillance by officials and fear of censure, found himself in a constant state of siege mentality. He could only find comfort in the rationalization that perhaps his manuscripts would be allowed to be published posthumously. After the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to southwestern China as a schoolteacher for six years. It was in 1980 that he was able to publish his first piece of writing, a novella entitled *Hanye zhong de xingchen* 《寒夜中的星辰》 (Stars on a Cold Night). At that time he was already 38.

Of all the contemporary Chinese writers, Gao Xingjian was perhaps the most outward-looking. Through his knowledge of the French language, he could gain access, if only in a limited way, to contemporary developments in literature and literary criticism in the West. After a brief stint as a schoolteacher, he was for a short time a translator and he often gave lectures on French surrealist poetry and other avant-garde writings to his colleagues. In 1981, he published a booklet entitled *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao*

chutan 《現代小說技巧初探》 (Preliminary Explorations into the Techniques of Modern Fiction), which was based on ideas taken from the French structuralist school. The book was a rather crude attempt at theory, aimed at the self-enclosed circles of Chinese writers and critics who were still very much under the influence of the Maoist line of “revolutionary realism.” The book proved to be too radical for the authorities and was condemned as a serious and blatant challenge to the party line. Soon the whole country was embroiled in a controversy over the pitfalls of modernism and the book’s “bad influences” on young and old writers alike.³

In June 1981, Gao Xingjian was assigned to the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, China’s foremost theatre company. At the time, the company, like all the major theatre companies in China, was still deeply committed to realism and the Stanislavskian method of acting. The first play he wrote for the Beijing People’s Art Theatre was *Chezhan* 《車站》 (Bus Stop), an absurdist play about a group of passengers waiting for a bus which never comes. The play was politely declined by the company because of its non-realistic tendencies. In 1982, Gao finished *Juedui xinhao* 《絕對訊號》 (Absolute Signal), which was given a test run in the rehearsal room of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. The play, featuring many flashbacks, disjointed temporal sequences and the interplay of subjective and objective perspectives, is a rather didactic prodigal son story — an attempted train robbery is thwarted by one of the villains who eventually realizes his mistaken ways. During the “previews,” he and Lin Zhaohua 林兆華, China’s best known director who also shared Gao Xingjian’s views on experimental drama, decided against Stanislavskian realism and opted for a more modernist production with a minimum of props. The stage, an empty room with the audience on three sides, was equipped only with a few iron bars indicating the inside of a train coach, and the only lighting was a flashlight which the director used to shine on whichever actor was speaking at any given moment. The play had several full-house “previews” and was finally moved to the company’s auditorium for a regular run. The production was considered a breakthrough and a trend-setter in Chinese experimental theatre, but it also aroused the authorities’ suspicion and once again brought about a vehement war of words on modernism and realism.

Despite the threat of official sanctions, Gao Xingjian pressed on and continued with his efforts in experimental drama, supported by a host of

famous dramatists such as Cao Yu 曹禺 and Wu Zuguang 吴祖光. In July 1983, he and Lin Zhao-hua began reviving *Bus Stop* as a “rehearsal,” which had a successful short run in the banquet hall of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. Cao Yu, then director of the theatre company, applauded the play and considered it a “wonderful” piece of work. But news of the “rehearsal” leaked out, and this time the political fallout was much more serious than with the artistic debate that followed *Absolute Signal*. It was the time of the “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement,” and the new production was accused of being anti-socialist and of imparting a strong feeling of “doubt and negativity” against the existing way of life.⁴ After thirteen performances the play was forced to stop, and Gao Xingjian was subsequently barred from publication for one year. Before further punishments were announced (reportedly he was to be sent to a labour camp in Qinghai to “receive training”), he went into self-exile in the mountains of southwestern China. The turn of events made him realize that exile was the only way to save himself and to preserve “one’s values, integrity and independence of spirit.”⁵

When he returned to Beijing, he was again allowed to publish his writings. A collection of his medium-length stories came out, followed by another collection of eight of his plays that included some short experimental pieces written to train actors. In November 1984, after settling down after his “exile” in the mountains, he finished *Yeren* 《野人》 (Wilderness Man) in ten days and nights, incorporating into the play his thoughts on ecology, the destruction of nature and the environment by civilization, and above all, a celebration of the primordial human spirit. According to Gao Xingjian, *Wilderness Man* was to be an experimental play, an “epic” describing events from “seven or eight thousand years ago to the present” and encompassing many issues such as those of “man and nature, and modern man and the history of mankind.”⁶ The play, aimed at creating a modern Eastern drama, has more than thirty atemporal scenes; it also features a plethora of nonrealistic masked ceremonies, wedding rituals, folk songs and a dance troupe of twenty members, whose abstract movements symbolize the masses, the earth, its floods and forests, as well as a wide range of emotions. *Wilderness Man* represented the pinnacle of the development of experimental drama in China at the time. It also gave notice that drama, or any work of art, did not have to be guided by the

concerns for socialist education or political usefulness, and that interpretative lacunae in any piece of work, rather than determinateness, would enhance artistic effectiveness. Here Gao Xingjian's predilection for subjectivity gradually surfaced, and soon he would find himself increasingly uneasy, an individualist surrounded by a sea of collectivity which from time to time would threaten to overrun his personal peace and creative space in art. Regarded as politically innocuous, *Wilderness Man* was very favourably received, and the playwright and his work both managed to avoid political censure. But it was to be his last work to be publicly performed on his home soil.

In May 1985, Gao Xingjian was invited to give a series of lectures in Germany and France, where he apparently basked in the international recognition accorded to him in the foreign press. When he came back to Beijing in early 1986, he finished *Bi'an* 《彼岸》 (The Other Shore). Probably inspired by the freedom and individualism he had witnessed in Europe, the play, among its many different themes, expresses his reservations about the persecution of the individual by the collective rule of the masses, led by a deceiving and manipulating leader whose tactics and claims to power are highly questionable. The rehearsal of the play, done by the students of Beijing People's Art Theatre and under the direction of Lin Zhaohua, was ordered to stop after only one month, and subsequently the plan to establish a workshop on experimental drama was also dropped. This turn of events prompted Gao to go into exile in France in 1987, convinced that his plays would never be allowed to be performed in China again.

When he was living and writing in France, Gao Xingjian could give full rein to his imagination to explore and promote his ideas about a modern theatre, free from the interference of any overriding authority. In 1989 his *Taowang* 《逃亡》 (Exile), which tells the story of three characters running away from the pursuing soldiers during the Tiananmen incident (1989), again brought down the wrath of the Chinese government. As a result, his membership of the Communist Party was revoked. Ironically, the play also put Gao Xingjian at odds with the Chinese Overseas Democracy Movement, which considered the portrayal of intellectuals as susceptible to doubt and emotional vacillations an insult. However, he maintained that his play was concerned with the fate of the individual and his response to an adverse environment. One cannot be sure whether this

development distressed our playwright, or if it was actually a predictable outcome of his individualism and personality as a loner. The fact remains that after *Exile*, he shied away from Chinese subject matter in his plays in the next few years.

