

Cultural Translation between the World and the Chinese: The Problematics in Positioning Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian

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Abstract

This article explores four problematics in positioning Gao Xingjian between “world literature” and “Chinese literature”: Gao Xingjian and cultural translation; Gao Xingjian and modern Chinese literature; Gao Xingjian and world literature; and Gao Xingjian and China’s Nobel Prize complex. The article envisions Gao as a cultural translator who has migrated back and forth across linguistic and ethnic boundaries and has integrated diverse cultural elements in his “modernist” writings. A discussion of the attack on the “lack of creativity” in modern Chinese literature further situates Gao in a contact zone between languages and cultures. An investigation of labeling Gao’s work as “world literature with Chinese characteristics” entails revisiting the controversy surrounding the perceived “translatability” of “world poetry” and a consideration of the tripartite qualification for “world literature.” Finally, the controversy among Chinese intellectuals around the world regarding Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Prize award not only foregrounds the geo-cultural politics in the era of globalization but also sheds light on Gao Xingjian’s dilemma of struggling between his claim to creativity, individuality, and transcendence on the one hand, and the demand of translatability and “universality” in the contemporary cultural production and circulation of “world literature” on the other.

Keywords

Gao Xingjian (高行健), cultural translation, world literature, creativity, individuality, transcendence, universality

Gao Xingjian and Cultural Translation: Migration, Exile, Transcendence

A fragile individual, a solitary writer confronted by society and voicing his opinions—I believe this is the nature of literature. From ancient times to the present, from China to foreign countries, from the East to the West, the nature of literature has not changed that much.

—Gao Xingjian, *No isms* 11

An avant-garde writer in post-Mao China and a respected Chinese-French writer-artist after 1988, Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000. The news came as a surprise to the Chinese literary circles around the world because of a marked difference in his receptions: whereas Gao's works had been banned in mainland China since 1989 and had sold poorly in overseas Chinese editions before 2000, his literary works (especially plays) were frequently translated and performed in European languages, earning him more recognition in Europe than in East Asia during the 1990s (Barmé; Tam, *Soul* 311-38; Lovell). As Gilbert Fong observed in 1999, "Gao Xingjian has been hailed as the first Chinese playwright to enter world theatre. His plays in fact have been performed more often outside China than inside it, in France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the United States, and in overseas Chinese communities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore" (x).¹ In other words, Gao has gradually become part of the European cultural scene and therefore part of so-called "world theater." It is this kind of "migration"—or, more precisely, the migration of his works through translation and performance—that foregrounds the dilemma of positioning Gao *vis-à-vis* "world" literature and "Chinese" literature.

In this article I explore four areas of problematics in positioning Gao Xingjian: Gao Xingjian and cultural translation; Gao Xingjian and modern Chinese literature; Gao Xingjian and world literature; and Gao Xingjian and China's Nobel Prize complex. I suggest that we might envision Gao as a translator working between multiple cultures, not simply European and Chinese cultures, modern and ancient

¹ An inventory of the performances of Gao's plays in Asia, Europe, and the United States can be found in Liu 323-59.

cultures, but also urban and rural cultures, elite and folk cultures, the Central Plain (中原 Zhongyuan) and the Yangtze River (長江 Changjiang) regional cultures, Confucian and Daoist-Buddhist cultures.² As a cultural translator, Gao has constantly positioned himself on the edge, borderline, or frontier, so that he can gain new perspectives and new experiences otherwise unobtainable, discredited, or forbidden at the center. A cultural intermediary facilitating communication and exchange between the source and target languages and cultures, he has drawn on refreshing elements from foreign literature to enrich Chinese literature and has revived indigenous folk traditions to jump-start what he perceives as the sagging creative energy in post-Mao China.

Seen from this perspective, Gao Xingjian emerges as a cultural translator who has helped introduce European modernism (especially in avant-garde theater and experimental fiction) to post-Mao China (as in his play *The Bus Stop* [車站 Chezhan, 1982]); who has “rediscovered” home-grown cultural, ecological values amidst a sweeping rage for modernization and urbanization in his native land (as in his play *Wild Man* [野人 Yeren, 1984]); who has insisted on existential inquiry as a mode of being in opposition to the increasingly pointless commercial cultural production around the world (as in his play *The Other Shore* [彼岸 Bi an, 1986]) (*Gao Xingjian's Plays* 84-133, 200-83). Parallel to the migration of meaning from one language to another through translation, Gao's physical migration from the urban to the rural and subsequently from China to France also finds parallels in the linguistic migration of new ideas in his creative output as well as in the performance of his works outside China.

