

The French Gao Xingjian, Bilingualism, and *Ballade Nocturne**

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On July 7, 2008, I sat with Gao Xingjian at Davé, a swank Chinese restaurant in Paris. Gao had just returned from Italy, where he had been honored with yet another international award, and he particularly enjoyed this occasion in Milan because it included him reciting his French poem “L’Errance de l’oiseau” for the audience gathered.¹ His pleasure in performing was two-fold: revisiting a literary work of his own creation that he particularly loves, and expressing himself in the French language. These two ideas are central to contextualizing his most recent dramatic work, *Ballade Nocturne*. Joining *Shengshengman bianzou*² as his second “dance-drama” (舞劇 *wuju*) to date, *Ballade Nocturne* continues Gao’s life-long experimentation with dissolving and redefining artistic boundaries and melding aesthetic forms. This aspect of his work has been discussed by several scholars and remains important in his newest creation, but his self-expression in French and what that means to him as an artist and human being has barely been acknowledged.

At the end of our meal, I asked Gao how and why he started studying the French language, and he told me about an article he discovered in a library journal when he was seventeen. The article described Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg’s activities in 1920s Paris, where he frequented a certain café in Montparnasse with the likes of Picasso and Cocteau.³ In 1957, Gao Xingjian elected to major in French language at the Beijing Foreign

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Languages Institute, dreaming that he would one day visit that same Parisian café—La Rotonde—and thirty years later, he finally did. I proposed to Gao that we visit the café together. He was amused that I was eager to see the café that he himself had not entered in more than a decade, but I wanted to experience the place that had inspired him to first study the language that had transformed his life.

The next day at La Rotonde, we were seated in a red velvet booth with brass rails and a fringed lamp that recalled the decadence of ninety years prior when artists and intellectuals like Apollinaire, Breton, and Hemingway graced the same tables. Gao asked me to read aloud to him the brief historical essay “La Rotonde: un peu d’histoire” on the back of the menu, and he listened intently as I recounted the legendary history of the clientele who regularly gathered there when the hub of Parisian bohemian life had migrated south from Montmartre. Gao reminisced about his early days of exile in Paris in the late 1980s, when fellow artists still gathered to share their ideas and paintings, and he gently lamented that those days seem to be gone forever now that market forces have eclipsed iconoclasm. He commented that now his conversations happen with journalists via telephone on the eve of scheduled visits to foreign lands or in random reception areas upon arrival. Gao made a point of telling me that such interview questions are translated into and responded to by him in French, which he prefers to Chinese when traveling abroad, especially to Western countries.

Gao feels very at home in France. He is proud of the fact that strangers often think he is a local and stop him on the street to ask for directions, even when he is with his companion who is also Chinese. His acquaintances in France are “Westerners,” not Chinese. He does not desire or need Chinese friendships; he does not want to talk about China, which he considers irrelevant to his life and work. He noted that although he feels comfortable in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, he feels slightly more so in Hong Kong because it is more Western and international. Stating that New York is his second favorite city after Paris, Gao added that he prefers talking to Asian Americans in New York than to overseas Chinese.⁴

In spite of Gao Xingjian’s deliberate efforts, particularly since 1991, to develop an aesthetic as an individual artist unbound by his Chinese past—by disassociating himself with China in most of his works, continuing to cultivate an experimental artistic style and engaging with universal human themes, and authoring some plays in original French versions—most critics and scholars insist on exploring “Chineseness” in his works and situating him as a writer with a Chinese identity, albeit fraught and fractured. And

often his French plays are considered only in their subsequent Chinese versions or English translations.⁵

Todd Coulter, the first scholar to undertake a study that includes consideration of Gao Xingjian in his French context, points out that Gao's "use of language is not arbitrary as it reveals a shift not only from his native language to an adopted one, but also ... suggests a shift in cultural awareness and perspective" (Coulter, 2007: 83–90). Coulter questions the persistence of cultural theorists (such as Said) to directly bind language to nation, illustrating how Gao's dramaturgy transcends such models. Indeed, Gao himself emphasizes that whether writing in French or Chinese, his goal is to achieve a new, unique, and modern language that is marked by creativity and the potential to express the inexpressible.⁶

