

THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK  
OF MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE  
IN TRANSLATION

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# Exophony, Translation, and Transnationalism in Gao Xingjian's French/Chinese Plays

MARY MAZZILLI

In the year 2000, Chinese-born playwright, director, novelist, and painter Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940–) won the Nobel Prize in Literature. At that time, Gao had already been living in Europe for about thirteen years having made the decision, in 1987, to live in voluntary cultural exile—after his work had been again censored in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since settling in France, Gao has written in both Chinese and French, sometimes with the help of translators and sometimes without, sometimes first writing in Chinese and sometimes first writing in French. Gao Xingjian is an author working across languages and across cultures, like other Sinophone writers such as novelists Dai Sijie 戴思杰, who also writes in French; Lulu Wang 王子逸, and Gong Yuhong, who write in Dutch; and Guo Xiaolu 郭小橧 who writes in English.

“Translingual writing” (Kellman 2000) and exophony are the terms being used to define writers writing in a language other than their primary language, and scholars have debated whether translation actually occurs in the writing process itself. Responding to the lack of detailed scholarship on Gao's bilingualism in the context of translingual/exophonic writing,<sup>1</sup> this chapter will contribute to the debate on translation, with the argument that authors writing in more than one language challenge the idea of an original version of a text and promote a form of transnationalism (postdramatic transnationalism), making a political standpoint. Most importantly, it is equating transnationalism (rather than translingualism) and writing/translation processes that will help unveil the volatile nature of cultural and linguistic identity. It will do this by exploring the processes of linguistic and cultural assimilation, and linguistic contamination (De Donno 2021) as embedded in the writing/translation, questioning whether texts produced in more than one language by the same author are the product and extension of cultural fluidity, which is part of these authors'—in this case Gao's—transnationalism. I chose to focus mainly on Gao's post-1997 plays because in theatre there is another level of translation in the staging of the written dramatic text, which has been slightly overlooked in the study of Gao's plays. Most importantly, theatre in its bringing together and as “imitation of acting” in the world (Morgan 2013, 4) has the potential for political action and social

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<sup>1</sup>This is with the exception of Claire Conceison who has been planning a translation of his French plays (Wasserstrom 2013) and talks at length about his bilingualism (Conceison 2009).

change. This chapter will investigate the main debates and features of translanguism and exophonic writing, also within the context of translation studies and migration, which will then be brought in to assess Gao's position as a writer in exile, finally to focus on his post-1997 French/Chinese plays.

## CONTEXT: TRANSLINGUAL WRITING, EXOPHONY, AND THE QUESTION OF MIGRATION AND TRANSLATION

In *The Translingual Imagination* (2000), Steven Kellman introduces the term translanguism to define authors writing in a language other than their primary (De Donno 2021, 103), which is presented as a common activity of many writers across the centuries and continents. Yet, the book with its strong interest in twentieth-century literature (and cinema), which has been criticized by some reviews (McCormick 2001; Orr 2002; Pym 2002), does very little to offer a coherent framework or methodology. Furthermore, in his attempt to compile a “roster of translanguing authors” (Kellman 2000, 91) from the Sinophone world, only Chinese translator Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895–1976) and Chinese American author Chin Yang Lee (1915–2018) make the cut. Introduced in the 2007 edited volume *Exophonie Anders-Sprachigkeit (in) der Literatur* (Exophony: Other languages in/of literature), exophonic writing has been considered a subcategory of translanguing writing: “exophony” (from the Greek *exo*: moving out; *phony*: sound/voice—i.e., to move out of one's mother tongue) refers to “translanguing writing that takes place in a newly adopted or secondary language—a language often learned as an adult” (De Donno 2021, 104). This term highlights the transformational (moving out) nature and alterity (*exo* as in outside) as part of the translanguing writing process, confirmed in De Donno's recent article, which surveys the work of contemporary translanguing authors: British American writer of Bengali origin, Jhumpa Lahiri, who writes in both English and Italian, and the Japanese-born German author Yoko Tawada. De Donno connects translanguing practices to the process of translation and highlights the role that identity plays in these practices and processes: “translanguing is an aesthetic as well as an identity tool,” and “translanguing practice, precisely for its reliance on forms of translations and interactions between languages, cultures and identities, can be a tool for an author's refashioning” (104). The equation of translation—intended as the interaction between languages—and identity reveals that writing in different languages is not merely a linguistic act but a cultural one of identification and exchange between different cultures, underpinning a process of transformation (refashioning); De Donno even talks about an act of freedom and of creativity. This liberating transformative and creative aspect of working across languages as connected to cultural identity hints at the opportunity for cultural encounters, which empowers the writers themselves to become agents of transformations by taking the role of translators.

