Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Transcultural Theater

Exiled Playwright and Nobel Laureate

In his now-classic book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin pursues a detailed study of a generation of innovative and provocative dramatists in the 1950s and 1960s. From the experiences of those he calls the Absurdists, Esslin concludes: “New theatrical devices, new approaches to language, character, plot and construction of plays are necessary to the continued vitality of the theatre. Surprise, shock, the gasp of incomprehension are among the most powerful weapons in the armoury of the stage” (1991:430–431). Esslin’s insightful analysis of these European dramatists is indeed a fitting description of the Chinese-French playwright Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) and his theater.

The first Nobel Laureate in literature (2000) to write primarily in the Chinese language, Gao Xingjian is one of the most controversial figures, both artistically and politically, in contemporary China. Between 1982 and 1985, three of his plays were staged by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre—the most renowned theater company in the capital of the People’s Republic, with a dominantly realist tradition—where he served as a professional playwright. However, none of Gao’s plays had conformed to the realist tradition. Each one of these plays in fact shocked Chinese audiences and critics in its own way—aesthetically and ideologically. What Esslin called “the gasp of incomprehension,” essentially an expression of fear and insecurity when one is faced with vigorous challenges, could be the latent force underlying the abundant condemnation targeted at Gao. Gao was not a martyr; neither did he aspire to be one. Twice he fled from apparent danger of suppression and persecution—to the remote hinterland of southwestern China in 1985 and then to the West, for good, in 1987.
At a time when realism was the officially sanctioned mode and ideology of theatrical representation—and in fact for all literary and artistic representation—as it had been in China since the early 1940s, Gao’s nonconformist approach to theater appeared to be both novel in form and subversive in ideology. Gao and his collaborators cautiously attempted to avoid accusations that charged them as ideologically subversive by strictly containing any explanation of their works within the sphere of artistic experimentation (Gao 1998a). However, their experimentation not only provided an alternative to formal representation but also led audiences to adopt different perspectives in their reflection of the issues represented in the theater.

It is difficult to imagine how, after realism—and later socialist realism—had dominated artistic representation as well as the mindset of artists in China for forty years, Chinese writers and artists were able to break away from this tradition. In this respect, the Theater of the Absurd, especially that of the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), was a great inspiration to Gao, who had access to it owing to his knowledge of French language and literature. These Western dramatists, their works and their aesthetics—little if not totally unknown to Chinese playwrights or audiences in the immediate post–Cultural Revolution years—offered a critical alternative approach to the current state of theatrical practice as well as to traditional Chinese theatrical aesthetics. The innovative and reflective spirit of dramatists such as Beckett formed the bedrock of Gao’s continuous bold experimentation. In his later, postexile works completed while he lived in Paris, it is apparent that this spirit remains one of the key motivations of Gao’s dramatic creation.

After Gao left China in 1987, the heated controversies that his plays had stirred up faded. When I interviewed scholars of contemporary drama in Beijing in 1999,1 they concluded without hesitation that while Gao was one of the central figures in Chinese experimental theater in the mid-1980s, his influence had subsided to the extent that his name would not even be known to students of drama studies today. This obscurity is largely attributable to the fact that, after he vehemently denounced the Chinese government for its crackdown in Tiananmen Square (1989), both the publication and the performance of his works were banned in China. Meanwhile, however, there has been continued interest in Gao in Taiwan and Hong Kong,2 more or less confined within academic circles.

It was little wonder that when the Swedish Academy announced Gao as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000, critics and
journalists were bewildered.\(^3\) It was especially baffling to people in mainland China, who had long hoped to be connected with the (Western) world, and one way would be to have a Chinese writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Those who had previously heard Gao’s name were equally surprised, as the Gao they knew was a playwright who staged a few experimental works in the 1980s that by now were mostly forgotten.

Controversy surrounded Gao’s identity. Upon hearing the news that Gao was awarded the Nobel prize, the Chinese Association of Writers maintained that Gao is a French writer, not a Chinese writer (Gao had acquired French citizenship), and that his winning of the prize had nothing to do with China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry criticized the Nobel committee for being politically motivated. In contrast, the news was enthusiastically embraced in Taiwan, where Gao was praised for having made Chinese people around the world proud (Lianhe bao, October 13 and 14, 2000). The opening line of the Swedish Academy’s English-language press release says, “The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2000 goes to the Chinese writer Gao Xingjian” (italics mine), while the same organization gives Gao’s nationality as French. The Chinese-language press release clarifies that Gao is a “Zhongwen zuojia,” literally a “Chinese-language writer,” whereas the word “Chinese” in English could mean both “Chinese national” and “Chinese language.” The ambiguity has added some dramatic effect to the controversy about Gao’s identity, especially for those who have chosen to use the occasion to make a political statement.

Whether Gao has been overtly political in his works is debatable. He has always reserved his right to make political commentaries, although he never wanted to be involved in political activism (Gao 1996a:94). I would argue that Gao’s works cannot be divorced from the political contexts in which they were produced. Even a play like Bayue xue (August snow; written in 1997, first published in 2000), the life story of a Chan Buddhist patriarch living in seventh-century China,\(^4\) seemingly free of contemporary politics, can be read as a political allegory. It is indeed a traditional practice of Chinese intellectuals and writers to, as the old Chinese idiom says, use the past as a criticism of the present (jie gu yu jin).\(^5\)

The Swedish Academy is not devoid of political inclination, either, as is clearly suggested in the Nobel diploma presented to Gao. With a piece of artwork on one side and the award citation on the other, the Nobel diploma is individually designed to capture the achievements of the laureate. In Gao’s diploma, there are thirteen rows of eight neatly
arranged red, five-pointed stars against a black background. The center of the artwork is superimposed with a white horizontal stroke, resembling the Chinese character \( yi \) (one) in running-style calligraphy. The horizontal stroke could be a symbol of the Daoist notion of \( taiji \)—from which the universe is born—representing Gao’s artistic world and its genesis, which is profoundly influenced by the philosophies of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. The rows of orderly red stars, however, clearly suggest the communist regime in China. Does the design signify Gao’s art and philosophy breaking away from the oppression of the government of the Chinese Communist Party and that, now liberated, Gao occupies a higher moral ground than the regime that ruled over his past?