If the word “migration” still indicates the subjective freedom of going places (as in Gao's often-cited five-month, 15,000-kilometer expedition travel along the Yangtze River in 1983), the term “exile” sounds ominous because it confronts the restriction of physical movement and the likely “terminal” point of one's migration. But exile (i.e., physical displacement unto an alien location) does not disqualify linguistic migration central to the task of cultural translation, and Gao's exile has gained a new perspective for him as a creative writer. After spending seven years on *Soul Mountain* (靈山 Lingshan, 1990), he admitted that completing this novel of over 500 pages away from China in 1989 had put an end to his “homesickness” (鄉愁 xiangchou): “Once separated from the so-called land of my ancestry (祖國

² For Gao, the Central Plain culture is Confucian in nature and has been institutionalized in China for centuries, whereas the Yangtze River culture includes the Chu (楚) culture (the central river region), the Ba-Shu (巴蜀) culture (the upper river region), and the Wu-Yue (吳越) culture (the lower river region). In addition to these sub-national cultures, Gao also mentions the Haidai (海岱) culture near the Bohai (渤海) coastline. See Gao's *No isms* 180.

zuguo), I gained distance and started writing with a more sober mind (冷靜 *lengjing*)” (*No isms* 15).³ In other words, Gao treats his state of exile in France not exclusively as a state of loss or deprivation but more as a state of gains or advantage. He asserts philosophically: “a person who is fully aware of his self is always in a state of exile” (*No isms* 154). At a metaphysical level, life is but an exile after all.

It is evident that Gao has overcome the potentially devastating impact of exile and has been able to write with more clarity and vision in his own judgment. Obviously, *lengjing*, Gao’s Chinese phrase translated as “a sober mind” above but covering a larger semantic field (e.g., somber, solemn, calmness, tranquility), resonates the kind of quality he has in mind when he envisions a type of “cold literature” (冷的文學 *leng de wenzue*). For him, “cold literature” is removed from political and commercial manipulation, devoid of the desire to speak for the state, the nation, or the people, and is instead committed to writing as a not-for-profit means of existence or subsistence (*No isms* 18-20). In Gao’s transcendent view of creative writing, “cold literature” is ultimately an individual undertaking, responsible for none other than the writer’s language and consciousness.

From migration to exile, Gao’s commitment to transcending conventional boundaries (e.g., political, ideological, national, literary) has rarely waived. As a cultural translator, he has freed himself from parochial and narrow nationalistic concerns; but like so many other translators, he has been faulted for being “unfaithful” either to the source or to the target language and culture. As his Nobel Prize controversy testifies (a point I will return in the concluding section), Gao’s status in modern Chinese literature is relentlessly challenged. “Many Chinese intellectuals and writers [...],” to quote one scholarly summary, “wonder[ed] why the Nobel Committee, in awarding its first ever prize to a writer working in the Chinese language, would give it to a writer in exile whose very ‘Chineseness’ was somehow in question because he had abandoned the homeland and become a French citizen” (Denton iii). It is this “Chineseness” in question that deserves further attention.

³ Gao started an outline of *Soul Mountain* in Beijing in the summer of 1982 and completed the novel in Paris in September 1989.

Gao Xingjian and Modern Chinese Literature: Hybridity, Creativity, Individuality

What I pursue in *Soul Mountain* is another kind of Chinese culture, another conception and form of the novel, as well as another expression of the modern Chinese language.