In detailing the various moments and means through which France has recognized Gao's work, Coulter indicates that these efforts, more than merely valorizing Gao when others were ignoring (or even disclaiming) him, "placed Gao in the firmament of French culture. In [the] push to celebrate Gao, France marked him as her own" (Coulter, 2008). Gao's notoriety in France increased dramatically when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, but he was already visible before that. He became a naturalized citizen in 1997, having been knighted with the title of *chevalier de l'ordre des arts et lettres* five years earlier. He was commissioned several times by the cultural ministry, which resulted in his French plays *Au bord de la vie*, *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end*, and *Le Quêteur de la mort*.⁷ *Quatre quatuors* premiered at the Comédie-Française as part of their series of contemporary French experimental plays; Gao was appointed as a member of the theatre's *comité de lecture* in 2002, as one of four "*personnalités du monde des lettres et du théâtre*" who join the theatre administrative staff in reading and selecting new works to be premiered. Outside Paris, the renowned Avignon festival featured Gao's plays in 2001, and the year 2003–2004 was declared "L'année Gao" in the city of Marseille.

The announcement of the Nobel Prize bestowed on Gao in 2000 called him a "Chinese" writer while the Nobel organization also identifies his nationality as French. Sy Ren Quah refers to Gao as a "French-Chinese playwright" and indicates that Chinese press about the Nobel award referred to Gao as a "*Zhongwen zuojia*" (中文作家), specifically meaning "Chinese-language writer," allowing his national status to remain ambiguous (Quah, 2004: 1–3). But Gao was already frequently writing in French at the time, and as the volume of his French-language works grows, it becomes increasingly problematic and erroneous to label him a *Zhongwen zuojia*.⁸ Gao's work,

like that of many bilingual and exiled playwrights before him, demands more complex and careful definition. And, though his Chineseness will continue to be claimed and disclaimed by China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the greater Chinese diaspora, and the global community—in addition to the writer himself—the various ways he is claimed and disclaimed internationally as a French writer must continue to be explored as well. It is my hope that my comments here will be useful in engaging other scholars, playwrights, and translators in dialogue about national, cultural, and linguistic identity, as well as the relationship between sound, language, visual image, and corporeal movement in the translation of Gao's polymorphic dramatic texts.

The fact that Gao Xingjian is not typically regarded as a French writer may be partly due to the fact that his French plays do not circulate in translation directly from their originals. For English versions, Gao first rewrites the plays in Chinese—specifying that this a re-creation of the play, not a translation⁹—and then Gilbert Fong translates and publishes them. Recently, for example, Gao's 1990 Chinese-language play *Taowang* (逃亡 *Escape*) and 2000 French-language play *Le Quêteur de la mort* (*The Man Who Questions Death*) were published together in English, translated from their Chinese versions.¹⁰ This reinforces his image as a “Chinese” writer—particularly since the translator of his works into English also has a Chinese surname.

As the translator of Gao's latest play *Ballade nocturne* from French into English, I wish to comment briefly on the “trilingual” process of translating it, as well as its polymorphic form and sensibility that is both consistent with Gao's earlier work and explores even further the synthesis of visibility, movement, and language that has evolved as his trademark and distinct contribution.¹¹ Within this discussion, approached through unmasking the challenge of translation in terms of language, culture, and gender, I wish to foreground in particular Gao's desire to flee the confines of his identity as a “Chinese writer” by proposing that we consider the implications of contextualizing him not only as a transcultural writer, but also as a French writer with a bilingual consciousness.

Gilbert Fong has access to the original French versions of Gao's plays that he translates from Chinese into English, but does not engage with them in his translation process—thus, his translations are solely of the recreated Chinese texts. Without taking anything away from Fong's dedicated translation of Gao's plays, I want to propose that familiarity with both Gao's Chinese and French plays when translating either of them into English is extremely valuable, because his writing in each language

is informed by his sensibility of the other, and always has been. Since his days as a university student, Gao has read and translated in both languages, and he began writing plays in French in 1991 with *Au bord de la vie*. His written work in both Chinese and French has a unique bilingual sensibility, though he does not mix the two languages in a single piece as some other overseas and exiled writers do. For me, as I translated *Ballade nocturne* in 2007, intimate knowledge of Gao's writing in Chinese remained a necessary guide: in other words, as translator, I in fact moved between *three* languages when performing the apparently bilingual act of rendering Gao's work from French into English. This layered act could creatively be called "tripartite" translation, borrowing the term associated with Gao's theory of acting incorporated in his plays—the term by which he also defines the genre of his debut film, *Silhouette sinon l'ombre*.¹²