It is indeed important to understand Gao Xingjian’s past before studying his theater. To put Gao’s art and thought in perspective, I will begin with a biographical account of Gao, with an emphasis on his encounter with theater and the development of his views on cultural, social, and political issues.\(^6\)

**The Early Years**

Gao Xingjian was born in Ganzhou, Jiangxi province, on January 4, 1940. His ancestors were wealthy salt merchants living in Taizhou, Jiangsu province, until his great-grandfather used up almost his entire family fortune trying unsuccessfully to buy an official post. After the decline of the family, both his grandfather and his father worked for the Bank of China. Gao’s mother graduated from a missionary school and later became an active member of the Chinese Young Christians Association Salvation Drama Troupe. Gao had, as he recalled, a comparatively stable childhood filled with happy memories, despite escalating warfare and the turbulence of the period—first the war against the Japanese invasion (1937–1945) and then the civil war between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party (1945–1949). Because his father was a senior bank officer, the family’s social circle included Chinese men and women who had some knowledge of Western culture, and English was occasionally used at social functions. Thus, as a child, Gao was exposed to Western influences.

Gao’s encounters with drama began very early. After his parents married, his mother had to quit the traveling Salvation Drama Troupe, but her enthusiasm for drama remained. At home, she would sometimes write a short script and perform it to entertain herself. When Gao was older, under her direction, he would perform with his younger brother
to their only audience, his mother. As a young teenager, Gao started to watch jingju (Peking opera) with his uncle, who was a great jingju fan, and his father, although Gao’s serious interest in traditional Chinese theater did not develop until much later.

Before 1951, because of poor health, Gao did not receive any formal education. After the family moved to Nanjing that year, he joined the last year of primary school and went on to Nanjing Number 10 Secondary School, which was formerly affiliated with the missionary-run University of Nanking. There Gao went through six years of education, which later proved critical to the development of his artistic inclination. The school had inherited the liberal atmosphere of missionary schools, and its teaching staff was competent. While Gao began to learn the violin at home, at school he also picked up oil painting and sculpture under the guidance of the renowned artist Yun Zongying. Gao’s talent in painting prompted Yun to recommend him to the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The idea, however, was vehemently opposed by his mother, who had observed that, after the establishment of the People’s Republic, the only job for artists was painting propaganda posters. What Gao gained from his early immersion in music and painting benefited him for the rest of his life.

The most important of his theatrical concepts—multivocality (duo shengbu)—is borrowed from music. Moreover, after going into exile, he earned his living as a painter rather than a writer.

Before graduating from secondary school, Gao had to decide on his course of study at the university. His aspiration was to become a writer or to work in the theater. His first idea was to study Chinese literature, but he soon abandoned this option as he realized that it would not help him become a writer upon graduation. He also considered doing theater studies. However, he could not major in directing, as it required three years of work experience in a professional drama company; neither could he major in acting, as he was two centimeters short of the prescribed height of 1.7 meters. His final decision was an incidental one. Upon reading an article about the romantic and inspirational lifestyle of Parisian artists in the early twentieth century, Gao decided to read French literature and, in 1957, was offered a place at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages.

It was a year when numerous political movements followed one another in quick succession. As an undergraduate, Gao experienced for the first time a spiritually and intellectually repressive atmosphere. Students were swamped with materials relating to the antirightist campaign and were required to read works by Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Apathetic to
political activities, Gao devoted most of his time to reading extracurricular books. Although there was already rigorous censorship of English materials, censorship of French materials was looser, and these were readily accessible to Gao. From the French editions of *Moscow News* and *Soviet Literature*, he read about the anti-Stalin and antitotalitarian movements in the Soviet Union that were intensely active in the 1950s. His readings made him more depressed about the situation in China.

As an undergraduate, Gao became actively involved in dramatic activities. In 1960, with some fellow students, Gao founded a drama society named “Seagull” in which he served as playwright, director, and literary advisor. He began to read books by the Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) and conducted workshops for members of the society. Later, he extended his reading to Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883–1923), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), and Vladimir Mayakovskiy (1893–1930). Eventually, he came into contact with the works of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), which would be important to the formation of Gao’s own dramaturgy during the 1980s. The plays the society produced included *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekov (1860–1904), *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Brecht, and *The Center-Forward Died at Dawn* by the Argentine playwright Agustín Cuzzani (1924–1987). With the last, an avant-garde, absurdist-like play, Gao experimented for the first time with an empty-stage setting, which was a bold step that went beyond the realist conventions dominating the Chinese stage at the time.