—Gao Xingjian, *No isms* 114

Before Gao's Nobel Prize controversy erupted in 2000, the term "modern Chinese literature" had already been disputed, not so much in China or the United States as in Europe, where even a seasoned scholar has questioned the seemingly ready "translatability" of much of modern Chinese literature as the sign of an "inferior" product marked by decade-long contamination, imitation, or outright plagiarism. Bonnie McDougall, one of the pioneering scholars and translators of modern Chinese literature in the West, presented a contentious paper, "The Anxiety of Out-fluence: Creativity, History and Postmodernity," at a conference at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, in 1992.⁴ She argues that modern Chinese literature is "generally so depressingly mediocre" due to combined factors such as "impulses to imitation" (i.e., "largely unreflexive adoptions of Western ideas"), "the quest for the correct," "the fallacy of the *Zeitgeist*," "mimesis and authenticity" (e.g., "a kind of social anthropology" or "a kind of plagiarism of actuality"), as well as "foreign and domestic dogma" (*Fictional Authors* 228-32). After listing these factors in an impassioned, indeed impatient manner, McDougall jumps to the conclusion that "Chinese writing of the 1980s lacked creativity" (*Fictional Authors* 232). With no effective medicine in sight, she administers this prescription to modern Chinese writers: "the renunciation of literature (as an elite cultural form, as a self-justifying creative good, as an obedient response on command) might be one of the more honorable choices" (*Fictional Authors* 237). Her arrogance aside, McDougall's message is loud and clear: if modern Chinese writers cannot manage to be "creative" (as defined in Western terms), then they had better be silent and renounce their literary careers altogether.

⁴ For Bonnie McDougall's earlier work as a translator of modern Chinese literature, see *Paths in Dreams* and *Notes from the City of the Sun*.

On the one hand, insofar as Gao Xingjian was a prominent Chinese practitioner of Western-influenced modernism in the early 1980s, McDougall's across-the-board judgment as to a lack of "creativity" in Chinese literature of the period might apply to him as well. There is no denying that Gao's insistence on literature as "an elite cultural form" and a "self-justifying" creative practice stands in diametric opposition to McDougall's prescription, and what is fundamentally ironic in this connection is that Gao's self-justifying elitist stance is actually among the crucial factors that helped him win the most-coveted international prize in literature, as the Nobel Committee's press release shows unambiguously (Swedish Academy). On the other hand, McDougall's ventriloquist attack on modern Chinese literature does not merit item-by-item refutation because she is simply reiterating an entrenched European bias that treats modern Chinese literature as being largely "derivative of out-moded Western models, and thus condemned to a perpetual, and futile game of catch-up" (Jones 184). However, McDougall's placing of modern Chinese literature in the framework of East-West cultural interaction points out the fact that questions of creativity and identity cannot but be subjected to the Western-centered international politics of interpretation, especially in the era of transnationalism and globalization.

Another irony revealed in McDougall's criticism is that, to some extent, Gao Xingjian might concur with McDougall that modern Chinese literature suffers some kind of crisis. For Gao, "the crisis of the modern Chinese language"—one he sees as originating from the iconoclastic May Fourth movement—is manifested in four areas: (1) massive Europeanization; (2) increasing poverty of expression; (3) acceptance of ungrammatical sentences and awkward new coinages as fresh inventions; and (4) increasing disregard of rhyme and rhythm derived from the Chinese four tones (*No isms* 113). The reason I describe Gao's argument of modern Chinese language "in crisis" as ironic is because for many critics, much of his work is "European," some of his Chinese expressions "ungrammatical," and many of his new inventions "awkward." What distinguishes Gao's position from those targeted by McDougall's arbitrary dismissal of modern Chinese literature, however, is that Gao opts for a pro-active stance, identifying the source of these "problems" and seeking "remedies" by way of continued, self-conscious literary practice. As he makes clear on numerous occasions, Gao does not object to "language games" (語言遊戲 *yuyan youxi*) because language forces him to play along (and he plays with Chinese and French languages at least); rather, he is willing to "dance inside the language prison" so as to test the limits of creative freedom (*No isms* 114).