This becomes even more poignant as we talk about the connection between translanguing/exophony/translation and migration. Kellman states that “much of translanguing writing ... is the literature of immigration” (2000, 23). Loredana Polezzi points out that “migrants can gain the ability to translate, adopting what he [Kellman] calls an autonomous practice of translation,” thus highlighting the agency of migrants who “may also become translators, as well as or instead of requiring (or being posited as requiring) translation” (2012, 348). In some cases, migrant writers, as migrant in a geographical and also metaphorical sense (using a language other than their own,

“migrating” from one culture to another), can be seen as active agents not only of translation between languages and cultures but also of transformation and change that goes beyond the binary between their mother tongue and their adopted language. This binary position in itself positing languages in a hierarchical order according to backgrounds (where the writers grew up and which language they spoke as they grew up) can be easily challenged when we look deeper into the dynamic and fluid transitions between languages and the role they played in the author’s life and upbringing. In her account of German exophonic writing by migrant writers, Chantal Wright problematizes the binary of one’s own and not one’s own language: “To write in a language which is not one’s mother tongue means that one has already made it one’s own” (2010, 23). The idea of a mother tongue, also, becomes problematic as and when multiple languages are part of one’s upbringing, such is the case of Canada-based author Dan Vyleta, who grew up in Germany with Czech parents, and then completed his higher education in English; and a question to be raised is also on whether any of the exophonic writers can really differentiate between two or more languages without one language interfering with the other(s) (23).

Going back to Polezzi, especially in the case of writers/self-translators, even the binary between source text and translation is disrupted because creativity, and transformation, plays a much more prominent role:

From a translation studies point of view, it is crucial to note that when migrants act as their own self-translators, the boundary between an “original” and its translation becomes particularly fuzzy, requiring us to broaden the notion of translation. Many cases of self-translation, in fact, do not follow the familiar binary model in which a pre-existing source text moves across linguistic and cultural frontiers in a linear fashion.

(Polezzi 2012, 350)

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the blurring of boundaries between the original and the translation poses the question of whether there is an original text at all, which will be further explored below. For now, we can contend that self-translation becomes an act of freedom, of “re-fashioning” (using De Donno’s words), of remodeling one’s own identity and one’s own attachment to one or more cultures. It is also a political act where writers as self-translators become political actors, whereby “those acts of translation and self-translation have at least the potential to bear witness not just to the experience of the migrant but also to our understanding of being ‘human’” (Polezzi 2012, 354). Translation “becomes a gesture against the dehumanizing nature of contemporary power and its attempts at containment (of voices, of bodies, of movement, and of ‘civilized conversation’” (354). Wright highlights the potential political significance of the question of identity as exemplified by the act of exophonic writing:

[E]xophony itself is a political act: it is an affirmation of the value of the writer’s work and of her struggle. Arguably, though, all translation is a political act, particularly so in cultures where a monolingual paradigm holds sway and where the cultural attitude to difference is one of aggressive assimilation. Here, as elsewhere, exophonic texts exemplify or condense important issues relating to monolingualism, translation and literature.

(Wright 2016, 139)



So, exophonic writing challenges monolingualism. When we talk about migration as part of the writers' cultural and social experience, to some extent, it also challenges assimilation, here intended as the surrender to another culture and language, particularly in regard to migrant experience and the host culture and language.