Besides carrying out theatrical experimentation, Gao and his society members also watched many performances by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre and the National Youth Theatre, the two most renowned theater companies in the Chinese capital. Gao was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend rehearsals at the National Youth Theatre and to receive personal guidance from its resident director, Deng Zhiyi, who happened to be a cousin of his schoolmate. In the rehearsal room, Gao learned the practical aspects of a play’s production that were unattainable merely from reading books. One piece of advice from Deng that Gao never forgot was this: “A play is born in the rehearsal room rather than in the script. You have to be familiar with the theater before you write a play.” By the time he graduated from university, Gao had written two stage plays and a screenplay. However, Deng advised him not to send them to literary journals for publication as they might invite trouble. Those plays were modern and revolutionary, but they might have appeared antirevolutionary at that time because they did not conform to realist conven-
tions. Recognizing Gao’s talents, Deng promised to help Gao attain a job in the National Youth Theatre.

Gao’s initial hope of becoming a professional playwright, however, was not realized. Upon his graduation in 1962, he was assigned to work as a translator in the Foreign Language Bureau. Uninterested in translation work, Gao spent most of his spare time writing plays and stories, often working through the night. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Gao had to burn all his manuscripts, including ten plays, an unfinished novel, and numerous poems and notes, which weighed almost forty kilograms in total. In 1969, Gao entered the cadre school. He soon realized that he was in tremendous danger of political attack in the cadre school, and he asked to be transferred to the countryside. In retrospect, he described this experience as fleeing: “A person is just like a little bug: it is impossible for him to confront the violence of a political regime. The only way out is to flee.” In 1970, he began six years of rural life, first in the province of Jiangxi and later in Anhui.

During the years when he was lying low in rural villages, Gao began to write again, as he was engulfed by a deep sense of loneliness. Revealing his feelings and thoughts in conversation with others would leave evidence that could bring about subsequent attacks on him. Thus, the only person he could talk to safely was himself, and Gao started to acquire the habit of self-monologue, which he deemed essential to maintaining a person’s consciousness: “The reason I am still alive is because I can carry on self-monologues. When ideological remolding goes on to the extent that self-monologue is extinct and you cannot hear your own voice, then you have already been thoroughly remolded.” Unsurprisingly, self-monologue later became Gao’s unique way of writing plays. He would use two tape recorders, one to play music to create a suitable mood and the other to record the dialogues that he recited verbally and spontaneously. He would later transcribe the recording, which usually formed part of his plays.

After China and the United States began to resume diplomatic relations following Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, the need for China to establish communications with the West increased. In late 1975, Gao was recalled to work in the Foreign Language Bureau, where he came into contact for the first time with the works of Samuel Beckett, which were to have a great influence on him. In order to improve the standards of the Chinese translators, a French Embassy official was invited to conduct lectures on modern French literature. The first text chosen was Beckett’s *Wait-
ing for Godot. Gao was fascinated by the Absurdist play and seized on the opportunity to borrow more works by Beckett from the French Embassy’s library through the lecturer. Besides Beckett, Gao also read voraciously plays by Jean Genet (1910–1986) and Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994). Following his earlier encounter with Brecht’s works, Gao was excited for the second time by a theater that subverted realist conventions. This time the subversion was both formal and ideological.

In 1979, Gao visited France with a delegation of Chinese writers, serving as the interpreter for the famous writer Ba Jin (b. 1904). Although this was his first trip to Europe, the Western experience did not surprise him, as he had read about the West in literary works and news reports, thanks to his translation job. In fact, it was the French writers who were surprised by his knowledge of Beckett and other modernist writers. Nevertheless, watching theater performances and talking to artists in France proved to be a refreshing experience for him.

After he returned later in the same year, Gao’s first literary work, a novella titled *Hanye de xingchen* (Stars on a cold night), was published in *Huacheng*, a literary journal. From the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Gao had begun writing prolifically, but his modernist works were perceived as “not storylike” and rejected by editors of many literary journals. When asked to write about the writing of modern fiction, he published a series of articles called *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (A preliminary discussion of the techniques of modern fiction). These articles were later printed twice as a collection and received enthusiastic responses. However, they also invited severe criticism, as Gao was accused of subverting realist tradition. Fortunately, veteran writers such as Ba Jin and Xia Yan (1900–1995) came to his rescue, and Gao managed to stay out of trouble. As it turned out, this was only the beginning of the political oppression Gao was to suffer later. In the same year, Gao was transferred to the Writers’ Association in Beijing and traveled again to France and Italy, this time in the capacity of a writer.

**The Mature Years**

The turning point in Gao’s life came in 1981, when he was transferred to the Beijing People’s Art Theatre and became a resident playwright there. He was immediately asked by Yu Shizhi, vice president of the theater, to write a play. Within a week, he produced *Chezhan* (The bus stop). However, as the “Anti–Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign” was just begin-
ning, the play, with its distinct Absurdist characteristics, had to be shelved. Gao was then requested to write another play in a more realistic style. With the help of Liu Huiyuan, a young man who used to work on a cargo train, Gao wrote a play about a train robbery, _Juédì xīnhào_ (Alarm signal). Although this time he was cautious about using nonrealist modes of representation, the play was not approved for public performance by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre Party committee because of its ambiguity in dealing with sensitive issues such as unemployment and China’s future. Nevertheless, with Yu Shizhi’s personal support, the play went on to rehearsal and was initially scheduled for an internal trial performance.

Upon reading _Alarm Signal_, Lin Zhaohua, a young director of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre who had never directed a play on his own, was enthusiastic about the innovative ideas in Gao’s play and volunteered to work with Gao. Lin was both well-trained in directing and open-minded toward new dramatic concepts. They formed a strong team as they exchanged their knowledge about theater and explored new representational modes. Lin became the sole director of all Gao’s plays produced in China from 1982 to 1985. To a certain extent, the theatrical innovations of Gao’s plays were a result of this collaboration, which also led Lin to become the most prominent director in Chinese experimental theater well into the 1990s.

