Focus on Gao Xingjian: Review Article

Towards a Modern Zen Theatre: Gao Xingjian and Chinese Theatre Experimentalism. By HENRY Y.H. ZHAO. [University of London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000. 230 pp. ISBN 0–7286–0317–9.]

The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian. Translated by GILBERT C.F. FONG. [Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999. xlii + 269 pp. ISBN 962–201–862–9.]

With Gao Xingjian's winning of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature and the controversy it generated, scholarship on Gao in English becomes crucial to understanding the landscape of Chinese cultural studies (both local and diasporan) during the 1980s and 1990s. Chinese spoken drama, severely under-studied and under-acknowledged in both Asian studies and theatre scholarship, has become a topic of sudden interest since the Nobel was bestowed on Gao last year. The relative paucity of English-language book-length sources on contemporary Chinese *huaju* (which include only four anthologies and even fewer single-author published manuscripts) means that studies that do reach the reading public potentially have tremendous impact on how this complex topic spanning the past century of Chinese cultural and political history is perceived. It is for this reason that I read Henry Zhao (Zhao Yiheng)'s *Toward a Modern Zen Theatre* with both considerable excitement and unexpected disappointment.

Although most of Zhao's information is sound factually, the manner in which he frames it epistemologically and theoretically is somewhat problematic. Most prevalently, he insists on framing experimental theatre activity in China (which followed its opening to the West after the Cultural Revolution) as a distinct "Movement" which peaked in 1984–87, then subsequently "failed" and came to a halt in 1989. He separates this Movement from a more general "Chinese Theatre Experimentalism" which continued into and throughout the 1990s. He concludes that Gao Xingjian (who wrote all his post-1996 plays from his new home in France) is the only truly successful Chinese experimental theatre artist (playwright or otherwise) of the 1990s, and identifies his unique aesthetic as "Modern Zen Theatre" (in contrast to "Postmodern Theatre," which Zhao himself clearly disdains, practised by everyone else).

According to Zhao, not only did Gao become "a loner in the movement" (p. 126) and wisely "quit the movement" (p. 9) in 1985 to blaze new trails in Zen theatre (a classification that he acknowledges Gao himself resists), but Gao has created "a new kind of theatre that has never been seen in the history of world drama" (p. 22). This, obviously, is a huge claim (stated more than once) and Zhao simply does not (and, I would argue, cannot) present evidence to sustain it, *or* to convincingly divorce Gao's plays from postmodern theatre, for that matter. Zhao

defines postmodern theatre as "anti-literary" (p. 136) unscripted theatre that avoids language and "reject(s) that theatre performance should have any, purpose, whether to entertain, educate, or enlighten" (p. 213). He concludes: "I personally hold that this is a defeatist road, a liquidation of theatre: it is no longer theatre or anti-theatre but non-theatre. There isn't much left on stage" (p. 138). Zhao's understanding of postmodern theatre is elementary and inaccurate; he appears to equate it with the genre of performance art, which itself actually goes far beyond Zhao's confining descriptions. Clearly, as a literary critic, Zhao is uneasy in the face of a non-text-based theatre. This is ironic in light of the fact that Gao's theatre is so richly performative: in fact, Zhao himself points out that Gao is a "director-like playwright" (p. 45) whose plays simply cannot be understood or appreciated fully without at least visualizing (if not experiencing) them as performance, an assertion with which I whole-heartedly agree.

In addition to transforming Chinese experimental theatre praxis into an "ism," Zhao chooses distracting and insufficiently supported translations of Chinese terms (such as "theatricism" for *juchangxing* rather than an existing term like "theatricality," which would serve as a more logical companion to his awkward translation of *jiadingxing* as "hypotheticality"). In his discussion of the latter term, he fails to consult a book on the topic by Wang Xiaoying, an important contemporary director left unmentioned along with several others. Meng Jinghui receives only passing reference and yet is currently the most significant experimental young director in China, while Mou Sen is identified by Zhao as the "best-known director" (p. 12) in China today even though, as of reports last year, he is inactive (meaning that he has possibly "left the theatre" along with other "pre-eminent theatre experimentalists of the 1980s" who Zhao says "simply disappeared" (p. 134)).

Zhao's overall analysis is based almost solely on Beijing sources, with playwright Sha Yexin and theorist Huang Zuolin being the only Shanghai artists mentioned (Huang was also a hugely important director). Zhao's Beijing bias persists in spite of his acknowledgment in a footnote (p. 61) of the commonly regarded division of the "Northern School and the Southern School" (probably a translation of *jingpai* and *haipai*, more accurately conveyed in English as Beijing School and Shanghai School) and Gao's status by origin as a "southerner" despite his residency at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. In terms of experimental playwrights, Shanghai's Zhang Xian most notably deserves attention.

Furthermore, although his brief discussion of the aesthetic of *xieyi* is instructive (particularly when he reunites it with its Zen Buddhist origins), in repeatedly claiming that China has never produced a play exhibiting the characteristics of *xieyi*, Zhao completely ignores the 1987–89 Shanghai critical and popular sensation *Zhongguo meng* (*China Dream*), which was consistently called a "*xieyi* play" by both critics and its creators. Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang wrote it as an experiment in manifesting *xieyi* on stage, and Huang Zuolin came out of retirement to direct it, considering it the closest any stage production had come to

embodying the *xieyi* aesthetic of which he had become the leading proponent; *China Dream* toured several mainland cities and Singapore, while separate productions in local languages were mounted in both New York City and Tokyo, giving it significant national and international impact.