We should take a look at the ways Gao creatively plays with literary language. According to him, *Soul Mountain* aims in part to “express the multiple levels of a modern person’s cognition by using the Chinese language” and to present such cognition in the form of a “language flow.” Gao specifically praises European modernist writers (e.g., Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf) as his sources of inspiration and identifies the Chinese tendency to “short-circuit” a character’s psychological processes as a “weakness” in modern Chinese literature (*No isms* 139). In order to overcome weaknesses such as this, Gao implements inventions or innovations in *Soul Mountain* in the areas of structure, genre, and idiom. He designs a linguistic structure in which one subject adopts four pronouns and mutates (or migrates, to evoke an image deployed earlier in this article) from “I” (traveling in the real world) to “You” (traveling in the imaginary world) to “She” (the other with whom the subject cannot communicate) to “He” (an alienated form of “I”). In Gao’s design, the freedom of interchangeable “pronouns-as-characters” (Lee; Liu 147-56) parallels the freedom granted for their mutual observation and reflection, which further parallels the freedom informed by Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Daoism and Zen Buddhism. *Soul Mountain*, therefore, can be regarded as a lengthy “monologue,” which additionally takes the shape of an extensive “travelogue” (遊記 youji) as the subject tours the actual and imaginary landscapes along the Yangtze River (*No isms* 173-76).

If the linguistic structure in *Soul Mountain* appears too modern or Western to the average Chinese reader, Gao attempts to strike a balance by incorporating diverse traditional Chinese forms and genres of writing, such as travelogue, notes (筆記 biji), tales of wonders (傳奇 chuanqi), fables, and myths. In addition, he enriches the modern idiom by borrowing from what he calls the “living language” (i.e., folk songs and local legends). He also polishes his use of the Chinese language by paying attention to the sound and rhythm of his writing: he often relies on tape-recording to help his composition and claims to have revised parts of his manuscript up to twenty times (*No isms* 172).

As a result of his elaborate design, *Soul Mountain* yields a kind of synthesis (or hybridity) Gao deems instrumental to the expression of the multiple levels of a modern person’s cognition. But Gao’s “creativity” in cultural translation (i.e., drawing on various, at time apparently incompatible Western and Chinese sources) might be disputed, for he does not so much invent as re-invent or revamp traditional Chinese subjects, motifs, myths, and the like. As Jeffrey Kinkley has convincingly demonstrated, in terms of literary themes, techniques, strategies, and philosophies, Gao’s *Soul Mountain* bears uncanny resemblance to the works of Shen Congwen (a

modern writer famous for his rural stories), and both Gao and Shen are reputedly fond of the Chu culture, an “exotic, aboriginal, or multiethnic Chinese culture,” the source of which can be traced to the tradition of Qu Yuan and the ancient *Songs of the South* (楚辭 Chuci). As Kinkley observes:

Both modern writers are drawn to the primitive: the folk stories, songs, and religion, including the shamanism that inspired the ancient *Songs*. The modern authors voice antipathy to Confucian piety, and, as modernists, they mix and remake genres; experiment with literary technique; and explore literary exoticism, the self, and within the self, the soul—a soul so fragmented that they have it speak in different voices. (131)

Kinkley’s study confirms Gao’s creativity in drawing inspirations from a mixture of hybrid cultural elements as well as in constructing a hybridity of fictional forms in his work. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the issues of hybridity and creativity, Gao’s stance on “individuality” is not all that indisputable. “As a writer in exile,” he writes, “I redeem myself entirely in literary and artistic creation” (*No isms* 9). He admits that works like *Soul Mountain* sustain him in pursuit of “a kind of fresh literature, a kind of “present-time literature” (現時代文學 xianshidai wenxue) based on the cognitive and expressive methods of the Eastern people but also steeped in the consciousness of a modern person” (*No isms* 107).

Yet, Gao’s self-acclaimed grounding in Chinese or Eastern culture and his reputed “transcendence” of national or cultural boundaries cannot but invite further questions. Whereas he uses “Eastern” to designate his “cognitive and expressive methods,” he refuses to specify the gender and nationality of the “modern person” and instead unproblematically grants this modern person a transcendental existence. Not surprisingly, his critics have taken him to task by challenging his fundamental male or male-centered conception of the modern person and exposing his problematic (or, for some, even “misogynist”) depiction of women (Xu; Rojas). Such challenge to his seemingly gender-neutral stance on the modern person, combined with the above-mentioned dispute over his “Chineseness” (and, by extension, his claim to Eastern culture), further reveals that Gao’s self-described “transcendent” stance has done little to prevent critical positioning or repositioning of him on either side of the entrenched division of Chinese literature and world literature.