It is not that Gao's work cannot be effectively translated otherwise (i.e., with access to only the manifest source language and the target language), but having fluency and consciousness of the third language allows the translator to dwell in a linguistic and aesthetic sphere closer to that of the writer himself, entering into his use of image and language and rendering it into an English informed by his *total linguistic spectrum*, which simultaneously combines his complete facility in both Chinese and French. This may not always happen for the writer on a conscious level, but just as his work in different media (painting, prose, drama, etc.) reflects a *total language* or *total aesthetic system* that replicates elements of each in the other, Gao's development as a writer and artist has always happened in a bicultural bilingual realm, throughout his career in both China and France.

In describing the "expatriate imagination" of modernist writers, Eugene Eoyang claims that only multilingual/multicultural writers can understand their texts in full, but that this cultural flux (of which all translations are a part) makes their texts more accessible across boundaries. Noting that translation can no longer be approached from a single cultural perspective, Eoyang calls for ceasing to privilege one language over another in favor of self-awareness that using one language *momentarily* gives it precedence over all others in that moment—a practice that is embodied by Gao as he moves seamlessly between Chinese and French, and a practice that is essential for translators of his work. Eoyang highlights another persistent problem that plagues translation work—and once again, a problem that Gao seems to have transcended: this is the misconception that the "original in time is also the more authentic, and must be superior in value, as well as prior, to the

imitation.” The romantic sensibility “privileges original composition over imitation” while the capitalist sensibility “confers on the ‘original’ author all rights to his work, which is now his ‘property’.” There is a Western assumption that uniqueness is equivalent to value, that “the replica is an allusion to the original, a souvenir of having seen the original, whereas the forgery presumes to replace the original” (Eoyang, 1993: 10–18). These ingrained paradigms are particularly problematic in the case of Gao Xingjian, who rewrites his French plays into Chinese: his Chinese versions can hardly be regarded as “forgeries,” nor should we necessarily view Fong’s English translations of the Chinese versions as somehow twice-removed from their French “originals.”

Let us not forget that Gao is a trained translator, which many playwrights are not. Just as his sensibility as a director significantly impacts how he writes his plays and the rich visual images contained in them, his sensibility as a translator—and as a writer who thinks, writes, and speaks in two languages—is also always present in some form. In this regard, Gao is not unlike Beckett. Each mastered French as a college student and developed skill in translation between French and his native language; and for each, bilingualism facilitated the choice of a permanent life in Paris, as well as the decision to write plays in his adopted French language and refashion them into his native tongue without the intervention of a translator, creating “double” or “twin” texts. As Ann Beer points out, this “curious status of bilingualism itself” presents a conundrum for critics and scholars because “it does not appear in the individual text, and can therefore only be discussed in some larger, and extra-textual, framework that examines the author or the oeuvre as a whole.” Furthermore, Gao’s bilingualism and biculturalism, like Beckett’s before him, makes “‘placing’ [him] in terms of national context ... an almost impossible task.” (This task became the subject of much controversy when Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000.) However, while posing challenges to scholars in its “subverting of certainties and breaking of canonical traditions,” the bilingualism of Beckett and Gao gives their work freshness, fluidity, and complexity, freeing them from convention and empowering them to renew and remake existing forms “in full knowledge of literary tradition but with the detachment of one who is not controlled by it ... renew[ing] forms ... in ways that were previously unthinkable.” Their work is anything but static, and their bilingual sensibility allows them to transcend the constraints of a single culture, cultivate autonomy as an artist, and establish a sense of detachment from the material world or an individual culture. This transcendence of a specific unified

view afforded by bilingualism—the multiple perspectives on humanity it nurtures—is echoed in the range of genres and media with which both writers experiment (Beer, 1994: 209–19).¹³

Poetic, abstract, philosophical, mystical Gao Xingjian can also be exceedingly plain and pragmatic in response to some of the deepest inquiries about his practice and art. When I first interviewed Gao in Paris in 2006, I was curious about his decision to write in two languages, and wondered what inspires him to write in one or the other at a given moment: he frankly replied that when he is commissioned to write a play in France, he writes in French rather than Chinese. He also told me that when he is writing in one language, he completely disposes of the cultural and linguistic system of the other and never performs any conscious translation.