Migrant writing, in a more negative sense, however, can also suffer from tensions between assimilation and alienation (the sense of otherness toward both the host culture and culture of origin). Talking about high modernism and immigrant literature, Roland Végző says that immigrant literature “could be said to have been concerned with the impossibility of assimilation. In both their assimilationist and segregationist versions, immigrant texts reflected the modern experience of dislocation as they presented various narratives of assimilation into different national cultures (either that of the New World or of the Old World)” (2010, 26). Dislocation—the impossibility of assimilation—as put forward by Végző, posits the migrant experience into a marginal space, which is both political and cultural. In this regard, beyond modernism, Polezzi offers a more positive outlook by stressing that migrants have a choice between assimilation and otherness, but one does not reject the other: “they use translation as a strategy of assimilation, attempting to incorporate themselves into the language and the culture of the host group, or as a form of accommodation, trying to negotiate spaces of resistance and of survival for the language and culture of their origins” (2012, 348).

It also offers a positive reading of the “outsideness” of migrant writing and of the role it can have within the host culture (Polezzi 2012, 352). This does not mean that migrant writers do not experience dislocation, and as Polezzi suggests, the opportunity to be self-translators is not given to all migrants. However, it is important to acknowledge the cultural and political significance of self-translating (thus exophonic writing), and the empowerment this represents, because it enables migrant writers to create a space for themselves in another culture by, at the same time, disrupting and transforming both the other's culture and language and their own. Most importantly, by rejecting the binary position between one's own and one's adoptive language and culture, such a process of self-translating, remodeling, and transformation can be considered as a fluid loop of negotiations moving back and forth between assimilation and alienation/outsideness, language of origin, and target language.

It is in this fluidity, however, where exophonic writing comes to differ from translation, challenging “the conventional notions of source and target in Translation Studies” (Wright 2016, 139). It is not a coincidence that in translation the process of assimilation bears a different meaning than the one used thus far in this chapter and means the same as foreignization:

The assimilation of foreign cultures in translation is the same as foreignisation. Depending on the forces of assimilation and their potential impact on a receptor culture, translators are present in their capacity of readers in the (re)production of meaning in another cultural context and in deciding the amount of assimilation needed to introduce the strange and the foreign to target-language audiences.

(Sun 2003, 34–5)

In translation studies, unlike assimilation of the host country culture and language on the part of the migrant writer, assimilation means the incorporation of a foreign language and cultural references in the target text, and here, like the exophonic/migrant writer, the translator has to

make a decision. However, caught in a balancing act between preserving the target culture and resembling the original text in the target text (their own translation), such an endeavor makes the processes of translators less transformational and liberating.

Having established the difference between exophonic writing/self-translation and translation, can we consider such writing as a form of translation at all? The equation of translation/exophonic writing is still a useful one that opens up the meaning of translation to indicate a fluid process of negotiations between languages and cultures, namely, the idea that communication (verbal or otherwise) is always a form of translation. However, to avoid confusion about the usage of terminologies, such as assimilation, one can look at the actual writing strategies that define the modality of exophonic writing. De Donno distinguishes two writing practices used by exophonic authors, that of contamination and that of separation between languages:

The interaction between “multiple verbal systems,” however, occurs in two main ways: through contamination, by creating an explicit hybrid dimension of playful interaction between languages in the surface of the text; or through separation between languages, which are used monolingually in the text, including in translation, and where translanguaging occurs in more discreet ways by means of other literary strategies.

(De Donno 2021, 104)

In her attempt to “challenge the nationalism and patriarchy of Japan, and the stigmatisation of foreignness in Germany” (De Donno 2021, 120), Yoko Tawada’s contamination can be found in the playful usage of both Japanese and German language, whose differences inform both the aesthetics and the narrative of her literary work. In Lahiri’s case, resorting to writing some of her work only in Italian and some others in English (separation), marks her ability to overcome the alienation she experienced as a second-generation migrant in the United States, and represents “the reconciliatory reckoning of the cultural exclusion she felt because English was not the ‘mother tongue’ of her family” (120). By considering these two authors, contamination and separation are useful terms that, almost equivalent to assimilation (intended as foreignization) and alienation, define the kind of translation taking place in exophonic writing. Most importantly, these strategies and practices enhance the liberating transformative nature of this writing, which in addressing issues of identity, responds to the need to subvert (almost at a political level) the restrictions formed and institutionalized in monolingual cultural settings.