_Alarm Signal_ premiered in November 1982. In contrast to the suspicious attitude of some of the leaders of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, the play was warmly received by the invited guests, who were theater practitioners and students of drama studies. After each performance, the audience stayed back for the postperformance discussion, which sometimes lasted until after midnight. Reports and reviews in the newspapers were highly positive about the play. In view of the enthusiastic response, censorship was lifted and _Alarm Signal_ went on to more than a hundred performances. Soon after, more than ten major drama companies across the country produced the play.

With the overwhelming success of _Alarm Signal_, Gao and Lin began to prepare for the production of _The Bus Stop_, though the Party committee of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre still did not approve it for performance. This time, however, Gao attained verbal consent from Cao Yu (1910–1996), a veteran playwright and honorary president of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. In July 1983, Cao Yu came to the dress rehearsal and expressed his support for its public performance. Although _The Bus Stop_ also excited the audience, its performance came to an abrupt halt after
ten shows in the midst of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. It then came under severe criticism and was labeled “anti-Party” and “antisocialist.” Gao knew he had to flee from the situation, and, with the help of Yu Shizhi, he left Beijing and began his exile in southwestern China. From his experience in the Cultural Revolution, Gao realized that self-censorship would not necessarily keep him from political oppression and that fleeing was the best way of protecting himself.

During the following five months, from late 1983 to early 1984, Gao traveled through eight provinces and seven nature reserves, covering fifteen thousand kilometers in the Yangtze region. He had in mind collecting materials for his novel *Lingshan* (Soul mountain), which he had wanted to pursue since 1982. On his journey, Gao met anthropologists who were doing research on the primitive culture of ethnic minorities in China, and he was also attracted to the latter’s folk arts and religious ceremonies. These encounters, coupled with the ideas of Daoism and Chan Buddhism, in which he was profoundly interested at the time, extended his understanding and perception of Chinese identity, which, in the context of modern China, had been molded predominantly by the urban Confucian literati tradition.

Gao returned to Beijing when the political campaign simmered down in mid-1984. Yu Shizhi again asked Gao to write a play so that Gao could be “rehabilitated.” With his rural experiences fresh in his mind, Gao produced *Yeren* (Wild man), a play about the endangered natural environment and disappearing minority cultures, and planned to stage it at the Capital Theatre, the main performance venue of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. Gao’s works had always been treated as experimental pieces and were produced in make-do studio spaces. To have a play staged at the Capital Theatre signified that Gao’s work had been accepted as part of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre tradition. Having acquired full support from the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, Gao carried out a large-scale experiment that aimed to offer a totally different theatrical experience from that of existing spoken drama (*huaju*). He called it “total theater” (*wan-quan de xiju*), which included elements of traditional Chinese theater and songs and dances of ethnic minorities. When *Wild Man* premiered in May 1985, it immediately ignited another round of heated debate, this time directed not at the content but at its mode of representation, which was unprecedented in the strong realist tradition of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre.

Soon after the success of *Wild Man*, Gao wrote *Bi’an* (The other shore) in 1986. It was intended primarily to train actors in all-around per-
forming abilities, as Gao and his director Lin Zhaohua had planned to set up an experimental theater workshop. However, neither the realization of *The Other Shore* on the Chinese stage nor the establishment of the workshop materialized. As it turned out, *Wild Man* was Gao’s last play to be produced in China before he left his country in 1987.

While Gao was encountering political censorship in China, his works had gained recognition outside the country. As early as 1983, the French newspaper *Le monde* hailed the production of *The Bus Stop* as signifying “the birth of Chinese avant-garde theater,” and Geremie Barmé (1983b) published an article in *Renditions* introducing Gao with translated excerpts from *The Bus Stop*. In 1984, *The Bus Stop* was staged by a theater group in Yugoslavia and broadcast on the Hungarian state radio station. Between 1985 and 1986, with invitations from various European governmental and arts organizations, Gao attended seminars and play-reading sessions in Germany, France, Britain, Austria, and Denmark. At the same time, his literary and critical works were translated and his plays produced in many European countries.

In May 1987, Gao was invited by the Morat Institut für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft of the Federal Republic of Germany to be a visiting artist. The Chinese authorities initially refused him permission to go. Only after intervention by a senior official in the Ministry of Culture was Gao given clearance to leave the country. By this time, Gao realized that he would always be subjected to political attack. When he packed to leave for Germany, Gao had decided not to return to China. Later that year, Gao moved to Paris and made it his new home.

When he accepted the invitation from the Morat Institut, Gao wanted to make sure that he would be able to earn a living as an artist. His Chinese ink paintings were already well known in West Germany, where his first solo exhibition had been held in 1985 at Berliner Kunsthalle Bethanien. Since then, his paintings had been exhibited throughout Europe and collected by European art galleries and museums. While residing in Paris as a successful painter, free from worry about either material or ideological constraints, Gao continued to write plays and novels.