When we revisited the topic of his bilingualism two years later, Gao elaborated that he had written *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end (Weekend Quartet, 1996/1997)* as a “poem-play” (詩劇 *shiju*), noting that the French language is innately poetic and musical:

My work is always changing, it changes with every play. My use of language always changes.... The musicality of French is so strong—it is a beautiful language.... I search for an expression that comes from the musicality of the language and its rich multiplicity of sounds....¹⁴

He also located his pursuit of new linguistic forms in both French and Chinese in the differing musical qualities or “musicality” (音樂性 *yinyuexing*) of the two languages, using the example of *Au bord de la vie (Between Life and Death)*:

It has to do with linguistic composition and structure (結構 *jiegou*). Chinese has its own traits. When I rewrote [*Au bord de la vie* into] *Shengsijie* 生死界, for instance, I paid close attention to the musicality of the language just as I had done in the French original. Musicality of the language is extremely important in my work. In Chinese, each individual word has a distinct tone and pronunciation [that gives it musicality], so it makes it even more difficult....¹⁵

This instance shows how 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 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:

It was difficult [to write my first play in French] ... I had to face a new life and think about a new audience and a new world. I was already living in the West and it had nothing to do with China. Using French was not a process of translating, but was a process of thinking in French and structuring the play in French. I had to approach it using the possibilities that the French language presented and using its music.... During periods when I write in French, I don't read in Chinese. [When I wrote *Au bord de la vie*] I listened only to the French news, and immersed myself in a French-language environment.¹⁶

Significantly, Gao's first play in French bears striking similarities to his most recent play in French completed fifteen years later. As Quah indicates, *Au bord de la vie* explores a female protagonist's "physical and emotional struggle as a woman" as she engages in an extended monologue—though shifting interchangeably between two personae of WOMAN and NARRATOR—while a male actor moves about silently (Quah, 2004: 136; For insightful discussions of *Au bord de la vie*, see Quah 2004, Coulter 2006, Labedzka 2008 and others). In *Ballade nocturne*, the split subjectivity of the female protagonist is further manifested in the bodies of at least three performers: one actress identified as "ACTRESS" and two dancers (one "LIVELY" and one "MELANCHOLY") who share the role of "SHE." The silent male presence in *Au bord de la vie* becomes a musician playing the saxophone in *Ballade nocturne*, which allows him a form of audible expression, though he is still denied access to human language.

The similarities between the two plays are less surprising when one learns that the earlier play inspired the later one. Gao began to work on *Ballade nocturne* in 1999, nearly a decade after writing *Au bord de la vie*. A suburban French director at a small theatre group had particularly liked the earlier play and staged a segment of it, then asked Gao to write a new piece for his company, ideally related to the topic of Medieval vampires. Gao was not particularly taken with the idea, but experimented with multiple drafts exploring the sexual connection between vampires and women, without writing overtly about vampires themselves. The collaboration never materialized and the drafts of the play lay dormant in the flurry of activity that followed in the wake of Gao's Nobel Prize. It was not until 2003 that Gao returned to the piece, again drafting several versions that resulted in the script he gave to me in June 2006 and further revised in 2007.¹⁷ His

motivation in revisiting and developing the piece was to approach the world from a twenty-first century perspective, which to Gao, importantly, should be a woman's perspective:

Once I was released from that director's requirements, I was free to write the play the way I wanted to ... the way it needed to be written, the way it would be interesting ... the way it deserved to be written.... If there could be a new ideology to face the twenty-first century, I thought it could be women looking at things from a feminine perspective, women coming to know the world through their own eyes.... It has always been men's voices that have been accepted ... a female voice needed to be introduced ... women have philosophical power, and they put forth a different world view [than men].¹⁸

Gao maintains that in order to transcend his male viewpoint and write from the perspective of woman, he sheds his own subjectivity. "I am a man," he says, "but I can still look at things from a woman's perspective in the space between a man and a woman."¹⁹

Gao's unique play-poem-dance-libretto in French explores the power, rage, despair, and triumph of woman, expressed through poetic verse, dance, and music that express images ranging from woman's holiness to her fallenness, her isolation to her self-fulfillment, and her passion to her nonchalance.