Gao Xingjian and World Literature: Chineseness, Universality, Skepticism

A writer is neither a representative of a national culture, nor a representative of a national people.

—Gao Xingjian, *No isms* 15

While teaching at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, Torbjorn Lodén makes this announcement in an article titled “World Literature with Chinese Characteristics”: “A kind of ‘world literature’ that integrates elements from different cultures into an organic whole which transcends the sum-total of its constituent parts is now emerging as a major literary current, teeming with life and growing rapidly” (258). Taking note of such a “transcending” quality, Lodén includes Gao Xingjian in this emerging world current and feels “entitled to look upon *Soul Mountain* as a piece of ‘world literature with Chinese characteristics’” (273). In sharp contrast to McDougall’s pessimistic view of fundamentally “imitative” and “mediocre” modern Chinese literature, Lodén strikes an optimistic note: “For the culture of China which, no matter how illustrious, suffers from the ills of insularity, few things could be more promising than the appearance of first-rate writers of world literature. Gao Xingjian has now joined these ranks. So has Bei Dao. And many more are coming” (274).⁵

Lodén’s grouping of Gao Xingjian and Bei Dao (北島, an internationally acclaimed Chinese poet also in exile) does not so much answer the question why Lodén has chosen his title phrase “world literature with Chinese characteristics”—clearly mimicking China’s official designation of its current political system as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”—as bring us to revisit a previous controversy over the relationship between modern Chinese poetry and what Stephen Owen grudgingly calls “world poetry.” In his 1990 review of Bei Dao’s collection, *The August Sleepwalker: Poetry* (translated into English by none other than Bonnie McDougall), Owen is disturbed by what he perceives as Bei Dao’s tendency to write with Western readers in mind and to forsake time-honored Chinese poetic expressions (e.g., idiom, imagery, symbolism) in favor of those readily translatable

⁵ Lodén’s optimism rests on his conviction that “V.S. Naipaul, Kenzaburo Oe, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott and others provide good reasons for cherishing the hope that variety will survive, and indeed be enriched, by the globalization of world culture” (273).

into English. For Owen, Bei Dao's practice of "world poetry" (i.e., "a poetry written to travel well") gains translatability (including acceptability and accessibility) in Western cultures but risks losing creativity nurtured by the rich Chinese poetic tradition. In Owen's judgment, "although it is supposedly free of all local history, this 'world poetry' turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism," each of which is "an essentially local tradition [...] taken for granted as universal" (28-32).⁶

By no means a mere coincidence, David Damrosch cites Owen's review of Bei Dao in an introduction to *What Is World Literature?* In Damrosch's view, Owen's critique of Western "cultural hegemony" may be legitimate, but his criticism of "world poetry" is counter-productive because "works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large," regardless of the authors' or the translators' intentions. What is of more significance for scholars, writes Damrosch, is "to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts" (24). Damrosch's tripartite definition of world literature is worth quoting at some length here:

1. World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.
2. World literature is writing that gains in translation.
3. World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time. (281)

Damrosch's definition of world literature as "a mode of reading" (including translation) and circulation (including reception) highlights the increasing importance of process (or movement) over content (or meaning) in the contemporary study of world literature. While the second part of his definition qualifies both Bei Dao and Gao Xingjian as writers of "world literature" whose works gain in translation into European languages (although what exactly their translations gain requires further scrutiny, which is beyond the space of this article), Damrosch's first part reminds us—in a way similar to Gao Xingjian's statement used as the epigraph to this section—that neither Bei Dao nor Gao Xingjian could unequivocally represent Chinese literature. As a matter of fact, their admission to the ranks of world literature seems to have provoked controversy concerning their legitimacy as "Chinese" writers. In Bei Dao's case, we may modify Lodén's characterization of

⁶ For critiques of Owen's position, see Chow 3-4; and Yeh 94-96.

Gao Xingjian and question whether Bei Dao has been practicing “world poetry with Chinese characteristics” or “Chinese poetry with world characteristics”—or simply a generic type of “world poetry” as Owen sees it. In any case, the “Chinese” and the “world” seem to constitute an uneasy—or uneasily conjoined—relationship once an ethnic Chinese writer enters the ranks of world literature and is engaged primarily by readers of other places and other times (as in Damrosch’s third definition).