## GAO XINGJIAN’S THEATRE: HIS EXILE, ESCAPE, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Having considered exophonic writing as being a form of translation that is liberating, transformative, and creative, issues of identity and cultural, and political destabilization of monolingualism, especially as connected to the migrant experience, have come to the fore as positive forces and not as signs of surrender to the hegemony of a monolingual culture. So, how does all this apply to Gao, who like other Chinese writers, such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, has not been considered an exophonic writer? It is also true that Gao’s work has never been considered strictly the work of a migrant writer either, despite the fact that he left China for France in 1987.

Scholars and Gao himself have talked, instead, about exile as a physical but above all existential condition that finds its way into the creative process. Exile and escape have been motifs that have been present in his work—in his essays. In his Nobel Prize speech, for instance, quoting from a 1990 essay in which he wrote about literature (Gao 2000a, 18–20), he uses the term “cold literature” 冷的文學:

Cold literature is literature that will flee in order to survive, it is literature that refuses to be strangled by society in its quest for spiritual salvation. If a race cannot accommodate this sort of non-utilitarian literature it is not merely a misfortune for the writer but a tragedy for the race.  
(Gao 2000a)

This definition stresses the motif of “escape” from a society that might “strangle” and restrict the writer’s creativity and individual freedom. Gao also stresses how literature is all about the “return to the voice of the individual, for literature is primarily derived from the feelings of the individual and is the result of feelings” (Gao 2000a). Moreover, part of his famous “no-isms” 沒有主義 (Gao 1996), that literature should have little to do with politics or any form of “isms,” is really a reaction against how literature has been used in China to promote political ideologies, as I mention in my book on Gao’s theatre (Mazzilli 2015a, 117). Escape, intended to represent individual freedom and an anti-political stance, can be read also through his personal exile. In 1987, following the censorship of multiple of his literary works in the PRC (which continues to this day), Gao went into voluntary exile and never returned to China. Most importantly, exile as connected to escape resonates in most of his prose and theatre, exemplified by the lonely aloof male character in search of “spiritual salvation” (quoting from his Nobel Prize lecture). In this sense, by choosing the role of the exiled intellectual rather than talking about migration, Gao’s position is highly political, as exile implies a political action of censorship, whereby Gao’s escape becomes an alternative political act of opposition.

Scholar Alexa Joubin also sees the paradox of Gao’s self-exile, which has been seen as a “political statement” (2011, 377), and the marginality that he so much advocated has been contradicted by the fame and the recognition he received even before the Nobel Prize in Literature:

Gao’s post-exile career is a living example of transculturation that creates a new center of artistic gravity; the configuration of this center may not be based on nationalist sentiments, as it demonstrates an erosion of the collective. However, this new center has not escaped the shadow cast by the cultural and ethnic background of its creator. The paradox arises from the duality of exile: writing in French and Chinese and working to bring elements from more than one culture into his stage works, Gao has to negotiate the interstitial space between different cultural realms, even as he creates a personal voice that is not associated with a nation-state.

(Joubin 2011, 377)

Written in relation to the staging of *Neige en août* (Snow in August; 2000c, 2002) in Taiwan, this quote shows the tension between marginality and a cultural center, in which Gao as a self-exiled writer has found himself sited. On one side, Gao’s marginality has created a new cultural center, though, on the other, this center still needs to negotiate between marginal positions, which come from his cultural background but also the fact that he writes in different languages and deals with two different cultural realms. In this regard, his position is not very dissimilar to other

exophonic writers and migrant writers, negotiating between contamination and separateness, assimilation (intended here in a literary sense) and alienation. What is unique about his position is the success that his career has enjoyed, which has helped create a new center, which is transcultural and transnational. I see this center as a positive necessary outcome from a process of the interplay between transcultural and transnational forces in Gao's work.

Moreover, the above quote also brings attention to terms such as transcultural and transnational ("not associated with a nation-state"), and since transnational better describes this work of transcendence of national boundaries, it carries a political meaning. In particular, I want to refer to my idea of postdramatic transnationalism, which "acknowledges the fluidity of the theatrical discourse that is postdramatic<sup>2</sup> in its essence of being post and beyond ideologies, because postdramatic theatre cannot be assigned to an individual nation or culture" (Mazzilli 2015a, 9). In agreement to some extent with Kong Shuyu's idea of nomadism as connected to Gao, where the stress is on his refusal "to become the subject of any nation-state and suspect of any forms of power formation" (2014, 142), I would argue that his transnationalism is an act of defiance and transcendence, which occurs within the process of translation where translation becomes a transcending and, as mentioned above, liberating act. In regard to his role as self-translator/exophonic writer,<sup>3</sup> which will be explored in more detail with some textual references to his work, it is worth noting that Gao himself stresses the importance of the role language plays in literature and human civilization and its potential to transcend cultural (and national) boundaries:

Language is the ultimate crystallization of human civilization. It is intricate, incisive and difficult to grasp and yet it is pervasive, penetrates human perceptions and links man, the perceiving subject, to his own understanding of the world. The written word is also magical for it allows communication between separate individuals, even if they are from different races and times.