Gao Xingjian is a highly private person. His unhappiness in China was due as much to his eremitic disposition as to the suffocating socio-political system he found himself born into, a totalizing regime bent on collectivization and a common ideology which pervaded every aspect of the life of the individual, including his creativity. To Gao Xingjian, such heavy-handedness strangles the freedom of expression, particularly in art. His response can be likened to that of a traditional Chinese Zen Buddhist, who chooses to detach himself from the “dusty” human world while being in it, casting a “cold eye” on everything, especially the absurdities and the shortsightedness of the unenlightened. But while the Zen Buddhist is keen on pursuing a supreme happiness, the understanding of the *tao*, Gao Xingjian does not consider himself so lucky, for as a modern man obligated to explore his own soul, he simply cannot afford the luxury of hiding his torment behind the *tao*. Instead, he forces his way into the self and compels it to reluctantly admit to its own inadequacies, its fragmentation, its impotence to act, and its inability to eradicate the evil in and around it. If we were to discern a progression in Gao Xingjian’s dramatic career, it would have to be seen as a journey from the public subject matter of his early period to the later, more private concerns, a change from the culture and system specific to the more universal, and thus to the more neutral, his personal convictions having undergone, so to speak, a baptism of fire. This transition is clearly marked by *The Other Shore* in 1985, which features a mixture of private and public themes.

Gao Xingjian offers no solution to the problems of the self. Championing a new kind of modernism in contemporary Chinese literature, he claims in 1987 that it constitutes an affirmation of the self, not its negation, as in Western modernism, and a rediscovery of humanism, which has been lost among the insistence on the denial of rationality and the equation of absurdity with existence.⁷ The self, as life itself, is always in a state of flux, encompassing past and present, good and evil, long-lasting guilt and brief happiness, and life and death. And like a mannequin, the self is made up of many separable parts which can be assembled and disassembled at will,

and appear either in one piece or as dismembered fragments to the horrified owner who claims to have held them together. Such is the essence of existence, made meaningless by the horror, ignorance, and injustice surrounding it. But Gao Xingjian is not a complete pessimist; what matters most to him and to his characters is the materiality of living, of being able to live and, most importantly, to speak and write. Thus words, or discourse, are all and everything in life through which man gets to know his own consciousness, even though words may be mangled, rendered nonsensical, or even useless. As he says, the unknowable behind the words contains the real human nature, and the absurdity of language is the same as the absurdity of living.⁸

To Gao Xingjian, literature has no obligations — the moral and ethical controversies arising from literary writings are only figments of imagination trumped up by meddlesome critics and cultural officials. “Literature has no relation to politics. It is purely a personal undertaking, an observation, a look back at past experiences, a speculation, a cluster of sentiments, a certain expression of inner emotions, and a feeling of the satisfaction of contemplation.” Therefore he advocates a “cold literature” (冷的文學 *lengde wenxue*), i.e., literature at its most fundamental, to distinguish it from didactic, political, social and even expressive writing.⁹ However, a writer should not totally disassociate himself from society. While refraining from active intervention in social and political issues, he should “exile” himself but at the same time take a position on the margin of society, thus facilitating his undisturbed observations on life and the self. As such, “cold literature” is not art for art’s sake, which he despises as being tantamount to “cowardice,”¹⁰ and which is only meaningful in so far as it is practised in a society which prohibits it. “Cold literature” survives by means of exile, and it strives to escape from the strangulation of society to conserve itself.¹¹

Needless to say, Gao Xingjian is ambivalent on the question of the relationship between a writer and his society, betraying a love-hate attitude to man’s involvement in society and detachment from it. Society is invariably made up of antipathetic masses, easily manipulated and prone to persecute the individual among them. But then what is a writer to write about apart from the society of which he is a member? This is Gao Xingjian’s dilemma, one that he tries to solve by placing himself on the outside, a

stranger to his own community, and by retreating into the innermost depths of the individual, his consciousness. Therein lies his Chinese heritage, not so much in the superficial display of traditional Chinese theatrical conventions which occasionally crops up in his plays, but in his reluctance to totally cut himself off from humanitarianism in an effort to save the human soul, if not collectively, as individual beings. He is characteristic of the modern Chinese intellectual who rebels against his own Chineseness and yet rejects a Western individualism which pays no heed to society. According to his way of thinking, the latter is injurious to human nature — the negation of the very essence of life itself.

Gao Xingjian does not purposely seek to construct a barrier between himself and his world. He is, so to speak, not much of a joiner; he only desires to seek his own personal peace and freedom. In one of his latest declarations, he proclaims the idea of “None-ism” (沒有主義 *Meiyou zhuyi*)¹², i.e., a refusal to believe in any of the “isms.” “No matter whether it is in politics or literature, I do not believe in or belong to any party or school, and this includes nationalism and patriotism.”¹³ His “None-ism” advocates an unlimited and unbridled independence, so that the individual can empty his mind of all the shackles of convention to make the choices best suited to himself, to be sceptical of all blind acquiescence to authority, trendiness and ideological detainment, in other words, it is to be a liberation of the spirit. As a writer, Gao Xingjian steadfastly refuses to be categorized as belonging to any school, Chinese or Western. While he was still in China, he struggled to break free from realism and the Stanislavskian method which had dominated the Chinese theatre for more than three decades, considering them to be too logical, neat, and tyrannized by words. On the other hand, he is also particularly harsh about post-modernism. According to his opinion, the means of what is known as post-modernism has become an end in itself, and art vanishes as a consequence.¹⁴ In other words, concepts have displaced art in the same way as dialectics and abstractions have taken over from genuine criticism, and anybody can become an artist because artistic skills are not required as prerequisites.¹⁵

Gao Xingjian’s antipathy towards the canonized is derived from his constant search for a genuine renewal in art. Even though he pursues “the freedom not to peddle antiques,”¹⁶ he is nonetheless not iconoclastic. “When someone wants to go forward, there is no need to trample on one’s

ancestors."¹⁷ He has not been able to sever himself totally from tradition: we can see him trying to seek inspiration from the theatricality of classical Chinese opera and from folk culture. The latter's emphasis on rituality and simplicity interests him as an artist, and its uncorrupted character is a kindred spirit to his understanding of the primeval self.

In rejecting the modernist label in 1987 (when he was still in China), he said that it was more appropriate to place himself at the meeting point between Eastern and Western cultures and between history and the present.¹⁸ However, he also claimed that he has paid his debts to all things Chinese since the publication of *Lingshan* 靈山 (Spiritual Mountain) in 1990, a novel set in the mythical mountains and streams of southwestern China. In his latest plays, he has been striving for neutrality and universality, shying away from Chinese settings and characters.

We shall not dwell on the idea of interculturalism in Gao Xingjian. Suffice it to say that even our writer himself is conscious of the crosscurrents of the Chinese and the Western interacting in both his personal and artistic life. It is important to point out that he always values the self not in an egotistic manner, but in the knowledge of the imperative to comprehend the self, its relation to the world, and the value of existence. The key here is the Chinese concept of "*jingguan*" 靜觀,¹⁹ or "peaceful observation," which encompasses the ideas of tranquillity, disinterestedness, and detachment. And it is through this concept that we can begin to understand Gao Xingjian's idea of the tripartition of the actor, i.e., just as a writer should observe himself and society with the indifference of an outsider, an actor should also be able to observe his performance and the character he is portraying with the same degree of "coldness" and detachment.