To explore this uneasy relationship further, we may ponder questions Gilbert Fong raises with regard to Gao Xingjian: “is there an essential ‘Chineseness’ in his works? Does he, like many contemporary Chinese writers living overseas, still look to Chinese artistic and cultural traditions for inspiration?” (x). Except for the word “essential,” Kinkley’s answer to Fong’s questions would be in the positive, as Kinkley’s study has pinpointed the aspects of the rich Chu cultural tradition that have informed Gao’s *Soul Mountain*, from the literary to the philosophical and the ethnic. Gao himself acknowledges the impact of folk and peripheral cultures on his work, although he favors a “transcendent” position, contending that there is no need to represent national or ethnic cultural elements solely for the purpose of selling one’s work: “What is important to a writer is transcendence (超脫 chaotuo), to create something anew rather than to live by selling pieces of the ancestors’ heritage” (*No isms* 15).

Gao’s insistence on creating something anew as evidence of one’s transcendence of a national culture finally gained the Nobel Committee’s approval. In the latter’s judgment, what counts most substantially in Gao’s case is not so much his alleged “Chineseness” (which nonetheless weighs heavily in the award deliberation) as the “universal validity” of his work: “Through its polyphony, its blend of genres and the scrutiny that the act of writing subjects itself to, the book [*Soul Mountain*] recalls German Romanticism’s magnificent concept of a universal poetry” (Swedish Academy). The Nobel Committee’s judgment immediately begs questions. Is this “universal poetry” of German Romanticism a predecessor of the contemporary “world poetry” in Owen’s formulation? What kind of “worldness” or world quality guarantees the “universal validity” in a work of world literature? In Gao’s case, one critic suggests that his reputed “universality”—comparable to or reminiscent of a distinguished European literary tradition—resides more in his 1990s plays than in his fiction, because a more recent migration might have taken

place as “Gao has been striving for neutrality and universality, shying away from Chinese settings and characters” (Fong xviii).⁷

If Gao’s “universality” is closely linked to “neutrality,” his “neutrality” (i.e., not entirely Chinese nor Western) may prove to be a particular type derived from a profound skepticism. Not surprisingly, the Nobel Committee praises Gao as a “perspicacious skeptic,” and skepticism is what Lodén sees as an outstanding feature in *Soul Mountain*. For his part, Gao directs his skepticism—a particular manifestation of his universality—at Chinese history by incorporating this meditation in *Soul Mountain*: history is a riddle, history is a lie, history is nonsense, history is prediction, history is a metaphor, history is a state of mind, history is nothing—“history may be read however you like, this is indeed a tremendous discovery!” (*Soul Mountains* 500-01). In spite of his reputed “neutrality,” Gao’s “universality” is grounded in his personal experience of recent Chinese history, especially the events of the Cultural Revolution, and it is his unpleasant experience that has fortified his skeptic stance and has ironically landed him in a category far from being “neutral”—a “dissident” in the eye of Chinese government.

What distinguishes Gao from many other Chinese writers is that he remains skeptical of his own conception of the novel by having an interlocutor voice certain foreseeable (hence, pre-emptive) criticism of *Soul Mountain*: “You’ve slapped together travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, untheoretical discussions, unfable-like fables, copied out some folk songs, added some legend-like nonsense of your own invention, and are calling it fiction!” (*Soul Mountain* 452-53). Through examples like these, Gao keeps a distance from what he expresses in language. Upon closer analysis, his skepticism is concerned with language and human existence, as Sy Ren Quah comments in regard to Gao’s 1990s existential plays:

Man wants to be the master of his utterance but, ironically, ends up a slave to it. The Women in *Between Life and Death* expresses her agony and despair. The Sleepwalker in *The Nocturnal Wanderer* appears to be arrogant but pitiable. The Man in *Dialogue and Rebuttal* exudes helplessness and powerlessness. Presented through intense emotions, the meaninglessness of utterance has been connected to the insignificance of existence. (93)

⁷ These later plays include *Between Life and Death* (生死界 Shengsi jie, 1991), *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (對話與反詰 Duihua yu fanjie, 1992), *Nocturnal Wanderer* (夜遊神 Yeyou shen, 1993), and *Weekend Quartet* (周末四重奏 Zhoumo sichongzou, 1995).