(Gao 2000a)

The emphasis is on the transcendent power of the written word, which albeit "evasive," can help separate individuals, regardless of their background and the age they live in. I would argue that this is empowering translation, as a vehicle to transcending cultural and linguistic differences, which as it happens quite often in exophonic writing, challenges the idea of a binary between original/source text and target text, and even of an original text.

## EXOPHONIC WRITING/SELF-TRANSLATION AND THEATRE IN GAO'S FRENCH/CHINESE PLAYS

So, how does transnationalism as cultural national transcendence occur in Gao's self-translation work? What kind of self-translator/exophonic writer is Gao? The answers to these questions are not straightforward, as we will see. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I will focus mainly

<sup>2</sup>Postdramatic theatre was coined by Hans-Thies Lehman in his 2006 book, of that name, about postwar theatrical trends in Europe and North America, but I use postdramatic as suffix to transnationalism because of "its essence of being post and beyond ideologies, because postdramatic theatre cannot be assigned to an individual nation or culture" (Mazzilli 2015a, 9).

<sup>3</sup>One should not forget that Gao worked as a translator even before his writing career took off.

on his plays, those written and produced after his self-imposed exile in 1987, which also marked the time when his plays started to appear first in French, then in Chinese, and then in English. Furthermore, I chose to focus on his theatre work rather than his prose because of the third level of translation, which is the staging of a piece, discussed below.

Having moved to France, Gao wrote his plays in French, but not all of them without the help of a translator. So, for instance, *Au borde de la vie* (生死界 [Between Life and Death]; 1992), *Le Somnambule* (夜游神 [Nocturnal Wanderer]; 1993), and *Quatre Quatuors our un week-end* (周末四重奏 [Weekend Quartet]; 1995) were originally translated by the author himself in French; *La fuite* (逃亡 [Escape]; 1990) was translated into French by Michele Guyot in the 1992 edition in the collection *Theatre a Vif* (later republished by Lansman), *Dialoguer et Interloquer* (对话与反诘 [Dialogue and Rebuttal]; 1992) by Anne Curien in the 1994 MEET edition, while *Le Quêteur de la mort* (Death Collector; 2000), *L'Autre rive* (彼岸 [The Other Shore]; 1986), and *La Neige en août* (八月雪 [Snow in August]; 2000c, 2002) were translated, in 2004, by Noël and Lilliane Dutrait.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to know why some plays have been translated by others and some not, even though it is important to know that Gao often shares drafts of his plays with translator Noël Dutrait (Conceison 2009, 319). The Chinese versions are written (translated) by the author himself but, as Conceison notes, in some cases these appear much later in Chinese, which in itself is an interesting fact for two reasons. Firstly, as Conceison suggests that, especially in regard to his latest play *Ballade Nocturne*, Gao did not want to be identified as a Chinese writer.<sup>5</sup> This tells us a lot about his identity: he attempts to escape his Chineseness, even though, as another paradox, in his Nobel Prize speech, he is aware that his Chineseness will inevitably come through his work and a lot of his theatre incorporates a strong Chineseness, which is an aspect that scholars like myself (Mazzilli 2015a) and Todd Coulter (2014) have criticized in our respective studies of his theatre. Secondly, the Chinese version of Gao's plays are rather a refashioning of his work, as Conceison explains: "Gao first rewrites the plays in Chinese—specifying that this a re-creation of the play not a translation" (2009, 306); they are what she call "double" or "twin" texts (308). In an interview with Conceison, Gao "thought the Chinese version of his first French play (*Au bord de la vie*) would result from his translating it, but he discovered this task was impossible and chose to rewrite the play instead" (319).