Most of Gao’s later plays were commissioned by arts organizations in Europe. In these plays, he embarked on the exploration of humanistic themes, especially the predicament of alienation in modern times. In 1989, he wrote *Taowang* (Fleeing), based on the Tiananmen Incident of June 4, for an American theater. However, as the parties had different perceptions of the incident, the theater wanted Gao to revise the play, which
he refused to do on the principle that freedom of expression was the fundamental right of a writer. Fleeing was later premiered by Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern of Sweden in 1992. Another play, Shengsi jie (Between life and death) was commissioned by the French Cultural Ministry in 1991 and premiered by the Renaud-Barrault Théâtre in Paris in 1993. The play Duihua yu fanjie (Dialogue and rebuttal) was commissioned by France’s Maison des Auteurs de Théâtre Étrangers and premiered by Austria’s Theater des Augenblicks in Vienna in 1992 with Gao directing the play himself. France’s Beaumarchais Foundation commissioned the play Yeyou shen (Nocturnal wanderer) in 1993, and it was premiered by Théâtre des Halles in Avignon in 1999. Zhoumo sichongzou (Weekend quartet) was commissioned by France’s Bibliothèque Municipale de Joué-les-Tours in 1995, and its first public reading was held in 1999 in l’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. (The premiere was scheduled for September 2003.) Gao’s latest play, Kouwen siwang (Inquiring death), will be staged in December 2003.

In contrast to the above-mentioned plays, three other projects first conceptualized in China were later completed in Paris. Thematically related to China, these works were part of Gao’s attempt to propose an alternative idea of Chineseness. Originally written for the dancer Jiang Qing, Mingcheng (The nether city) premiered as a modern dance piece by the Hong Kong Dance Company in 1988. (It was reworked into a full-length play in 1991.) Shanhaijing zhuan (The Story of Shanhaijing [The Classic of Mountains and Seas]) was originally proposed to the Beijing People’s Art Theatre in order to attain approval to leave China in 1987. The play, a large-scale re-presentation of ancient Chinese mythology, was eventually completed in 1993 but remained Gao’s only major play to go unstaged. Gao’s first novel, Soul Mountain, for which he had begun research in 1982, was completed in 1989 and published in Taiwan the following year. With the completion of these three projects, Gao claimed that he wanted to sever his relations with China and begin a new life.

In June 1989, after the crackdown on the student demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, Gao voiced a strong protest and formally sought political asylum from the French government. In 1991, at a conference in Stockholm, he announced that he would “never return to a totalitarian China.” In 1998, after living in Paris for more than a decade, he became a citizen of France. On the surface, it might seem that Gao is determined to sever all connections with China and is enjoying his newfound freedom to express himself and his humanistic concerns. However, this is not entirely true. Although he claimed, after completing the play The Story of Shanhaijing, that “China doesn’t even appear in my dreams,”
the cultural and artistic aspects of China as well as his experiences in China were not completely erased. Gao’s recent dramatic work *August Snow* (which premiered in Taipei in December 2002 with Gao as the director) is the life story of the Chinese Chan Buddhist patriarch Huineng (638–713). Another novel, *Yige ren de shengjing* (One man’s bible, 1999), is based on his experiences during the Cultural Revolution. As he continues to wander freely in exile, China and Chinese culture remain important sources for his creative efforts.

**Transcultural Theater and Its Significance**

As evident from the above biographical account, Gao Xingjian not only is at ease in and moves freely between different cultures, he has also reflected profoundly and extensively on cultural issues and the notion of culture. I therefore propose to read Gao’s theater as a transcultural entity. I am not so much interested in understanding how different cultures become integrated in the process of Gao’s theatrical creation (that is, with issues relating to the creator’s intention) as in examining the different cultural elements in his theatrical products; that is to say, I see Gao’s theater as a cultural and intellectual sphere in which an interaction of different cultures takes place. An analysis of the representation of cultures and the occurrence of cultural exchanges in Gao’s theater requires close attention to how different cultures—Chinese and French, traditional and modern, literati and folk, mainstream and peripheral—carry on a dialogue with each other.

Before I begin such an analysis, the notion of transculturalism should be interrogated. In the fields of theater and performance, is transculturalism a concept of artistic representation or of cultural politics? Does transculturalism merely allude to or actively appropriate a theatrical form originating from a different culture? At what levels do cultural exchanges take place, and what are their effects on the individual culture? When an instance of cultural exchange occurs, is it always possible to detect its occurrence or trace its cultural origins? What is the significance of transculturalism in the present cultural, social, and political contexts of globalization?

Scholars have used different terms to discuss the concept of transculturalism and related notions, such as intercultural and intracultural. For the French scholar Patrice Pavis, intercultural theater “creates hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas.” In this pro-
cess of hybridization, the original forms are usually undistinguishable, giving way to the formation of a new aesthetic. The “transcultural,” Pavis contends, “transcends particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition,” as practitioners of transcultural theater “are concerned with particularities and traditions only in order to grasp more effectively what they have in common and what is not reducible to a specific culture” (1996:6–8, 18–19). Indian theater practitioner and critic Rustom Bharucha, in contrast, disapproves of Pavis’ seeming distancing from the realities of history, political struggle, and nationalism, which he condemns as “apolitical,” “asocial,” and “subtly orientalist.” Using examples drawn from the Indian subcontinent, Bharucha instead proposes the notion of “intraculturalism,” whose objective is “not to reconstruct ‘dying’ traditions, but to create new possibilities of interaction and exchange within and across a wealth of ‘living’ traditions from vastly different time frames and cultural contexts” (2000:27, 62–63).

When using the term “transcultural,” I am aware of the inherent cultural politics demonstrated by Bharucha’s critique of Pavis. While I agree that certain characteristics may connect two or more different cultures, a recourse to “universality,” however, must not subsume the specificities of individual cultures. As I shall elaborate below, Gao’s transcultural theater embodies aspects of cultural exchange and integration that are at times collaboratory and at times contradictory, and encompasses the myriad cultural practices and politics highlighted by both Pavis and Bharucha. Moreover, as part of a cultural and intellectual movement at the turn of the twentieth century, modern Chinese theater has always been an alien form of art appropriated from the West, bearing little or no connection to traditional forms of theater in China. To posit Gao’s theater as transcultural is to recognize both the historical genesis of modern Chinese theater as well as Gao’s indebtedness to that tradition. More important, Gao’s theater is not confined to a single area of cultural exchange but, in the context of China and beyond, ambitiously embraces the intercultural, the intracultural, and the transcultural as described above. As such, I have chosen the more generic term “transculturalism” for its inclusiveness.