Acting and the Tripartition of the Actor

Gao Xingjian's idea of dramaturgy affirms the importance of what he calls theatricality (*juchangxing* 劇場性). When Aristotle talks about "action," Gao Xingjian claims, he is referring to action in its fundamental sense, i.e., the kind of action that the audience can see and hear,²⁰ unlike the "action" in contemporary drama which is limited to the conflict of ideas and concepts. This physical aspect of drama is what distinguishes it from poetry, which emphasizes lyricality, and fiction, which underlines narration. Drama

is process, and while it may not necessarily be complete in itself, the changes, discoveries, and surprises in a play can be amplified and elaborated upon and made into elements of theatricality, thus generating dramatic action on the stage.²¹

According to Gao Xingjian, stage language can be used to indicate harmony or disharmony as in a musical structure. Like the notes in a symphony, the phonic qualities of words often highlight their materiality, effectively transforming the utterances into a non-narrational medium. In this manner, stage language acquires the charm and the almost magical power of chanting, and produces a deeply felt compulsion in both actors and audience. Such is the difference between the new language of drama, with its emphasis on materiality and physical impact, and the semantically inclined language commonly used in other literary genres.²²

There is yet another aspect to the making of theatricality. Drama is nothing but performance, and the actions on the stage are meant for the enjoyment of the audience. In order to facilitate this communication and to enhance its directness, Gao Xingjian maintains that the actor has to be self-conscious of his craft, being aware not only of the character he is playing but also of the fact that he is putting on a performance as a performer. This awareness is in contrast to Stanislavsky's total immersion method, and to an extent it is also distinguished from Brecht's "alienation," which breaks the illusion of realism and underlines the distance between performance and audience. To Gao Xingjian, there is no denying that drama is ostentation — the many attempts at realism by the modern theatre are nothing short of spurious and futile efforts to achieve impossibility. Ostentation is helpful and also essential to communicating with the audience: in fact, an actor should highlight the act of pretending, as if he is saying to himself and to the audience, "Look how well I can pretend to be somebody else!" As in Beijing opera or the Japanese kabuki, even though the actor focuses his attention on how to perform his role, he still manages to retain his identity as an actor — his job is to give a good performance but not to live the life of the character.²³ The pretending still exists, and is even accentuated, but it coexists with a more direct and true-to-life actor-audience communication, in which the actor has become the centre and disseminator of artistic awareness. In other words, besides the character-centred and audience-centred theories of Stanislavsky and Brecht, Gao

Xingjian has ventured his own actor-centred theory in an argument for a more self-conscious art.

How does one achieve self-consciousness and yet still be “in” the performance and a good actor at the same time? The answer to this is Gao Xingjian’s idea of the tripartition of acting. In traditional Chinese theatre, Gao Xingjian explains, when the actor gets ready for the role he is to play, he extracts himself from his everyday activities, relaxes his body and focuses his mind to enter into his performance. During this time, he “purifies” himself into a “state of neutrality”; in other words, he is in a state of transition between his everyday self and his role. This neutrality can be explained by looking at the convention of *liangxiang* 亮相²⁴ (literally “to reveal oneself”) in Beijing opera. At the time of *liangxiang*, the actor freezes his movement for a few seconds to mark his entrance or the completion of a display of martial arts, dance sequence, etc., thus making himself “appear” before his audience, who applaud and voice their approval. The performance is briefly suspended, as the actor neutralizes his acting capacity and calls attention to the exhibition of his art.

Thus in any performance, there exists in the actor three identities — the self, the neutral actor, and the character. Neutrality is not tantamount to self-effacement; it demands a self-consciousness in the actor of his own make-believe. At the same time this also equips the actor with a “third eye” of inner vision which, because of the detachment from the character he is portraying, is capable of observing his performing self, the other actors on the stage and, more importantly, the audience. Neutrality then becomes a medium which enables the actor to control and adjust his performance, helping him to be in and out of his character not only before the performance but also many times during the performance. And because the actor is both experiencing (acting) and observing himself while performing, he is more able to project his feelings into the character for the audience’s enjoyment. In any theatre, what needs to be communicated is not reality but the feeling of reality. By embodying the three identities on the stage, the actor can challenge the character he is playing, empathize with him, pity, admire and even criticize him. The dramatic tension resulting from this kind of acting is beyond that produced by mere yelling and shouting which disguise themselves as theatre. In this way, not only the plot but also acting itself can be interesting and become the focus of the

audience's attention. And the actor, because his feeling for the character is not derived exclusively from his physical self, is awarded a high degree of satisfaction through an awareness of his own artistic creation.

Points of View in Drama

Gao Xingjian is concerned about acting, but being first and foremost a writer, he is also equally concerned about playwriting. He laments the demise of the playwright in the contemporary theatre. The playwright, according to Gao, has been forced to give up his former prominence to the director, who is now the absolute ruler of the stage. With the weakening position of the playwright, theatre increasingly relies on technology to support its predominantly visual presentation, and music, which is capable of generating tension through contrasts and variations (e.g. in a symphony), has also been abused, being given the task of covering up the inadequacies in performance. As the peripherals have taken over from real dramatic action, and abstraction, in the form of exegesis of ideas, emerges as the only objective, theatre tends to become non-drama or even anti-drama and comes closer and closer to the end of the road.²⁵

As a playwright, Gao Xingjian is motivated by the desire to wrestle the centre stage from the hands of the director. He insists on the dramatic, the "drama" (戲 *xi*) happening on the stage. His plays may not feature a well-made plot, and they may even resort to abstractions from time to time, but there has to be structural integrity — expositions, contrasts, conflicts, and discoveries, the essentials with which drama is made, and which are seen as "action" by the audience. The dramatic is not confined to externalities; most of Gao Xingjian's recent works feature internal conflicts, the psychological drama within a character's consciousness.

Gao Xingjian admits that his idea of the tripartite actor is not universally applicable to all kinds of scripts, and he remains unsure whether this theory of his has been the driving force behind his style of playwriting or vice versa. The idea is part of Gao Xingjian's search for a new language for the contemporary stage; the drama of the modern man's frenzied schizophrenia demands such acting as a complement, or even prerequisite. His understanding of performance, namely, the coexistence of the self, the neutral actor, and the character in the actor, opens up new possibilities in

playwriting. Just as consciousness is capable of being realized by the tripartite actor, so it can also be interpolated on the discourse level to project different modes of perception.

It is evident that Gao Xingjian's latest works, which are included in the present collection, all feature his newly developed ideas about narrative modes in drama and put into effect his demands on the actor. In these plays the characters not only speak in the first person, as is the case by dramatic convention, they also speak and refer to themselves in the second and third persons, being in and out of their own selves in the same play or even in the same scene. For instance, in *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, the hero and the heroine speak in the first person in the first half of the play, and then switch to the second and third persons respectively in the second half, when they are languishing in a state of apparent meaninglessness as spirits after their deaths.

Gao Xingjian's experiments in the narrative modes of drama may have been inspired by the special features of the Chinese language. Many times he has commented that the Chinese language, being an uninflected language, facilitates shifting the "angle" or perspective of narration. "As the subject in a Chinese sentence can be omitted and there are no verbal conjugations, it is quite natural to displace the 'I' as the subject by a zero subject. The subjective consciousness can be transformed, achieving a pan-subjective consciousness or even self-effacement. And it is just as easy to change the 'I' into the second person (you) or the third person (he/she). The 'I' as 'you' is a case of objectification, and the 'I' as 'he/she' one of detached observation, or contemplation. This really affords the writer tremendous freedom!"²⁶

Commenting on the new possibilities of his dramatic strategy, Gao Xingjian says:

The character, which usually appears on stage in the first person, can be divided into three different points of view and can speak in three different persons, and the same character will then have three psychological dimensions. The character as both agent and receptor is enriched by many perspectives, which enable a more complete mode of expression. And from his various observation platforms, the same character will be able to generate and express

many different attitudes towards the outside world and towards his own experience of it.²⁷

The shift in narrative mode is not a mere substitution of “I” by “you,” “he” or “she”; it also has implications for the actor and the audience’s point of view. With the “I” relating the story of “you,” “he” or “she,” the character is functionally divided into two separate roles of addresser and addressee, or narrator and narratee, even though they are both physically embodied in one person. The second or third person self functions as the observed, who operates in the external world made up of other characters. As the “I” is insulated from direct contact with the external world, he is equipped with a different perspective from that of his divided double, and in his capacity as a non-participating narrator, he can be more objective in assessing his own consciousness as that of someone other than himself.