Additional oversights include failure to list Carla Kirkwood's 1995 translation published in *Modern International Drama* as the first English translation of Gao's *Chezhan* (*Bus Stop*), as well as an implied linkage of Wang Peigong's 1989 post-Tiananmen arrest to his play *W M* four years earlier (actually Wang was arrested and incarcerated for more than a year because Wu'er Kaixi came to his home and borrowed money from his wife before fleeing China). The most frustrating aspect of reading Zhao's book, however, is the apparent lack of editing by the staff at SOAS: there is at least one typographical or grammatical error on every page, and numerous passages that should have been entirely rephrased. This may be related to the fact that Zhao also wrote a Chinese version of the book (*Jianli yizhong xiandai chanju: Gao Xingjian yu Zhongguo shiyan xiju*, Taipei: Erya Publishing Company, 1999), though neither he nor Fong cites this source anywhere in their notes, bibliographies, or appendices.

Zhao fares considerably better when he stays closest to his forté – literary criticism – and his true subject, Gao Xingjian as a writer. Although his focus is on Gao's dramaturgy, Zhao's inclusion of commentary on his novels and critical essays provides a perceptive synthesis of Gao's voice and the trajectory of his development as a writer. This comparison is especially useful in Zhao's discussion of Gao's short plays which have otherwise received little attention. Zhao divides Gao's body of plays into three stages – explorative/socially committed, mythological/ritual and Zen/*xieyi* – which are chronological, with the exceptions of *The Other Shore* (*Bi'an*), which was penned in 1986 before Gao left China but belongs thematically and structurally to his "Zen" period, and *Escape* (*Taowang*) from 1989 that reverts back to the more "realistic" style (in terms of plot, characterization and message) of his earliest plays.

Zhao is correct in pointing out that Gao employs a dramatic language for his actors/characters that deconstructs conventional gestures of representation in provocative and refreshing ways. Whether Gao is the first or only playwright to do so, or can justifiably claim to be doing so outside the influence of Western absurdist and postmodern drama, is questionable and too complex a query to address in this review. Suffice it to say that Zhao's study of Gao's plays in the context of Chinese experimental theatre during the past two decades is certainly a contribution to the fields of both Chinese and theatre studies, but it is best utilized as a companion to reading Gao's plays rather than a thorough analysis of Chinese experimental theatre.

Zhao's book is indeed a wonderful companion to Fong's edited translations of Gao's most recent plays (those that Zhao would categorize as his "Zen/*xieyi*" phase) and vice versa. Both Zhao and Fong provide brief introductions to each individual play with insights useful to digest before actually reading the scripts. Fong does not adopt Zhao's same

three categories, but does note a shift in Gao's work from public to private concerns (p. v) and raises some of the same issues Zhao addresses, such as the influence and uses of *xiqu* and folk culture, the transcendence of an East/West binary, and the "tripartition" of the actor (though Zhao does a better job than Fong of explaining it and of distinguishing Gao's notion of the self-conscious actor from Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*). Both authors seize on the importance of Gao's term (and book entitled) "*meiyou zhuyi*," but they translate and use it slightly differently: for Zhao it means "no isms," a rejection of conventional categories, while for Fong it becomes "none-ism," a new category itself.

It is unfortunate that Fong did not include *Escape* (*Taowang*) in his anthology, since it has had significant international impact (along with *Bus Stop* and *Between Life and Death*). *Escape* concerns the democracy movement and the June Fourth massacre in Tiananmen Square and has received bitter criticism from both Chinese officials and those who participated in the movement for its unabashed critique of both sides. Furthermore, I join Zhao in hoping that Gao's experimental epic plays *Necropolis* (Mingcheng, 1989) and *Tale of Mountains and Seas* (Shanhaijing zhuan, 1993) will soon be published in translation and/or staged.

One question that this reviewer was left with after reading Fong's collection and both scholars' analyses of each of Gao's most recent plays was why the issues of gender in these plays are not subjected to more self-conscious and deliberate feminist analysis. Gao presents disturbing gender hierarchies and depictions of the female (generally as sexual objects obsessed with ageing, in decay, and defining themselves solely in relation to men) that beg for immediate feminist critique or at least more serious analytical engagement.

While I would cite this neglect to treat gender adequately in Gao's dramaturgy as a common weakness of both books, I would point to their excellent appendices as one of their common strengths. Both Zhao and Fong provide several detailed lists of reference sources, translations and productions of Gao's plays both in Chinese-speaking and Western locations. These appendices help to create a collective archive that will become increasingly valuable as studies of Gao Xingjian continue to emerge. It would be helpful if the authors had provided the translated title of each play in the local language in which it was published/performed, and Fong might have included his two Japanese sources along with all other non-Chinese sources rather than isolating them (Zhao should also list in his bibliography the rich array of Chinese sources he cites in footnotes), but these are minor points. What their lists of sources and productions (along with the fact that both books were completed before Gao won the Nobel Prize) attest to is Gao's tremendous reputation and significance in continental Europe in the midst of his relative obscurity both in mainland China (for largely political reasons) and the United States.

Ideally, Gao's plays should be read in their Chinese original to be best appreciated since language is such a central issue in them, but Fong's fine translations provide English-speaking readers access to Gao's remarkable

recent theatre pieces. As a scholar/practitioner, I believe that only in performance can these plays truly take shape and reflect their rich constellation of meanings, effects and engagements; so, whenever possible, *do* stage the pieces in Fong's collection – if not as public performance, as class exercises to promote greater exploration of their possibilities. You will be amazed at the results.

CLAIRE CONCEISON