Like *La Silhouette sinon l'ombre*, his film of the same period, *Ballade nocturne* defies classification into genres that currently exist in the Western mind-frame. It is a "libretto for dance"—when staged, dancers' bodies are in motion (and stillness) throughout the piece, and a musician wanders playing a saxophone. As previously mentioned, the script calls for a cast of one actress, two dancers, and one musician, but Gao has indicated that SHE's lines can be spoken by one actress or shared among many, and that there can be as few as two dancers, but that it would work beautifully with ten or even an entire dance company of thirty or so. He stipulates that there should only be one musician, and this musician should be male.²⁰

The words spoken by SHE ("Elle") and THE ACTRESS ("La Comédienne") become both bodies in motion and music; the bodies of the dancers in motion become music and words; the music speaks in dialogue with bodies and words on the stage: not only does the play (if we can call it that) defy categorization and exceed boundaries, but its individual elements of acting, dance, and music transcend their own conventional classifications. These overlaps and transcendences are clear in Gao's stage directions, but

the evocation of sound, movement, and visibility even in the verbal dialogue itself (written in free poetic verse to maximize this effect) is another layer of this latest manifestation of Gao's exploration of "total art." In the following passage, for example, words become a forceful sexual encounter:

(The LIVELY DANCER comes onstage and dances a solo. The moon disappears.)

SHE: The wings flutter about like a butterfly,
 before being confined in their vibrations,
 by a pin on the wall,
 then shudder in surrender.
 And a voice groans in rage,
 tense in its cage,
 husky and grave. (Gao, 2007b/2010)

One of my former students identifies Gao's language in *Ballade nocturne*—and the task of translating it—as "choreography of words." Such a term cleverly dislocates the almost-always totalizing verbal associations with translation, repositioning the task in the realm of the visual. As Eugene Eoyang reminds us, translation is often misconstrued as an "activity of linguistic competence," when it is in fact an *act* of "linguistic performance" (Italics mine; Eoyang, 1993: 22). Consider how the following passage uses verbal rhythm and repetition not only to invoke combinations of sounds that replicate musical composition, but also to invoke patterns of corporeal movement through its choreography of words:

(The two DANCERS drag the MUSICIAN behind them as they exit.

The moon disappears. A sound of audible grief, increasingly high-pitched.

The MELANCHOLY DANCER comes onstage, all the while looking at her bare feet.)

ACTRESS: A sound beneath her feet
 as soon as she moves.
 A strange sound that touches her,
 something wants to come out,
 something that groans,
 something high-pitched,

something abominable,
 something that gnaws at her,
 something that snivels,
 something suffocates her,
 something demolishes her.
 She absolutely must
 expel this discomfort.
 With all her might,
 she crushes the complaints
 as well as her fears.

(Gao, 2007b/2010)

(*LIVELY DANCER comes onstage waving a flag that is in tatters.*

MELANCHOLY DANCER leaves the stage.)

In *Ballade nocturne*, perhaps more than any of his other plays, Gao leaves generous room for the director—and the audience—to explore and imagine. In reading the text, it is only in one’s imagination that one can see dancers creating, interpreting, and responding to the words, and see the musician in his various guises while hearing his haunting saxophone music. And yet, in isolating the strangely and beautifully poetic language of the words alone, the reader glimpses the unique way in which both the dancers and musician *and* the poetic words themselves sing and dance. In this sense, as Ovidio Carbonell proposes, each individual reader becomes “translator”—interpreter of literary signs into performative images—alongside the playwright and translator, participating in an act of cultural transmission in the interstices, where a “new historical subject” is found (Carbonell, 1996: 79–94).²¹