This is not at all surprising as in a recent interview he admits that his translation model was Chinese master translator Lin Shu 林纾 (1852–1924) (Wang 2020, 52), who has been "regarded by some critics as an unfaithful translator because during the process of translation, he primarily resorted to such techniques as omission, addition, alteration and abridgment, giving his works a strong personal stamp" (Chen and Cheng 2015, 416). Beyond the influences that Lin Shu might or might not have on his "self-translating work," I would argue that his approach to self-translating/ recreating in Chinese goes much deeper than that, and in this regard, I concur with Conceison:

Gao's writing in one language (Chinese) was directly informed by his previous authorship of the piece in another language (French), indicating greater hybridity in his bilingualism than he had

<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that Noël Dutrait has been the French translator for all Gao's prose into French.

<sup>5</sup>Significantly, when Gao granted me permission to seek publication for my translation of *Ballade Nocturne*, he stipulated that it should not appear in any venue (be it journal, anthology, or edited volume) that would contextualize him as a "Chinese" writer (Conceison 2009, 218).

previously acknowledged. Gao chooses to emphasize the distinctness of the two languages rather than their coexistence in his bilingual consciousness, and he deliberately shifts his cultural milieu when writing in French rather than Chinese.

(Conceison 2009, 309–10)

There is a continuous process of negotiation at play between the intention to keep the two languages and cultures separate and to reconcile the one with the other. This is exemplified by the fact that Gao avoids clear references to Chinese cultures in the French version but, at the same time, in his Chinese translation he wants to reproduce the musicality of the French language. To some extent, one could argue that his privileging French culture and language, trying to avoid cross-cultural encounters in his French plays, is contradicted by the fact that he still feels the need to translate them into Chinese, which he wants to embed with French characteristics. This is dissimilar from Lahiri, who does not get involved in the translation of her Italian novels into English. Furthermore, paradoxically, Chinese being a tonal language is highly musical; thus, one could argue that his sensitivity to linguistic musicality is a by-product of his Chinese linguistic background. Talking about language and identity, the complexity of such negotiations, and the desire to translate his own work into Chinese show that despite seemingly embracing his Frenchness, by rewriting and translating his plays into Chinese, unlike Lahiri who found some sort of freedom in embracing an “Italian” identity, Gao’s refashioning is attached to his Chineseness, so much so that he still writes some of his plays first in Chinese. This is the case of *Neige en août*. This confirms that his attempt to escape his Chineseness is strewn with contradictions, thus adding a political connotation to his cultural exile. However, before jumping to conclusions one needs to look at some textual references.

In my past publications on Gao, I have paid little attention to the role translation (or self-translation) plays in his work to the extent that in my monograph published in 2015, and related academic work, I have used my own translation from the Chinese, unlike Todd Coulter who translated his from the French. However, even then, by comparing some sections of the Chinese texts with the French I noticed some differences. For instance, *Au bord de la vie* is full of terms and expressions in the Chinese version that are not present in the French translation. In the last part of Woman’s speech, where the fragmentation of the self is mirrored by linguistic fragmentation, the word 混沌 is used twice<sup>6</sup> in the Chinese version while she talks about her aimless walking. 混沌 means chaos in Chinese but also could refer to the Daoist mythological figure of a “featureless deity” or the abstract concept of “featurelessness, shapelessness, and lack of definition” (Mazzilli 2015a, 59). In the French version the expression *sans route, sans but* (aimless) is used instead (Gao 2000b, 81), in the first case and in the second case, “the French text simply uses the expression ‘... tout s’éteindrait bientôt,’ meaning ‘everything would die soon’” (84), which is further complicated by “Gao’s use of the conditional in place of the future tense” (88), so the French translation of the first sentence would read as follows:

Lost in the clouds, SHE wanders *aimlessly* and appears to fall into the abyss.

(Gao 2000b, 81; my emphais)

<sup>6</sup>In the first sentence it is used as 混沌, while in the second sentence, it is used as 混沌沌, which can be connected to the word at the end of her speech, 寂滅, which means “perishable” but also “quiescence” (Mazzilli 2015a, 59).

In my translation from the Chinese:

Surrounded by clouds and fog she walks blindly, *in the mist of chaos* [my italics], looking hastily for the way but she has no aim, only the awareness that she is sinking into an abyss.