Quah's comment dovetails Fong's assessment of Gao's works—"the unknowable behind the words contains the real human nature, and the absurdity of language is the same as the absurdity of living" (Fong xvi). If this argument holds true, it follows that the goal of Gao's cultural translation is not merely the migration of meaning from one language to another but also, and more importantly, the transcendence of meaning over or beyond language. One such transcendent moment occurs at the conclusion of *Soul Mountain*, where Gao's meditation finds expression in his narrator's trance-like utterance: "In the snow outside my window I see a small green frog, one eye blinking and the other wide open, unmoving, looking at me. I know this is God" (*Soul Mountain* 505). Here is the kind of "transcendence" Gao has aimed to achieve all along: "Literature transcends national boundaries—through translations it transcends languages and then specific social customs and inter-human relationships created by geographical location and history—to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature" ("The Case" 596). Nonetheless, Gao may have transcended national and linguistic boundaries (being a Chinese-French writer whose works are now available in multiple languages), but he still finds himself incapable of transcending history. His transcendent stance on language and human existence may have convinced the Nobel Committee to accept the "universal validity" of his work, but this acceptance—which has shifted, if not elevated, the classification of his work from "Chinese literature" to "world literature"—is predicated on a long history of non-recognition of modern Chinese literature in the West, a history that has resulted in a peculiar "Nobel Prize complex" among contemporary Chinese intellectuals.

Gao Xingjian and China's Nobel Prize Complex: Politics, Legitimacy, Identity

I do not belong to any political or literary school, nor do I submit to any isms, including nationalism and patriotism.

—Gao Xingjian, *No isms* 9

As indicated earlier, the Swedish Academy's acceptance of Gao Xingjian in 2000 does not resolve the long-troubling "Nobel Prize complex" among Chinese intellectuals. As early as 1989, Wendy Larson and Richard Krauss thus contem-

plated the dilemma of Chinese writers in the arena of international politics of literature:

Can Chinese art join a “world culture”? The answer must be “not yet,” if we use the Nobel record of racist ignorance as a guide. [...] Yet the Nobel game is one which China, like any third-world nation, can never win. The search for Swedish recognition ultimately validates the West’s claims to be the judge of “world literature.” [...] China’s chance to win the prize may ultimately be determined by its importance, as a nation, in the eyes of a small group of Europeans who know little of its culture, history, or politics. (160)

By the end of 2000, the importance of China as a nation in command of an increasing international influence and a growing market economy was finally recognized by the Swedish Academy, but this recognition carries an ironic twist, because the prize was given to an overseas Chinese, a “dissident” writer in exile, a promoter of “cold literature” in opposition to officially sanctioned and commercially oriented literary products. While the Chinese government responded negatively to the news and announced that the Nobel Prize award to an ethnically Chinese “French writer” had been politically motivated (presumably in protest against the lack of artistic freedom in China), Chinese intellectuals and writers around the world appeared sharply divided as to Gao Xingjian’s legitimacy as a “Chinese” representative to the international pageant of the Nobel laureates (Lovell).

We are faced with two issues here: the first is the politics of recognition that has long championed the West over the non-West, and the second is the legitimacy of Gao as a Chinese writer and the authenticity of his identity. Inasmuch as the politics of recognition in the international arena of literature is concerned, China did not really win the Nobel game because the power structure of authority and legitimacy of the West in granting recognition to the non-West has remained fundamentally unchanged (Tam, “Gao Xingjian”). In her critique of this power structure, Shu-mei Shih exposes the logic of what she calls the “technologies of recognition” operating in a wide spectrum of discursive fields around the world: “The politics of recognition involves the granting of universality to the exceptional particular—that is, Gao’s works are exceptional in that they, in their particularity, transcend the particular and approach the universal” (25). In spite of the hyped value of transcendental universality (discussed in the previous section), Shih notices that, actually, the national was alive and well as a category in the selection of the Nobel Prize, in

Gao's as well as other Nobel laureates' cases. To go beyond the national and the universal as two dominant categories in the politics of recognition, Shih recommends "sinophone" as a category larger and more inclusive than Chinese: "The affirmation of Gao by the Nobel committee should be an affirmation of sinophone, not Chinese, literature" (27).