The discourse situation in Gao Xingjian’s plays mostly points to the exploration of the self, the centre around which all the happenings revolve and towards which all the meanings gravitate. In combining the narrating and experiencing selves, the narrative situation is capable of generating tension among the divided selves of the same character, with the “you” being closer to the implicit “I,” but not less confrontational than the third person self (“he/she”), who is further removed. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, “otherness” can never be firmly grasped. The other is basically a locus of the subject’s fears and dears; they do not belong to an external category, but are internal and unchangeable conditions of man’s existence. Viewed in this perspective, the dreams and speeches, when they are expressed on the stage, illuminate the split in the subject’s imaginary register and its elements.

The process opens up new venues of communication for the theatre. For instance, the “you” in *Nocturnal Wanderer*, in its capacity as the observed self of the “I,” is the main character in the play whose fate and emotions are on display. In this manner, the audience gets to see the play’s actions with an awareness of the non-experiencing “I” and his implicit judgement on the “you.” They are thus given a comprehensive picture of the drama, the complexity of the character and his inner conflicts which have been externalized, and his relationship with the world at large. In *Between Life and Death*, the heroine examines her own life in a series of

narrated flashbacks. Here the implied “I” plays the role of narrator retelling the story of “she,” who is the projected and experiencing self of “I.” In this manner, a degree of objectivity is achieved because the narrating “I,” detached from immediate experience, can be largely sheltered from self-pity. Thus on the level of expressiveness, shifting the narrative mode facilitates self-examination and makes it easier for the unconscious to reveal itself.

The modern stage has come a long way since the Stanislavskian method of realistic acting, i.e., total identification and immersion in the character being portrayed. Brecht’s epic theatre introduces the third-person narrator, and highlights stage narratology by adding another dimension to communication in the theatre — the audience, made aware of the existence of a world outside the world of the play, are “alienated” from the performance and performers. For Gao Xingjian, his idea of the theatre goes beyond alienation and invoking the audience’s rationality. It is inherent in and grows out of his conception of the world of the play, a world focusing on the consciousness of both actor and character, self-contained in its ostentation, yet made expansive so as to involve the audience both emotionally and intellectually. The key word is “self-consciousness.” Gao Xingjian’s self-conscious art reveals itself not merely in its self-reflexivity or in its relation to the world at large, i.e., how the world looks at the self; it can only be understood as self-observation in an alienated and detached manner. The relationship between the first-person self and his “other” hangs in a delicate balance, covering the whole spectrum of subjectivity and objectivity. The resultant potential for dramatic tension and conflict is part and parcel of his idea of the theatre, which encompasses both acting and playwriting.

Drama and the Modern Man

Gao Xingjian insists that his ideas should not be regarded as supporting technique for technique’s sake, nor are they merely aimed at rhetorical purposes. His pursuit of a new theatre is intended to reveal the naked realities of modern man and his living conditions — privileging formalism would only bury the truth of these realities and conditions.²⁸ Gao Xingjian is not a fan of the modern theatre (so-called “spoken drama” in

Chinese) dominated by words and their meaning-generating functions. Far more concerned with the unstated emotions in language and in performance, he aspires to a “modern language,” akin to the language games found in *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 and in the *Diamond Sutra* 《金剛經》, that will express a feeling of detachment and a kind of “free and easy” contemplation as embodied in Taoist and Buddhist texts.²⁹ In this he finds an ally in the Chinese language, which he tries to rejuvenate and develop into an appropriate medium of expression for the stage:

... I am not at all a cultural chauvinist, and I don't have in me the incomprehensible arrogance typical of the Chinese race. The only thing I want to do is to rejuvenate this ancient language, so that it can be equally able to express the bewilderment of modern man, his pursuits, his frustrations in not being able to attain them, and in the final analysis, the sufferings and happiness of living, loneliness and the dire need for expression.³⁰

Gao Xingjian's language is largely lyrical and at times even gossipy, yet it can be extremely powerful and moving in its indifference and apparent irrelevance, containing words of “unspoken wisdom.” As with many Zen Buddhist texts, his words “speak directly to the heart,” striking at the innermost core of the human soul. When they are most effective, they are graced with an almost magical power derived from a spellbinding rhythm akin to chanting, evincing a materiality beyond mere utterance and primary referentiality. The idea is to allow the mind of the audience to “wander in contemplation” among the words so as to grasp their true spirit, which resides as a sublimated effect beyond the language being used.³¹

Gao Xingjian does not resort to yelling and screaming in his writings. He is not a revolutionary, and he refuses to fight other people's war other than the one that resides in his heart. In concentrating on the self, Gao Xingjian's writings can be regarded as subjective and individualistic. However, his is a distinctive kind of individualism, one that values the self but not at the expense of others. As he says of his novel *Spiritual Mountain*:

My perception of the self has nothing to do with self-worship. I detest those people whose desire is to displace God with himself,

the kind of heroism which aspires to defeat the world, and the kind of self-purgation which puts on the guise of a tragic hero. I am myself, nothing less, nothing more.³²

In this way he rejects Nietzsche and the individualism of the West, which he considers destructive. His attitude is not unlike that of the traditional Taoist or Zen Buddhist who, bent on seclusion or exile from society to cultivating his inner virtues and strength, still casts an indifferent eye to observe the world of humans in his somewhat aloof and detached position. However, while Taoism and Buddhism aspire to understanding the *tao*, Gao Xingjian insists on knowing and studying the self and its inner secrets in all its complexities; while the former represents inner peace, Gao Xingjian finds only pain and suffering, and unfortunately, there appears to be no salvation. The individual is helpless in the face of this predicament, for he is impotent to change himself or his world. He can assert his existence only by way of thinking and of the production of discourse (he once proclaimed: "I discourse, therefore I am"³³); ironically these tend to become as ineffectual and meaningless as the world he finds himself in — therein resides the frustration and insoluble dilemma of modern man.

The Plays

The Other Shore 彼岸 (Bi'an) (1986)

Written in early 1986, *The Other Shore* was originally scheduled to be performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre under the direction of Lin Zhaohua, but the rehearsal was suspended because the play was considered politically sensitive. This marked a turning point in Gao Xingjian's thinking — he gradually came to the realization that the authorities would no longer allow his plays to be performed in China. (*The Other Shore* was subsequently performed in Taiwan by the Taiwan National College of Art in 1990 and by the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in 1995. Both productions were directed by the playwright.)

The Other Shore is a short but complex play. The plot is made up of disjointed narrative units that do not apparently or necessarily connect with one another, at least in a structurally coherent manner. However, each

unit can be seen as self-contained and is interesting and meaningful by itself. Gao Xingjian considers the play as his attempt at “pure” drama:

The Other Shore is different from conventional drama. One of the differences is that the play does not attempt to put together a coherent plot. I only intend it to be a revelation, to portray some of life’s experiences and feelings in a pure dramatic form, i.e., in the same way that music is pure.³⁴

The title *Bi’an* (literally “the other shore” or “the opposite shore”) refers to *paramita*, the land of enlightenment in Buddhism. According to Buddhist beliefs, one is able to cross the river of life — from the shore of delusion and suffering to the other shore of enlightenment — by cultivating and perfecting the *paramita* virtues of generosity, morality, patience, vigor, concentration (or meditation) and wisdom. The play reveals the fundamental tragedy of human life: even after crossing the river and reaching the other shore, the characters find that enlightenment is unobtainable, and that they are still trapped in the delusions and sufferings of everyday life from which there is no escape. As Gao Xingjian says, “It is destined that the individual will never be able to acquire the ultimate truth, which is known as God or the other shore.”³⁵

At least two issues stand out in the play: collectivism and personal salvation. In the opening scene, the game of ropes first illustrates the establishment of inter-personal relationships and the virtue and necessity of communal living. However, the ropes are soon subject to manipulation and control, and the relationships turn into unequal partnerships overrun by totalitarian rule. Then comes the river crossing by a group of actors, a difficult undertaking but hopeful of happiness upon its completion. After crossing the river to the other shore, the actors are accorded a temporary bliss through their loss of language. However, as soon as they are taught to speak again by Woman, a mother figure, they learn to distinguish between self and other and are anxious to seek out the outsider among them. Incited by their own words to irrational violence, they smother Woman to death and try to put the blame on one another. As the group turns into an unruly mob, they need a leader to guide them. They try to pressure Man, who may be regarded as the *de facto* hero in the play, to take up the role.