Feminist translation scholar Sherry Simon likewise locates the interstice or “space between” as the locus of translation (Simon, 1996: 134–67). In many of Gao’s plays, and particularly in *Ballade nocturne*, which foregrounds the body, voice, and spirit of woman in both archetypal and viscerally immediate ways, the reader—and translator—cannot help but be struck by the phenomenon of the female subject represented by the male author. In feminist terms, is this the “hijacking” of the female subject by a patriarchal male author/authority? Is Gao Xingjian inevitably subject to this critique (even in a play that clearly intends to empower the female subject) because he is constructing the female voice and body from his stance as a male creator-figure, in spite of his claims to transcend such a position? And how might my rendering of this play—referred to by some who heard it read at University of Notre Dame as a “woman’s manifesto”—fundamentally

differ from Gilbert Fong's translations of Gao's plays by virtue not only of my translating it directly from French, but also translating it as a woman?²²

As in his other works, Gao employs multiple pronouns in *Ballade nocturne*.²³ Speaking *as* herself in first-person, the protagonist SHE also speaks *of* herself in third-person and directly *to* the reader/audience in second-person. In addition to creating a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing the live actress from the embodied presence she represents), this resistance to omniscient first-person subjectivity and narration literally keeps the author from being able to speak “through” the female protagonist at all times, though he is still constructing her as a subject via all three approaches.

It is unmistakable that Gao is championing the cause of women; *Ballade nocturne* has been referred to as an “homage to woman” and Gao supports this assessment.²⁴ In his construction of the feminist ethos, Gao decries the global violence—both historical and contemporary—that is inflicted by men. The following passage invites passionate interpretation by director and performers without entering the realm of parody, which would subvert its feminist message:

(*SHE dances with the two DANCERS, as a trio.*)

SHE: [...] Let the parade of majorettes march by
 beating on their drums,
 the girls, women of tomorrow,
 joining in our battle,
 and if there is a religion worth believing in,
 it will be our own bodies.
 [...] now, without guilt,
 let us go to meet pleasures.
 Let us awaken from insomnia,
 and ignorant foolishness.
 Our nature is more beautiful,
 let us embrace a new era!
 When we sing aloud,
 our law unquestionably fair,
 this male-dominated world quivers.
 And those who use rifles and machine guns,
 who bomb and massacre,
 these executioners,
 are never the women.

When the men fight their dirty wars,
 the women generously give their love.
 While the one crushes life,
 the other continually recreates it.
 Farewell, woman the victim,
 and hail to our power!

SHE (*holding high the tattered flag*):

Let us unite under this banner,
 advancing toward victory! [...]

(Gao, 2007b/2010)

(*SHE takes the lead in the procession of the two DANCERS.*)

Here, as a Western reader, I hear echoes of *Lysistrata* in SHE's rallying of the troops in solidarity against the oppression of men, while Gao—as he informed me when we discussed this passage—sees young girls marching through the streets of Paris in a parade wearing uniform shorts, an image he assures me was commonplace about twenty years ago in the French capital, though rare today.²⁵ The passage is preceded by SHE joining the two dancers in a dance trio, and is followed by her leading them in a procession, an isolated moment of mimetic representation in an otherwise abstract piece resembling poetry, dance, and performance art more than drama.

Gao blends these disparate forms for thematic as well as aesthetic reasons in *Ballade nocturne*. When asked why he wrote the play in poetic free verse, he describes it as a means to convey a “feminine sensibility,” inseparable from the need to incorporate dance and music:

[This feminine sensibility] is not *raison*—it is not about logic, but sentiment; emotion cannot be analyzed ... and this play does not require “acting” (*hysterique*) or “pathos” ... It is not an intellectual play, the music and dance should not have *daoli* 道理. It should be based on *la sensation/ganjue zou*.²⁶

Notably, Gao freely combines French and Chinese terms when explaining “feminine sensibility” and the artistic style of the play, returning us to our original discussion of his own bilingual sensibility. Lest he be misunderstood as implying that women are emotional beings at the expense of being rational, he adds that women must be taken more seriously in the intellectual arena:

It is good to return to a matriarchal view and criticize the patriarchal view. And I think in this twenty-first century there are more and more women entering the ideological realm—sociology, literature, etc.—women have entered these male realms particularly since the 1960s. So I think if a new ideology is to emerge in [this] century, it should originate with woman's perspective.²⁷

Significantly for Gao, the male presence in the play cannot speak words—he is “man as seen through the eyes of women ... and so he is at the mercy of women in the play” and Gao emphasizes that this filtered, interpreted, and manipulated performance of the masculine is humorous. He adds that dance is a particularly apt agent for this feminist ideology because it is based in the (gendered) body, while language is also important in expressing gendered identity. In short, only through a hybridized aesthetic form is Gao able to suggest a new twenty-first century global ethos and female subjectivity.