**Intercultural Dialogue as a Discourse of China’s Reality**

Gao Xingjian first became the center of controversy as a playwright with the production of *Alarm Signal* in 1982 and *The Bus Stop* in the following year. Scholars often regard these early plays together with *Wild Man*, Gao’s third and last play staged in China, as his critique of contemporary China.
In the first book-length study in English of Gao’s theater, Henry Zhao lists these plays under the category “explorative/socially committed plays” together with Fleeing, which was written in 1989 when Gao had already attained freedom of expression in exile. Zhao believes that Gao’s works have the explicit intention “to lecture the audience on social issues” and that they became political targets because of their provocative social messages, whereas “whether they were experimental in technique was of secondary importance” (2000:9). Zhao’s view is valid in terms of the perception of Gao’s plays by the Chinese authorities. I would, however, argue that the relationship of theatrical form to their content and message should not be dismissed. The form of Gao’s preexile plays, in particular The Bus Stop, is not secondary to its message; on the contrary, the appropriation of a Western theatrical form in these plays has predetermined the nature of their message.

The history of modern Chinese drama is, from its inception, a history of wholesale appropriation of a Western dramatic form. In his seminal account of modern Chinese drama of the twentieth century, the Taiwanese scholar Ma Sen (1991) underlines two periods in which influence from the West was at its height, the May Fourth era and the post-1980s, which he describes as “dual Western tides” (liangdu xichao). Kwok-kan Tam, a Hong Kong scholar, also argues that Western ideologies have dominated modern Chinese drama through the export of dramatic form, proposing the concept of discursive formation for analyzing modern Chinese drama. Tam summarizes its hundred-year history into three discourses: the realist, the socialist-realist, and the postmodernist, all Western-influenced traditions (2000:142).

A common view of both Ma and Tam is that Chinese dramatists have played a significant role in effecting the impact of Western ideologies on modern Chinese drama in the twentieth century through their highly conscious effort in introducing and appropriating Western dramatic forms. These novel and provocative Western forms have clearly directed Chinese audiences to adopt perspectives on social issues that would have been inaccessible had they been represented in a familiar form. In his discussion of The Bus Stop, often labeled as the “first Chinese absurdist play,” Tam argues that Gao’s play begins with a realist setting and gradually unveils a world of absurdity, disorder, and confusion, challenging social unfairness with the use of dramatic techniques such as collage, repetition, juxtaposition, alienated narrator, and objective commentaries. In so doing, Tam contends, Gao has transformed the play into a process in which members of the audience are required to assume an
active role in the reflection of their world (2000:142). Evidently, Gao’s adoption of an absurdist form is not merely arbitrary but a deliberate effort to provoke the Chinese audience into interrogating their social realities.

Many critics have compared Gao’s The Bus Stop with Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, pointing to similarities such as the theme of waiting and its relationship to the bleak condition of human existence (Tam 1990). Others, however, perceive The Bus Stop as a critical-realist play despite its shared formal characteristics with Western avant-garde theater (Tay 1990). Though Gao denies that The Bus Stop is a Chinese version of Waiting for Godot, many techniques appropriated from the latter are noticeable in the former. These include the use of music as a motif and multivocality (two or more characters speaking at the same time, forming an orchestration of utterance, which I will discuss further in chapter 2).

The social issues represented in The Bus Stop were not atypical of China in the 1980s. However, because of the strangeness of the form, the audience experienced a Brechtian alienation effect. In a reversal of how Brecht’s concept of the alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) was inspired when he first saw a performance by the great jingju actor Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), Chinese audiences in the 1980s were led to take up a new approach in their perception of familiar issues through a novel Western form. Were it not for the novel absurdist form, the overfamiliar social issues in The Bus Stop would have come across as yet another exercise in realist expression. In this case of transcultural interaction, the appropriation of a Western form has distinctively determined the delivery of the content in Gao Xingjian’s theater.

Intracultural Dialogue as a Challenge to Cultural Hegemony

Transculturalism in Gao’s theater not only expresses itself as an interaction between Chinese and Western cultures (what Pavis calls “interculturalism”) but also as an interaction between different cultural systems within the geographical boundaries of China (what Bharucha calls “intraculturalism”). I will focus in this section on the latter and its interrogation of the notions of “Chinese culture” and “Chineseness” by citing three of Gao’s plays, namely, Wild Man, The Nether City, and The Story of Shanghaijing. In these plays, Gao gives expression to cultural elements from regions, ethnicities, periods, and ideological systems that do not belong to the mainstream, orthodox, central plains (zhongyuan) Confucian cul-
ture, thereby using intracultural dialogue to pose a challenge to these cultural hegemonies.