When Man refuses, they let themselves fall into the hands of a manipulating card-playing Master, who tempts them with wine and coaxes them into making fools of themselves. In an attempt to please Master, they willingly confuse reality with illusion and compromise truth with falsehood. Together they ridicule and persecute Man, the individualist among them. The various episodes in the first part of the play, at first appearing fragmented, are now given a thematic unity underscoring the flaw of collectivism, that it can easily degenerate into blind obedience and violence and play into the hands of a manipulative leader.

The scenes that follow describe Man's search for personal salvation as he tries to assert his independence in the community of man. Besieged by adversities, he feels smothered by the unreasonable demands on his individuality. As a result, he is frustrated in every way, a total failure in human relations. With his non-conformist stance, he cannot get along with the masses, nor can he obtain any understanding from his father and his mother; even his yearning for love is denied him. An outcast turned cynic, he strives frantically to pick up the pieces of his life, doing so literally by rearranging the arms and legs of mannequins to make them whole again and, like God, he tries to create his own version of human society. But when the mannequins become too many, he finds himself helplessly drawn into their collective pattern of frenzied movements: this is mob behaviour once again. All the time his actions are haunted by the underlying presence of the Zen Master and his chanting, as if he is casting a "cold" eye of indifference on the futility of all of Man's undertakings. In the end, Man leaves the stage "a drooping, blind, and deaf heart," and the masses become actors again as the play reverts to the everyday life of the beginning, the world before the river crossing to "the other shore."

To an extent *The Other Shore* expresses the author's misgivings about collectivism and its darker consequences. The ending offers no salvation for the persecuting masses and their irrationality, and there exists no one, like the "silent man" in *Bus Stop* or the ecologist in *Wilderness Man*, who takes on the role of the harbinger of hope. Communication is impossible despite human interaction, or because of it, for language is highly suspect, a means of deception, violence, and the distortion of intentions. As a result the individual can only seek refuge in the "dark and shady forest" of his heart, reminiscing about his past life until life itself perishes. But all is not

futile — for all its darkness and despair, the play also affords a glimpse of self-knowledge in the pursuit of an equilibrium between the self and the outside world.³⁶

Of course we are treading on dangerous ground in attempting to interpret the unity and the meaning of the play. It is as if each interpretation leads to another that is its contradiction, and there is always the risk of oversimplification. Perhaps it is better to just regard the play, as Gao Xingjian suggests, as a training exercise for actors. To our writer, *The Other Shore* is an experiment in pursuit of a modern theatre, using Eastern drama as a starting point. As with Peking opera, it is actor-centred, and communication with the audience is mostly derived from the directness of the actors' performance.³⁷ The play is also the first piece of work by the playwright embodying his idea of the neutral actor:

Crossing the river to the other shore is a key moment in the performance. After the rigorous movements of playing with the ropes and rapidly exchanging partners, the actors relax their bodies and lie on the floor to listen to the music. As they let the music evoke their feelings, their bodies are not motivated by ideas. This is a process of self-purgation.³⁸

From this moment on the actors will be able to “forget” themselves and to effectively focus their attention on observing their own body movements and listening to their own voices. And Shadow, Man's super-ego, is the physical manifestation of the neutral actor on stage: he is there to observe, evaluate and even make fun of “Man” in the encounter of the self with his other.

Between Life and Death 生死界 (Shengsijie) (1991)

In 1989, Gao Xingjian finished *Exile* (*Taowang* 逃亡), which is set against the background of the 1989 Tiananmen incident. The play describes the stories of three characters, a young man, a young girl student, and a middle-aged writer, who are in hiding and running from the pursuing PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers. It unmask and examines the fundamental human weaknesses, such as fear and desire, and the naive

idealism among the participants in the Democracy Movement, and casts doubts on the wisdom, and even the possibility, of the intelligentsia's intrusion into politics. In the end, the only way out for all the characters, as for the writer in real life, is to go into exile.

Between Life and Death, written two years after *The Other Shore*, can be seen as an attempt by Gao Xingjian to chastise the Chineseness in him (probably because of his displeasure with the adverse reactions to *Exile* in 1989) and pursue writing for a universal audience. The setting is unspecified and, except for the appearance of a Buddhist nun, there is no reference to anything specifically Chinese. The heroine, without any indication of her nationality, is just called Woman; she could be "everywoman." She serves as the play's narrator, describing her tortured life story, her fears and sensitivities, which are seen as typical of the female sex. In light of this, the play apparently champions feminism, especially women's sufferings at the hands of men. As the narrator-heroine says, "In her life, a woman is destined to suffer five hundred times more than a man." Even women help men to oppress other women, and they can be more vicious than men to their own kind. However, the play's concerns are actually more ambitious, as the collectivist themes in Gao Xingjian's previous works have been displaced by the more subjective question of the self and the existential.

The story is about a woman who faces the end of her life's journey in both mental and physical exhaustion. The various episodes in her monologue fall mainly into three categories. First there is her love-hate relationship with Man, who has no speaking parts but expresses his reactions to her monologue by performing pantomimes. She keeps nagging him, accuses him of infidelity and threatens to leave him. But when he disappears and eventually transforms into a pile of clothing, she is full of remorse, wishing that he could have stayed and made up with her. This is a sad comment on the fate of Woman, and of women in general — she attempts to assert her independence, but in the end she finds that she still has to depend on Man, at least for his companionship.

What follows are reminiscences of Woman's tainted past. She spent a harrowing childhood in a windowless house. She tried to get her mother's attention by cutting her finger with a pair of scissors. She was raped by her mother's lover. She had an affair with a woman doctor and her

husband, in which she was used as a plaything to spice up their sex life. And then there was her irksome one-night stand with some unknown man. According to her own admission, she has abandoned herself to living a life of sin after being manipulated and exploited by both men and women. Feeling guilty and remorseful, she takes off her ring, her bracelet and her earrings, all tokens of her past experiences, to purge herself of her sins, but all is in vain. As her disappointment grows, she feels increasingly depressed about herself, thinking that she is unfit to be a mother and unworthy of a warm and comfortable home. She is alone in the world among its evil and squalor, with nothing to look forward to except the end of her life.

The latter part of the play features a series of hallucination scenes. Here Woman finds herself languishing in a state “between life and death” as she makes various frantic attempts to discover the meaning of her existence in her encounters with the supernatural. A masked man appears, chases her in his car and warns her of a bloody disaster. Then she slides down into the depths of icy water. A nun, whom Woman first mistakes as the Buddhist Bodhisattva, disembowels herself, cleanses her intestines, puts them on a plate and then throws them in Woman’s face. A man dressed in black and perched on high stilts approaches, watching over her with a big black eye in his hand. A headless woman follows Woman, also with a big eye in her hand. The play ends with Woman musing aloud on the question of her identity while an old man tries to catch an imaginary snowflake with his hat.