Scholars of Gao's work speak of its construction of the “total actor,” “total theatre” and “total art”—and clearly Gao Xingjian by anyone's definition is a “total artist.” As Noël Dutrait and others have pointed out, he writes novels, plays, and poems; creates paintings, films, and photographs; and is also a public intellectual who produces profound critical essays. Furthermore, within individual creations of his polymorphic “total art,” he combines and juxtaposes these diverse forms in unique, increasingly experimental ways, as evidenced in his latest play *Ballade nocturne*.

My translation, *Ballade Nocturne*, attempts to transform gorgeous, moving, singing words in Gao Xingjian's French into English words and phrases that cannot do them justice, in the sense that Yan Fu's three criteria of translation—*xin, da, ya* (信 faithfulness, 達 expressiveness, 雅 elegance) are nearly impossible to achieve simultaneously.²⁸ The excerpts and analysis shared here demonstrate ways in which this intriguing text invites further exploration of Gao Xingjian's bilingual practice and sensibility—and the trilingual challenge it poses to translators of his plays into English—as well as his polymorphic juxtaposition of genre and media both between and within his works that results in new combinations and effects of sound, image, and movement. As a play focused on the bodies and the psyches of women, examination of its translation calls attention to the gender of both author and translator. And, finally, in the broad context of Gao Xingjian's “Chineseness,” it must be noted that cultural references implied by

metaphors and images in the play are more strongly French (or Western, or even “global”) than Chinese. Ultimately, Gao’s bilingual and bicultural sensibility prevails in *Ballade nocturne*, transcending and reconstructing categories of nation, language, genre, gender, and culture alike.

Notes

1. Gao was honored with a special award at the Milanese 2008 Festival (of literature, music, and cinema) on July 1, 2008, where he read his poem “*L’Errance de l’oiseau*” (Way of the Wandering Bird) in French, accompanied by subtitles in Italian. On the same trip, he also attended a public reading of the new Italian translation of *La Fuite* (逃亡 *Taowang/Escape*) in Agliana near Florence. “*L’Errance de l’oiseau*”, Gao’s first free-verse poem composed in French, is a large component of the text in his 2006 experimental film *Silhouette sinon l’ombre* (*Silhouette/Shadow*). It was written for the catalog of an exhibit of Gao’s paintings with the same title held at Musée de la Vieille Charité from July 30 to September 30, 2003 as part of Marseille’s “*L’Année Gao*.”
2. *Shengshengman bianzou* 聲聲慢變奏 (*Variation on A Slow Slow Tune*) was inspired by Li Qingzhao’s 李清照 poem “*Shengshengman*”; Gao composed his piece in four parts as a poetic dance to be performed by the contemporary dancer Jiang Qing. He first wrote it in 1987 in Beijing and then revised it in 1990 in Paris. The text is published in both its original Chinese and in Gilbert Fong’s English translation in Gao Xingjian (Gao, 2005: 431–41). Though bearing some similarities to *Ballade Nocturne*, the differences are greater: *Variation* is more repetitive and rhythmic, and less narrative in style and structure.
3. Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967) was born in Kiev, Ukraine to Jewish parents. He immigrated to Paris in 1908, but returned to Russia during World War I, then lived in Berlin and Belgium for three years before settling again in Paris, where he would stay primarily for the next two decades (1925–1945). Ehrenburg was an influential journalist, poet, translator, and novelist who interacted with figures like Lenin, Trotsky, Meyerhold, Pasternak, and Stalin (whose favor he gained and lost intermittently throughout his career).
4. Conversation with Gao Xingjian at Davé, 12 rue de Richelieu, Paris (July 7, 2008).
5. Along with his other efforts to separate his exile activity from his Chinese past, Gao ceased using the imprint of a traditional Chinese seal on his paintings. The May 2008 conference in Hong Kong from which this essay resulted originally focused on Gao’s Chineseness. Some of the most recent studies on

Gao, though excellent, mention his French plays as if they were originally written in Chinese (see, for instance, Labedzka, 2008).