(Mazzilli 2015a, 59)

The second sentence would read as follows from French:

In her heart there is nothing but one glimmer of light. SHE imagines that if she lets herself go, *everything would die soon*.

(Gao 2000b, 88; my emphasis)

In my translation from the Chinese:

Everything disappears. It is *chaos*. In her heart there is only a spark of secret light. Possibly also this cannot be stopped from disappearing, and everything *will perish* (will lead to a state of *quiescence*).

(Mazzilli 2015a, 60)

Originally, in my study of Gao, I do not really differentiate between the two versions as I say that they both point to “an inevitable death ... also to a primordial stage and a longing for an inner peace—the same Daoist equilibrium ... one that transcends materiality and language” (Mazzilli 2015a, 60). Now reconsidering the two versions, we can see that in the French the connection to specific philosophical connotations is lost. In the Chinese version there is a subtle reference to the Dao, where the word “chaos” can also refer to the original prelinguistic state that defines Gao’s idea of the ungendered/originary self, as defined by Yip and Tam (2002) and reiterated in my article on Gao’s stance on gender.<sup>7</sup> In the French version the meaning of the play is more generically connected to the fragmentation of the self and of narration. Besides the word chaos, also as you can see from my translation from the Chinese, Gao seems to have added more details with potential philosophical and religious connotations about the state of mind of the character, which is generally the case throughout the Chinese version.

Another example where the Chinese shows again some richness is *La Neige en août*, which presents a slightly different ending to the script. In the French version, the play ends with the group of laymen (*la foule des laïcs*) saying:

The baby cries when they are born, the old are silent as they depart ...  
 The living should learn to live “pleasantly” (contented)  
 The dead sleep with wisdom ...  
 So the world goes ...

<sup>7</sup>“Referring to the mythic figure of the Emperor Hun Dun in the work of modern Chinese writer Lu Ling (1921–1994), Kirk Denton explains that in Daoist terms, ‘chaos’ refers to a primal state, an ‘essential spiritual nourishment,’ part of the sage’s journey in the cyclic regeneration of the Tao and process of rebirth. This primal stage is defined as a ‘state of origins prior to the civilizing divisions of language.’ It is in these terms that ‘chaos’ can also refer to the original pre-linguistic state that defines Gao’s idea of the un-gendered/originary self” (Mazzilli 2015b, 376).

Even if the mountain Tai curves down, the mountain Jade would not fall.  
 Men bring trouble onto themselves.  
 Those who sink the stilts day after day will still sink the stilt. But if the bridge decays, a new one  
 can be built.  
 Do not say that the night rain hits the banana trees, a car has passed by, as light as carried by a  
 breeze.  
 Men attract trouble onto themselves.  
 Tonight and tomorrow will be also wonderful, wonderful all the same.

(Xu 2005, 76)

In the Chinese version, the choral singing of the laymen is replaced by the interlocution between the two characters Geisha and Writer, who had been present throughout till the masters join in the conversation, followed by the laymen, forming a similar choral ending to the piece:

**Geisha** (*Sings.*) The small child cries.  
**Writer** (*Sings.*) Just born.  
**Geisha** (*Sings.*) The old man is quiet.  
**Writer** (*Sings.*) He's gone.  
**Geisha** (*Sings.*) A bright lamp brings in a rattling open fire  
 [...]  
**Masters** (*Sing.*) When old bridges crush, new ones are built.  
**Writer** (*Sings.*) This is the way the world goes.  
**Geisha** (*Sings.*) Even if the mountain Tai falls, or the Jade mountain does  
 not, people will continue to self-inflict their own troubles.  
**Writer** (*Sings.*) The night rain falls on the banana leaves. A red carriage  
 passes by and the wind mourns.  
**Masters and laymen** (*Sing.*) Tonight and tomorrow morning, all the  
 same, all the same, all the same; tonight and tomorrow morning, all the  
 same; it will be wonderful; still wonderful all the same.

(Mazzilli 2015a, 202)

Considering that the French version followed, in this case, the Chinese version, and was not translated by the writer himself (as mentioned above), one could consider the French version as a simplification of the Chinese. Despite another translator's involvement, this seems to follow a trend where simplification is generally found in the French versions of the plays in comparison with the Chinese.