As spectacle, the hallucination scenes in the last part of the play are the most dramatic and effective. The images are horrifying and dreamlike, and their accompanying earnestness and intensity make them disturbingly real. One recurring image in these scenes is the big eye, which appears twice and each time sends shudders down Woman’s heart. The first one, painted on a man’s hand, denotes the eye of other people and the opposite sex, and Woman feels that this eye has been following her all her life. The second is the eye carried by the headless woman, presumably embodying the soul of the heroine, and the eye is the inner eye. The fear of being spied upon lingers and terrorizes Woman as she feels that her judgement day is approaching.

In *The Other Shore*, Gao Xingjian resorts to externalization to realize his idea of self-examination by using different characters to portray the

divided self, the observer and the observed. In *Between Life and Death*, he goes one step further towards subjectivizing and neutralizing the self: the two versions of the self are combined and contained in one character. The narrating "I" is the experiencing "she," even though the two are distinguished from each other in the use of deixis. The former, referring to her own story in the third person, distances herself not only from past experiences but also from the actions and emotions of the present. Ubiquitous in its presence, the "I" reveals itself only through narration, depending on discourse to prove her being (despite the fact that language is evasive and is itself in a state of chaos). The gap between the two selves remains unbridgeable from beginning to end. The narrating "I," like the big black eyes in the play, is always observing and implicitly evaluating, and so tends to transcend the immediacy of the moment. On the other hand, the "she," as the reification of "I" and the object of narration, can only aspire to the physicality of experience, the world of suffering and emotion. Thus the "I" plays the role of a "cold" and detached observer, but the irony is that it cannot be without the impassioned "she" and her worldliness.

The shift in narrative mode underlines the horror because of the need for objectification, but the play is more than the story of a fallen woman and her search for salvation. It is an examination of the dark secrets of a woman's inner world haunted by fears of rejection, ageing, death and the final judgement, and even of life itself, leading up to the impossibility of absolution despite her hysterical protestations. Narrated in the third person, these fears are given full expression, free from self-pity which tends to be inhibiting and selective. Apart from the psychological exigencies, the narrative situation eventuates in a split of the character, creating tension between the narrating "I" and the experiencing "she." In light of Gao Xingjian's idea of the neutral actor, the actress playing Woman, by positioning herself in an in-between space, can be in and out of her role in the course of performance. She addresses the character she is portraying as "she," and thus carries out a "disinterested observation" of her own performance in the same way that the two big black eyes observe Woman's actions. As the writer says in the postscript: "The narrator in the play, i.e., Woman, should not be regarded the same as a character. She is both in and out of the character, but still preserving her status as an actress." At times

she appears to share the character's emotional torments, but mostly she is with the audience, on the outside looking in.

The playwright also requires that the props in the play, the coat-hanger, the building blocks, the jewellery box and the dismembered mannequin, etc. are to be "enlivened," regarded as living characters, in their encounters with Woman. As in traditional Chinese theatre, the props are the bases and extensions of the performance process. For example, Man turns into a coat-hanger after he has been strangled by Woman; the building blocks are a reminder of Woman's memories; and the jewellery box represents the grave in which Woman buries herself and her past. Together with the other on-stage but non-speaking actors — the actress who performs the various psychological manifestations of Woman and the actor who plays Man, the ghost, the clown and the Old Man — the props as "living" characters combine to create a "psychological arena" where the drama of Woman's consciousness is revealed and played out, not only within the heroine herself but also among the various performing roles.

Dialogue and Rebuttal 對話與反詰 (Duihua yu fanjie) (1992)

Gao Xingjian appears to have a love-hate relationship with language. He has said that he wants to enhance the expressiveness of the Chinese language, yet he also condemns the ascendancy of language in modern drama, which he says has deprived the stage of its theatricality. With *Dialogue and Rebuttal* he claims to have made a determined effort to destroy language³⁹ and to cast doubts on its meaning-generating functions.⁴⁰ The play is made up of a series of dialogues between a man and a woman, generically known as Man and Woman, two strangers who have just had a brief sexual encounter. In the aftermath of their physical contact, they shut themselves out from each other in the ensuing conversation, refusing to engage in any meaningful communication. Woman flaunts her sexuality and laments her plight as a woman, but her fear of ageing and dying fails to arouse any sympathetic response in Man. Man is only interested in gratifying his prurient curiosity, as when he listens with relish to Woman's stories of her sexual caper in India and her alleged rape by her physical education teacher when she was a young schoolgirl. In the absence of love and understanding, only desire is left as the embodiment of physicality, and

their conversation merely serves to uncover the loneliness, boredom and futility of their lives.

The dialogues between Man and Woman, invariably short, non-expressive and generally indicative of an indifference towards each other, are interrupted by the characters' monologues narrated in the second (Man) or the third person (Woman). These digressions evince a move away from the drama between the two characters, who then become the objects of observation, evaluation and commentary by their own alienated selves. At times the monologues, as in the moment of "sudden enlightenment" in Zen Buddhism, serve to expose the truth of the predicaments in which the characters are trapped, but they also further neutralize their relationship. Even though the plot is dependent on the presence of Man and Woman, it is even more dependent on the absence of interaction between them. Communication is only one-way, from the narrating self to the experiencing self, not between the characters, as each is preoccupied in their own cocooned world.

At the end of the first half, the non-communication eventually leads to boredom and a bizarre game of sexual perversion, in which Man and Woman stab each other to death. As in *The Other Shore*, language inevitably alienates and ushers in violence. In the second half, communication remains impossible between the kindred spirits, for in most cases, the ghosts of Man and Woman are not talking to each other but to their own dead bodies or to the other's head lying on the stage floor. At this time, even sexual desire, which was the only channel of interaction in the first half, has lost its attractiveness. Man keeps looking for a door to escape from his predicament even though he knows that there is nothing behind that door, and Woman is preoccupied with reminiscences of the violence and suffering in her life, striving fruitlessly to ascertain her existence by the production of discourse. They are like dancing partners who nonetheless insist on being distanced from each other and shy away from any direct emotional contact. In the end, words have lost their referential function and the game of free association, with its occasional and accidental overlaps of meaning, is the only hint of their participation in a dialogue and of their existence. The irony is that both Man and Woman are already dead, their physical being already taken away from them by their nonsensical game of desire, which was meant to verify their being alive in the first place.

Their deaths have prevented them from talking to each other — only their souls are talking to their bodies.⁴¹ All that remains in language is a “crack,” the ever-increasing communication gap between humans. At the end of the play Man and Woman have become crawling worms; the reification of their human selves signifies a regression, or a recognition of their true identities and the true nature of human existence.

Witnessing and punctuating this drama of futility is the Monk and his acrobatic tricks. Like Man and Woman, he is also enwrapped in his own world and he makes no effort to communicate, or as Gao Xingjian puts it, there seems to be an invisible wall between the Monk and the other two characters. In one sense he is a foil, for while the acting of Man and Woman is naturalistic, his is highly ritualistic, and when they are hysterical and metamorphosed in the realm of the dead, he is composed, indifferent and above all, wordless, in sharp contrast to their rambling, meaningless verbosity. Even though he remains unfazed from beginning to end, he is not beyond laughing at himself. His attempts at a one-finger headstand, standing an egg on a stick and other antics are illustrations of the futility and frustrations of human endeavours.⁴² He is transcendental but not totally otherworldly, his antics being the follies of his own humanity. He listens carefully (this is symbolized by cleaning his ears, a gesture imbued with Buddhist meanings), and he observes with indifference that he has seen through the emptiness of human desires and sufferings. Perhaps the personification of Gao Xingjian’s idea of “indifferent observation,” he is content in the wordless wisdom accorded to him by his attainment of the state of Zen. If the drama between Man and Woman is “dialogue,” the Monk’s pantomime tricks are a “rebuttal,” an unspoken challenge to and ultimate denial of any possibility of meaning in language and in life’s activities.