Shih sees much promise in the concept of "sinophone literature" and its close relevance to Gao's case:

The sinophone as an organizing category allows for an alternative theorization of such a writer because it transcends national boundaries; its *raison d'être* is a condition of exile, diaspora, minoritization, and hybridity that resists incorporation both into China and into the place of residence. (26)

Undoubtedly, Shih's conceptualization of "sinophone literature" introduces a different type of the politics of recognition, albeit one not as pervasive as national literature and world literature. From the "sinophone" perspective, it makes sense to bypass the impassioned debate over Gao's legitimacy as a "Chinese" writer and to investigate the reception of his works around the world, not just in Chinese-speaking communities. As stated at the beginning of this paper, Gao may be better approached as a cultural translator whose works gain new meaning through acts of migration and under the condition of exile and diaspora. The crisis of Gao's identity, in this analysis, may reveal not so much the dubious hybridity of his works as it does the inadequacy of a critical language in embracing and elucidating new cultural products that emerge in a rapidly changing world of globalization.

To return to China's Nobel Prize complex, one detects a deep-seated and persistent geocultural anxiety: as a Chinese-French writer, Gao does not claim to and is not allowed to represent China, nor does he stand for other sinophone territories like Taiwan or Hong Kong. Ironically, his self-acclaimed "neutrality" from national politics and the reputed "universality" of his literary vision have made him an endearing figure to the general readership in Taiwan and Hong Kong after his Nobel Prize award. But the honor came at a price, as Gao the Nobel laureate has now found himself carrying an added value as a "political dissident," a banned writer in China whose aspiration for transcendence is ruthlessly compromised if not completely shattered by a concrete historical situation of *realpolitik*. What is equally ironic is that Gao himself may have benefited from his unfortunate disfavor in China, because such political disfavor may have boosted his international cultural

capital and consolidated his status in world literature. The geocultural politics in the era of globalization thus sheds light on Gao Xingjian's dilemma of struggling between his claim to creativity, individuality, and transcendence on the one hand, and the demand of translatability and universality in the contemporary cultural production and circulation of "world literature" on the other.

In spite of all the talk of Gao's universality and transcendence, the circulation of his works is ultimately tied to the imagination of Chinese national culture in the West. At the end of her extensive survey of the Nobel Prize controversy, Julia Lovell observes, "as long as the nation-state remains the principal unit of accounting in global transactions, and as long as intellectuals remain opinion-makers in nations around the world, these links between national identity and literature retain a powerful hold on global consciousness—even in neutral Sweden" (44). Like it or not, the fact remains that Gao Xingjian is the first Chinese-born writer to win the Nobel Prize. A biting irony persists: despite his 1992 claim that our age is one with no isms and no "idols" (偶像 *ouxiang*), Gao has become an idol of some sort—an idol of "world literature" whose works found popularity in overseas Chinese communities immediately following the Nobel Prize award and who has enjoyed publicity by giving keynote speeches in Hong Kong and Taiwan, among other places, after his honorable recognition.

"I express (表述 *biaoshu*), therefore I am" (*No isms* 111)—unfortunately, this much-quoted expression of Gao Xingjian does not so much secure his identity once and for all as it exposes the fundamental instability of his being, for he is, in spite of himself, more than what he expresses: once his works travel, in the original and in translations alike, Gao is also what others (including the Swedish Academy) express of him. An eminently successful cultural translator between the Chinese and the world, Gao is ultimately confronted with language, with all the consequences of his literary work, his linguistic expression, and his existential inquiry. "From my experience in writing," he states in his Nobel lecture, "I can say that literature is inherently man's affirmation of the value of his own self and that this is validated during the writing" ("The Case" 595). Such affirmation and validation, I should add, comes not just from his act of writing alone, but from the acts of writing by his current and—inevitably, future—readers in any original and translated languages.

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