This is confirmed, yet also further complicated when we look at the author's recommendations on the staging of the plays. On the one hand, Gao, even in his French version of *Au Borde de la vie*, recommends the play should be staged according to a modern dramatic expression inspired by the Chinese traditional theatre (Gao 2000b, 60).<sup>8</sup> On the other, in both the notes to direction of the

<sup>8</sup>He is not very specific about what he means by that, and for that one would need to read the countless essays he wrote about his theatre which point to a cross-cultural encounter between Chinese theatrical traditions and Western modern traditions.



play, *Le Somnambule*, in the French version and in a separate essay on the direction of the play, Gao says that in a Chinese representation of the play, the character of Le Sans-abri (流浪汉 Tramp) should not be like a god or a tramp, but rather should be molded on the character Ji Gong 济公, a popular figure of Chinese folklore, and the character of the prostitute should not wear a Chinese dress, whilst there are no constraints for productions in a Western language (Gao 2000b, 40). Looking at actual productions of the plays in Europe, Alan Timar's 2001 production of *Au Borde de la vie*, exploits such freedom: even though in the Copat DVD of the production, Timar celebrates and acknowledges Gao's Chineseness, there is no recognizable Chinese idiosyncrasy on stage, thus exploiting the freedom given to Western productions but not totally embracing Gao's recommendations. Great freedom is also enjoyed the SourouS Company 2010 production of Gao's latest play *Ballade Nocturne* (2010), where two female players take the place of the male performer playing an instrument and a puppet master takes the place of the two female dancers. In this regard, by not having a male presence on stage the production "removes the explicit gender tensions that are intrinsic to the text and to the original conception of the play" (Mazzilli 2015a, 210).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Looking back at these examples within the context of Gao's overall oeuvre, in relation to the translingual/exophonic writing strategies of contamination and separation, one could argue that Gao's liberties in the Chinese self-translations point to separation, namely, his attempt to keep the French and the Chinese as separate as possible, which would make his exophony quite similar to Lahiri. However, beyond the main differences, there are many similarities between the Chinese and French versions, and it would be totally far-fetched to call them two separate works. Furthermore, the intention to reproduce the musicality of the French and the attempt in some cases to recommend Chinese theatrical tradition as source for inspiration in the staging of this work can be seen as a form of contamination between the two cultures and versions of the same play. In fact, it is not surprising that much of the theatre scholarship on Gao has emphasized the transcultural nature of his theatre and has highlighted the Chineseness of the work (Zhao 2000; Quah 2004). It is also very important to note that the English translations of Gao's works (mainly by Gilbert Fong) are from the Chinese versions of the plays and retain the Chinese essence in the translation, whilst others such as Conceison, in her translation of *Ballade Nocturne*, has looked both at the French and Chinese versions of that play. Following suite from Conceison, it is only the more recent scholarship of Gao (Mazzilli 2015a, b; Coulter 2014; and Fusini 2020, to mention a few) that has attempted to see his theatrical work outside a Chinese paradigm. However, as he said in his Nobel Prize lecture and as is evident in his essays, Chinese culture is part of his DNA. As mentioned above, unlike Lahiri, the fact that Gao wants to write in Chinese to see his work still published and produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong signifies his own attachment to Sinophone culture, which should not be seen merely as the failure to fully escape his Chinese identity but as part of his fluidity, the fact that he is comfortable to see himself as a writer in exile and, by doing so, unknowingly, making a political stand, creating, as Joubin suggested, his own cultural center. Nomadism, exile/escape, and postdramatic transnationalism are not a total abandonment of the culture of origin but just the opposite. Gao's ability to inject and confuse and cross-references between cultures demonstrates the creative transformative potential of contamination and

assimilation (here intended as foreignization), which is enabled by using the cultural elements of one's choosing. Finally, it is through the theatrical medium that such a freedom is further enhanced because, as demonstrated by Gao's productions of his plays, staging is another form of translation, and transformation, which challenges the idea of one dominating "original text," one monolingual cultural setting of one's nation, thus transcending national boundaries. It is theatre as potentially a political forum that reinforces the political stance of Gao's postdramatic transnationalism.

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