Monk’s on-stage presence invokes a meaning beyond words. His role is meaningful in its meaninglessness, evincing a negative capability discernible in the hopeless world of Man and Woman. There remains in this paradox a capacity, a virtue that comes with the loss of referentiality, an attitude towards life derived from the understanding of the illogicality and the unstated meaning of language in Zen.⁴³ Gao Xingjian claims that he has no intention to promote Zen Buddhism or to expound its teachings: he is only interested in nudging the audience into contemplation, so that they can come close to the state of wordless and unspoken wisdom.⁴⁴ At

the end, the Monk reveals a greyish blue sky, which is eternal and peaceful, a symbol of the quiet acceptance of the way of the universe.

Nocturnal Wanderer 夜遊神 (Yeyoushen) (1993)

The subject matter of *Nocturnal Wanderer* is a dream, and through the dream the inner world of the protagonist, Traveller, is revealed in all its horror and insidiousness. The world of reality, with which the play begins, inspires the dream and provides the dramatis personae for the dream world. Traveller enters the dream world and becomes Sleepwalker, who embarks on a journey of self-discovery in his encounters with Tramp, Prostitute, Thug and Master, the various characters corresponding to the passengers Traveller meets on the train. The metamorphoses of people in the real world into dream world characters are accomplished in and through Traveller's psyche and its workings: they are imaginings and representations indicative of his secret fears and desires. In this way the dream is set up as an exploration of Traveller's consciousness.

Gao Xingjian has said that the play is about good and evil, about man, Satan, and God, and about man's self-consciousness.⁴⁵ In the dream, goodness, seen as Sleepwalker's conscience and innate sense of rectitude, is invariably suppressed and displaced by evil, either voluntarily or as an expedient. And Sleepwalker, an everyman figure whose only wish is to take a stroll in the night, just cannot escape being encroached upon by evil — Thug who threatens his life, Master who wants to control his thoughts, and Prostitute who tempts his soul (she later turns into his friend and critic exposing the lies in his life). Man is not born evil; in the case of Sleepwalker, evil is thrust upon him by a world infested with crime and violence. Consequently he is transformed into a murderer more flagitious than Thug or Master, someone who readily abandons his sensibility, his conscience and his sense of morality. He kills Tramp, who with the sagacity of a Buddhist monk represents salvation for his soul, thus depriving himself of any chance of redemption. He even rejects his head, which symbolizes thinking and reason, as he tramples upon it and breaks it into pieces.

At the end of the play Sleepwalker becomes fascinated by evil; in fact, he is obsessed with it. But just when he manages to bury his guilt by rationalization, feeling happy for himself in his newfound pleasure in

violence, he encounters his double, perhaps the narrating “I” in the nightmare. The two grapple with each other in a fight: Sleepwalker still has to run the gauntlet of his own self. Traveller has embarked on a journey of being and existence, but he discovers only violence and horror. Evil is ubiquitous in the outside world, but the real horror is that it also lurks inside the self, jumping at any chance to rear its ugly head. Traveller as everyman, or “archetypal man”⁴⁶ thus finds himself threatened by what surrounds him and what resides within him. In dream as in reality evil is invincible and irresistible, for as Sleepwalker finds out, it is the only means with which to fend for oneself; however, even this recourse to evil represents nothing more than a meaningless resistance against a world of meaninglessness. In the final scene Traveller and all the other passengers are gone; what remains is nothing but an open book which has inspired the nightmare.

There are three levels of consciousness in *Nocturnal Wanderer*, each one penetrating deeper into the psyche of the protagonist. The first level is located in the real and objective world of the train coach; here Traveller speaks in the first person. On the second level, Traveller becomes Sleepwalker in the dream. And as he speaks in the second person, he creates a third level of reality made up of self-reflections, where he takes on the role of observer, insulated from the experiencing self of evil, violence, and gratuitous sexuality, a world he finds inexplicable. What happens in the dream world also reflects on the world of reality, for the characters in the dream, Tramp, Prostitute, Thug, and Master have been transmuted into being through and by Traveller’s feelings towards the world he is living in. The products of his mental processes, these “images of the heart” 心像 have ironically become the masters controlling his consciousness. Gao Xingjian has commented that:

- *Between Life and Death*, *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, and *Nocturnal Wanderer* are concerned with the state of liminality between life and
- death or between reality and imagination. They also reveal the
- nightmare in the inner world of man. In these plays, the relation-
- ship with reality only serves as a starting point. What I strive to
- capture is the reality of the feelings in the psyche, a naked reality
- which needs no embellishment, and which is larger and more

important than all the exegeses on religion, ethics, or philosophy, so that human beings can be seen as more human, and their true nature can be more fully revealed.⁴⁷

In *Nocturnal Wanderer*, the key concepts are subjectivization and detachment: subjectivization transforms objective reality so as to delve into the meanings hidden behind the facade of the perceptible, and detachment objectifies such transformations as the other, so that a truthful picture of the subject becomes obtainable. Just as he demands that his actors be neutral observers of the performing self, Gao Xingjian also insists that his characters should observe themselves as the other through shifts in narrative mode. In this way the actor and the character he is playing are divided yet unified, and life as a multifaceted reflection of the self is incorporated into art.

Weekend Quartet 周末四重奏 (Zhoumo sichongzou) (1995)

Gao Xingjian believes in the constant renewal of his craft. With *Weekend Quartet*, his latest play, he appears to have made a determined effort to try his hand at something different — a realistic play devoid of the rituals and magical spectacles of his recent works. Whereas the previous plays are not keen on characterization, *Weekend Quartet* is peopled by characters with names and individualizing traits. With their varied backgrounds and personalities, they react differently to the dramatic situations in the plot, functioning like the different musical instruments in a quartet ensemble.

There is very little action in the four scenes (“quartets”), and there are no crises pushing the characters to the brink of their sanity as in *Between Life and Death* and *Nocturnal Wanderer*. The story is made up of the kind of everyday happenings one finds in real life — an elderly couple, owners of an old farm in the country, is visited by a young couple whose relationship is as unstable as their older counterparts, and the uneventful plot revolves around their romantic entanglements which, like all of their lives, lead nowhere. Bernard is an old and famous painter. Increasingly weary of living, he is nonetheless afraid of loneliness and of growing old, and he tries to prove what remains of his virility by chasing after the young girls he employs as models. His companion Anne, a more sober and worldly type,

has been an aspiring writer all her life, and she is equally obsessed with ageing and dying. To compensate for the lack of attention from Bernard, she flirts with their guest Daniel, a middle-aged writer. Daniel is at the end of his writing career — he has run out of things to write. A lost soul without any commitments, whether it is in ideology or love, he has nothing left in his life except his cynicism. Among this insipid bunch, Cecily, Daniel's girlfriend, is like a breath of fresh air, even though her liveliness could easily have been contrived. An ordinary girl except for her attractiveness, she does not hesitate to use her charms to her advantage. She has no lofty goals but wishes to find a mate to provide her with food and a roof over her head. Towards the end of the play even she grows tired of her role as the *femme fatale*. Her outward liveliness can hardly contain the same death in spirit as that of the other characters.