*Wild Man* is a product of Gao’s 1984 escape to the Yangtze region in southwestern China, in which the folk and tribal materials that he collected (the origins of which are noted in the postscript of the dramatic text) are dramatized as a representation of the frontier ethnic peoples and communities. For example, drawing inspiration from folk cultures in Hubei province, “Team of Sisters” comprises songs originally sung at wedding ceremonies in Shennongjia district; the exorcist mask dance is based on Daoist ritual performance and the *nuo* dance of the northeastern region of Gan; and the roof workers’ song and the grass-weeding song originate from folk music in the Shennongjia and Jingzhou districts (Gao 1985a:273–274). Admittedly, marginal cultural elements are made central to the theatrical representation of these minority peoples and their cultures. The excavation of these cultural elements from their origins in various rural locales and their transportation to a modern urban environment may be seen as a challenge to cultural hegemony, an example of “the periphery invading the center” (difang baowei zhongyang), even at the risk of exoticizing these minority cultures. *Wild Man* can be seen as an important first step in Gao’s experimentation with the representation of peripheral cultures in modern Chinese theater.

*The Nether City* and *The Story of Shanhaijing* demonstrate Gao’s ambition to construct a new, personal version of national mythologies. The dramatic structure and characterization of these plays as well as the playwright’s explanatory notes illustrate that Gao’s reflection on Chinese cultures is a challenge to mainstream Confucian literati culture. To counter the hegemonic culture of the Yellow River region, Gao upholds the marginalized cultures of the Yangtze region, which have an equally long history; to counter the canonized, dogmatized Confucian culture, Gao valorizes the cultures of secular Daoism and Chan Buddhism, which have strong folk and ritualistic characteristics; to counter the rigidified literati culture, Gao promotes an array of folk arts that are inextricably linked to people’s everyday lives. Gao’s ambitious version of national mythologies is significant, because not only has he launched a comprehensive challenge to mainstream culture, he has also provided an interactive space for various peripheral cultures in his theater. In this imaginary yet physical space, marginal cultures are given an opportunity to conduct a dialogue among themselves as well as to interact with the mainstream culture represented by the audience and the modern urban environment where Gao’s plays are staged.
Gao, therefore, actively appropriates these cultural elements for his theater. In the postscript to *The Nether City*, he explains,

> When this play is being staged, there should be no attempt to represent a verisimilitude of reality. In order to achieve this, the following devices are used: the masks of *nuo* dance, the face painting of *jingju*, the *bianlian* [rapid changing of face masks] technique of *chuanju* [Siquan opera], the tilt-walking of folk performance, drums and gongs, the style of accentuation of traditional Chinese percussion, colorful makeup, acrobatics, and magic tricks. The use of these elaborative elements is to recapture the function of entertainment and play, which is lost in modern theater. (Gao 1995c:68)

This point is reiterated in the postscript to *The Story of Shanhaijing*: “This play is an attempt to return to ancient Chinese dramatic traditions in the search for modern dramatic forms. . . . The writer suggests using something similar to a carnival performance” (Gao 1995d:108).

It is clear that Gao’s objective is to create a vibrant form of modern theater by appropriating elements from various cultural systems for which he attempts to provide a discursive space in his theater. Notably, in his selection of cultural elements to be represented, Gao repeatedly stresses the importance of their entertaining, playful, and carnivalesque nature. Gao’s emphasis on playfulness is not meant to make his theater appear frivolous; to the contrary, playfulness is valued by Gao precisely because it can serve a serious purpose. For Gao, playfulness is an effective weapon for challenging the oppression of the overly solemn and inviolable mainstream literati culture. As I will illustrate (see chapter 3), Gao’s targets include, first, Confucian literati culture, which inculcates traditional ethics and doctrines, and second, the realist and socialist-realist modes of representation, which emphasize the function of social criticism. Gao’s deliberate appropriation of these playful cultural elements in his theater marks a clear departure from the self-burdened mainstream tradition that has preoccupied generations of modern Chinese intellectuals.

### Transcultural Dialogue in the Form of Theatrical Representation

One key issue in the study of transcultural theater is the comparison between the essences of two or more cultures—or whether such a comparison is possible at all. On the one hand, there may not be a common ground for comparison between cultures with origins in disparate social and historical circumstances. On the other hand, it may be meaningless
to make a comparison when the essences of different cultures are stripped down to some elusive basic human nature. Pavis has cautioned about “turning intercultural theatre into a vague terrain for comparing themes or cultural identities” (1996:2). While I do not intend to engage in a philosophical discourse, I do propose to examine how Gao transforms philosophies into forms and uses them in terms of theatrical representation for the contemplation of the modern human condition.

When **Dialogue and Rebuttal** was staged in Vienna, a local newspaper carried the headline “Zen in the Theater of the Absurd” (*Der Standard*, September 24, 1992, cited in Gao 1996a:211). Gao’s play, as suggested by the headline, is seen as an integration of two seemingly unrelated entities, both culturally and historically. How, then, does the integration of Chan and the Theater of the Absurd happen, and at what level? Is the integration a result of a similarity in the way the world is represented in their philosophies, or is it based on the comparison between the cosmic view of ancient Chinese Chan and that of modern French Absurdism?

Gao’s kinship to the Theater of the Absurd and his deliberate appropriation of its form have been mentioned earlier in this chapter. With respect to Chinese traditions, most scholars concur that Chan Buddhism is an essential component in Gao’s thought and theater. Henry Zhao categorizes **Dialogue and Rebuttal** under the label of “Zen/xieyi plays,” which he claims to be hitherto unseen in the history of world drama (2000:22). In Zhao’s view, the corpus of Gao’s later works in this category (which also include *The Other Shore, Between Life and Death, Nocturnal Wanderer*, and *August Snow*) has its aesthetic origin in Chan, while its style of stage representation is xieyi (ibid.:156). It is apparent from the title of Zhao’s book, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, that he considers Zen (Chan) to be the fundamental spirit of Gao’s theater. In his introduction to *The Story of Shanhaijing*, the Chinese scholar-in-exile Liu Zaifu points out that the play is a return to Chan gongan, which reflects the predicament of human incommunicability (Gao 1993:9). Liu also claims that, in Gao’s plays, the essence of Chan culture has been preserved and developed to its fullest extent (2000:9). Such critics attempt to unveil the spiritual aspects of Gao’s theater, tracing the source of his influence to a philosophical if not a religious origin.