As with most of Gao Xingjian's plays, *Weekend Quartet* is not made up of external actions but of the interior landscapes of the soul. It is a play about characters and also about their self-examinations: they are likened to musical instruments playing life's sorrowful tunes. Unlike the other plays in this collection, its concerns are not so much existential in a philosophical sense as the fears and worries of ordinary living, the realities of how to accommodate oneself to the banalities of day-to-day living. There are no real crises but trivial conflicts and verbal squabbles which, as in a musical quartet, make up the changes in the mood of the play. Quartets 1 and 2 are expositions and complications, while Quartet 3 is made more sombre with the expose of the characters' dark inner secrets, and the final Quartet is spirited and gay, ending with a game of disjointed words and phrases in an acceptance of life's impossibility of meaning. It is as if the play has finally come to terms with life in exploring into the truth of man's existence.

While the characters are built up in the traditional manner, the audience, in a typical Gao Xingjian manner, also gets to know the truth of their private selves through their monologues, comprising dream sequences, hallucinations, and memory flashes. These lapses into the subconscious punctuate the realistic setting and situations and resonate with a disharmony that characterizes the world of the play. The characters' self-examinations are unprovoked and are mostly unrelated to the action — as if the play willingly and deliberately suspends itself, forfeiting its illusion

of reality and forcing the actors to neutralize their roles under the watchful eyes of the audience. During these monologues, the actors speak in the second or third person to carry out an “indifferent observation” of the characters they are portraying. Despite its realistic subject matter and characters, *Weekend Quartet* purposely flaunts its mechanical nature and achieves an artificiality which, coupled with the seemingly contradictory demand for real-life emotions, approximates the playwright’s concept of a modern dramatic performance.

Notes

1. Gao Xingjian 高行健, “Lun wenxue xiezuo” 〈論文學寫作〉 (On Writing Literature), in his *Meiyou zhuyi* 《沒有主義》 (None-ism) (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 1996), p. 57.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
3. Gao Xingjian, “Geri huanghua” 〈隔日黃花〉 (Day-old Yellow Blossoms), in his *Bi'an* 《彼岸》 (The Other Shore) (Taipei: Dijiao Chubanshe 帝教出版社, 1995), pp. 86–87.
4. Zhao Yiheng 趙毅衡, “Gao Xingjian chuanguozuolun” 〈高行健創作論〉 (On Gao Xingjian’s Creative Writing), unpublished manuscript, p. 34.
5. Gao Xingjian, “Bali suibi” 〈巴黎隨筆〉 (Random Thoughts in Paris), *Guangchang* 《廣場》, Feb. 1991, p. 14.
6. Zhao, p. 43.
7. Gao Xingjian, “Chidaole de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjin Zhongguo wenxue” 〈遲到了的現代主義與當今中國文學〉 (The Late Arrival of Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 102. First appeared in *Wenxue pinglun* 《文學評論》, No. 3, 1988.
8. Gao Xingjian, “Ling yizhong xiju” 〈另一種戲劇〉 (Another Kind of Drama), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 191.
9. Gao Xingjian, “Wo zhuzhang yizhong lengde wenxue” 〈我主張一種冷的文學〉 (I Advocate “Cold Literature”), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, pp. 18–20. Also in *Zhongshi wanbao* 《中時晚報》, 12 Aug. 1990.
10. Gao Xingjian, “Lun wenxue xiezuo” 〈論文學寫作〉, p. 54.
11. Gao Xingjian, “Wo zhuzhang yizhong lengde wenxue” 〈我主張一種冷的文學〉, p. 20.
12. Gao Xingjian, “Meiyou zhuyi” 〈沒有主義〉, in *Meiyou zhuyi*, pp. 8–17.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
14. Gao Xingjian, “Lun wenxue xiezuo” 〈論文學寫作〉, pp. 34–35.
15. Gao Xingjian, “Ping Faguo guanyu dangdai yishu de lunzhan” 〈評法國關於當代藝術的論戰〉 (The Controversy on Contemporary Art in France), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 281.

16. Zhao, p. 72.
17. Gao Xingjian, "Chidaole de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjin Zhongguo wenxue" (遲到了的現代主義與當今中國文學), p. 104.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
19. Gao Xingjian, "Wo zhuzhang yizhong lengde wenxue" (我主張一種冷的文學), p. 20.
20. Gao Xingjian, "Juzuofa yu zhongxing yanyuan" (劇作法與中性演員) (Dramaturgy and the Neutral Actor), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 254.
21. Gao Xingjian, "Yao shenmoyang de xiju" (要甚麼樣的戲劇) (The Kind of Drama I Prefer), *Lianhe wenxue* 《聯合文學》, No. 41, 1988, p. 133.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–37.
23. Gao Xingjian, "Wode xiju he wode yaoshi" (我的戲劇和我的鑰匙) (My Plays and the Key to My Writing), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 238.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Gao Xingjian, "Meiyou zhuyi" (沒有主義), p. 14.
26. Gao Xingjian, "Wenxue yu lingxue: Guanyu 'Lingshan'" (文學與靈學：關於《靈山》) (Literature and Spiritualism, About *Spiritual Mountain*), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, pp. 174–75.
27. Gao Xingjian, "Juzuofa yu zhongxing yanyuan" (劇作法與中性演員), pp. 262–63.
28. Gao Xingjian, "Ling yizhong xiju" (另一種戲劇), p. 191.
29. Gao Xingjian, "Wenxue yu lingxue: Guanyu 'Lingshan'" (文學與靈學：關於《靈山》), p. 175.
30. Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an" (關於《彼岸》) (On *The Other Shore*), in *Bi'an* 《彼岸》, pp. 68–69.
31. Gao Xingjian, "Wenxue yu lingxue: Guanyu 'Lingshan'" (文學與靈學：關於《靈山》), p. 175.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
33. Gao Xingjian, "Liuwang shi women huode shenme?" (流亡使我們獲得什麼) (What Have We Gained from Being in Exile?), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 128.
34. Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an" (關於《彼岸》), p. 69.
35. Gao Xingjian, "Guojia shenhua yu geren diankuang" (國家神話與個人癡狂) (National Mythology and Personal Lunacy), *Ming Pao Monthly* 《明報月刊》, Aug. 1993, p. 117.
36. Zhao, p. 88.
37. Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an" (關於《彼岸》), p. 69.
38. Gao Xingjian, "Bi'an daoyan houji" (《彼岸》導演後記) (Written After Directing *The Other Shore*), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 225.
39. Gao Xingjian, "Meiyou zhuyi" (沒有主義), p. 13.
40. Kong Jiesheng 孔捷生, "Xiao wutai he da shijie: Yu lu Fa dalu zuojia Gao Xingjian duitan" (小舞台和大世界：與旅法大陸作家高行健對話) (Small Stage and Big World:

Dialogue with the Dramatist Gao Xingjiang, a Chinese Expatriate in France), *Minzhu Zhongguo*《民主中國》, No. 16, July 1993, p. 86.

41. Gao Xingjian, “*Duihua yu fanjie daobiaoyan tan*”〈《對話與反詰》導表演談〉(On Directing and Acting in *Dialogue and Rebuttal*), in *Meiyou zhuyi*, p. 208.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
43. Gao Xingjian, “*Meiyou zhuyi*”〈沒有主義〉, p. 13.
44. Gao Xingjian, “*Duihua yu fanjie daobiaoyan tan*”〈《對話與反詰》導表演談〉, p. 196.
45. Kong Jiesheng, “*Xiao wutai he da shijie: Yu lu Fa dalu zuojia Gao Xingjian duitan*”〈小舞台和大世界：與旅法大陸作家高行健對談〉, p. 86.
46. Gao Xingjian, “*Ling yizhong xiju*”〈另一種戲劇〉, p. 191.
47. *Ibid.*