The significance of philosophy as a form in Gao’s theater, in my view, deserves a deeper understanding. In this respect, the Theater of the Absurd is a good point of departure. In the works of European dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet, Martin Esslin observes, “the Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the
human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet. . . . the difference between theory and experience” (1991:25, italics in original). Esslin’s insightful statement reminds the audience of the Theater of the Absurd to pay more attention to the “how” rather than the “what” of theatrical representation. The subject matter is expressed through a unique form that, according to Esslin, “separates the Theatre of the Absurd from the Existentialist theatre” (ibid.). Gao’s theater could be studied in a similar way. The form of Chan Buddhism (in this case, Gao’s choice is gongan) is used as a means for contemplating modern conditions. Represented in the form of gongan, the problems of modern existence go through a process analogous to light going through a prism. A study that focuses on form would set out to understand how white light becomes an array of splendid colors. Gao’s theater may be seen, on the one hand, as a successor to Chan Buddhism, and on the other, as subverting the philosophy of Chan Buddhism by appropriating its form for the representation of problems that exist in a different temporal and spatial context.

While scholars have analyzed how the philosophy of Chan has influenced the subject matter of Gao’s theater, the playwright himself has called attention to his use of Chan as a theatrical form and a mode of representation in Dialogue and Rebuttal: “The play’s dialogic form is inspired by the gongan style of question and answer in Chinese Zen Buddhism. The play has no intention of promoting Buddhism, and there is no need for the director to devote his time and effort in expounding the meaning of Zen Buddhism. The author only wants to propose that this kind of dialogue and cross-questioning is capable of being dramatized as a form of stage performance” (Gao 1999a:136, italics mine). I have earlier argued, with reference to The Bus Stop, that the appropriated absurdist form has transformed the way its content and message are perceived. Similarly, in the case of Dialogue and Rebuttal, the form of Chan gongan has invariably mediated how modern conditions are represented.

One subject of Dialogue and Rebuttal is the problem of verbal communication between two characters, a Man and a Girl. They attempt to speak to each other after they have had a brief sexual encounter only to realize that physical intimacy does not necessarily bring about spiritual closeness. Their failure to communicate also results in their retreating to their respective isolated worlds. Their problem is illustrated in the following scene toward the end of the play:
Man: *(Talking to himself.)* Behind that door, perhaps there is nothing.

Girl: *(Asking herself.)* No memories?

Man: *(Ruminating.)* That door, behind that door, perhaps there is really nothing, do you believe that?

Girl: No fantasies?

Man: That’s right, there’s nothing behind that door, you thought there was something, but there’s nothing.

Girl: And no dreams either?

Man: *(To audience.)* That door, behind that door, there’s nothing.

Girl: She can’t remember anything.

Man: *(To himself.)* There’s absolutely nothing behind that door. *(Giggles.)*

Girl: *(To audience.)* What happened?

Man: *(Softly, his back facing Girl.)* That door, behind that door, there is nothing.

Girl: *(Softly.)* And no memories.

Man: Absolutely, absolutely.

Girl: And no fantasies.

Man: Absolutely, absolutely. *(Nods his head.)*

Girl: And no dreams either.

Man: Absolutely, absolutely! *(Becoming contemptuous, his head to one side.)*

Girl: *(More softly.)* Can’t say.

Man: *(Very softly.)* Why?

Girl: *(With certainty.)* Can’t say.

Man: Why can’t you say it?

Girl: *(Almost whispering.)* Can’t say!

*(Gao 1999a:129–130)*

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From the words of the two characters, it is obvious that they are neither speaking to nor responding to each other, although a dialogue is seemingly going on. The dialogue, according to the playwright, is presented in question-and-answer form, with inspiration from Chan gongan. Along with the gongan style, the dialogue is imbued with a nonsensical, paradoxical nature, which resonates with the senselessness and futility of the characters’ being. In what follows, the dialogic characteristic of gongan is incorporated in the monologue:

**Girl:** She can’t believe that she actually said it, she said something that can’t be said, but she said it, clearly this can’t be said but why did she have to say it? It ought not to be said it can’t be said but she said it regardless, it’s her misfortune, it’s her disaster, it’s her sin.

. . .

Her sin, well, if she feels guilty then she’s guilty. She’s afraid of this, afraid of that, afraid, afraid, afraid, but she’s not afraid of her, not afraid of herself. But what happens if she’s also afraid of herself? Then wouldn’t she be not afraid?

(Gao 1999a:130–131)

In this way the paradox is further internalized by the character, suggesting that senselessness does not arise from incommunicability with the other but with oneself. In Gao’s play, the form of Chan gongan serves, on the one hand, as a means of constructing the dialogue while demonstrating, on the other, the impossibility of this construction.

As represented in Gao’s theater, Chan gongan is not an abstract idea, nor is it alienated from the mundane world, but it is a form for dealing with problems of the modern conditions of human existence. Subjects such as the meaninglessness of words and alienation in human relationships are perennial issues in modern times and have been frequently dealt with by many Western modernist writers. Under the same modern conditions and faced with dilemmas of similar nature, Gao engages these problems from a different viewpoint. By employing Chan gongan as a form in his theatrical representation, Gao’s response is imbued with a transcultural perspective.