6. Taped interview with Gao Xingjian, Paris, June 12–13, 2006.
7. Gao has written a total of five French plays to date, the other two being *Le somnambule* and *Ballade nocturne*. In Chinese and English respectively, their titles are: *Shengsijie* (生死界 *Between Life and Death*), *Zhoumo sichongzou* (*Weekend Quartet*), *Kouwen siwang* (叩問死亡 *The Man Who Questions Death*), and *Yeyoushen* (夜遊神 *Nocturnal Wanderer*). *Ballade nocturne* was not written in a Chinese version by Gao until June 2009 and has not yet been translated into English by Gilbert Fong from the Chinese. I have decided, with Gao's permission, to leave the title of the English translation in its original French form—its meaning is recognizable to English speakers but more poetic in French than an English approximation such as “Night Song,” and leaving the title in French identifies it as a French play in hopes that this fact will not be overlooked by scholars and readers of the play. (In this essay, references to the original French script appear as *Ballade nocturne* and those to my English translation as *Ballade Nocturne*.)
8. 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.
9. Taped interview with Gao Xingjian, Paris, June 11–13, 2006.
10. The Chinese version of *Le quêteur de la mort*, entitled *Kouwen siwang* (叩問死亡), was written in 2003. (For English translations and more information, see Gao [2007a]). A collection of his plays in French published in France in 2000 likewise includes plays that were originally written in Chinese with others written in French but offers no information regarding the original language of the texts or about their translations (Gao, 2000).
11. I borrow the term “polymorphic” from Noël Dutrait, who uses it in reference to Gao as someone who creates in a variety of distinct genres (prose, novel, short story, drama, opera, poetry, painting, photography, film, etc.); here I extend the term to reflect Gao's use of multiple genres within one artistic piece (Dutrait, 2006: 71, 82).
12. Gao's tripartite theory of acting situates the actor as three simultaneous subjects: his actual self, himself as actor, and actor as character. In terms of his recent filmmaking debut, Gao defines “tripartite film” as filmmaking in which the three components of image, music, and language each has its own autonomy, while they also combine to produce new meanings. Film becomes a composite art form in which the image no longer dominates (see Lee, 2008).

13. As Ann Beer expresses, “To have two tongues, two modes of speech, two ways of responding to the world, is to be necessarily outside the security of a unified single viewpoint” (Beer, 1994: 209–219). In addition to stage plays, Beckett also wrote radio and television plays, novels, novellas, critical essays, and poems. It should be noted here that Noël Dutrait plays an important advisory role when Gao Xingjian authors original works in French. Gao always shares a draft with Dutrait, who makes suggestions and/or minor corrections to his French. Gao’s first French play, *Au bord de la vie*, is the only exception, because when he wrote it in 1993, Dutrait had not yet begun serving as the primary translator of his works from Chinese into French (Paul Poncet translated Gao until his untimely death in 1989; Dutrait’s first project for Gao was the novel *Lingshan* 靈山 [*La Montagne de l’Âme/Soul Mountain*] which he began translating in 1992 and published in 2000). Gao also consults with Dutrait and others when he invents words or word usages in French, as he sometimes does in his attempt to create new linguistic modes of expression. (Conversations with Gao Xingjian, July 8, 2008 and Noël Dutrait, July 4, 2008.)
14. Taped interview at La Rotonde, Paris, July 8, 2008. *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end* was not produced until 2003, when Gao directed it for the Comédie-Française.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid. In taped interviews at his home in Paris July 15–17, 2009, Gao added that he 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.
17. Gao completed the play in February 2005 and revised it slightly in April 2007. My final translation corresponds to the April 2007 text, with slight alterations based on minor revisions Gao made to his French text in 2009.
18. Taped interview at La Rotonde, Paris, July 8, 2008.
19. Ibid.
20. Conversation with Gao Xingjian, South Bend, IN, September 11, 2007. Gao Xingjian and Julia Alvarez were the honored guests and subjects of the special event “Between Homeland and Heartland” at the University of Notre Dame, September 10–13, 2007, organized by Lionel Jensen and others and funded by Robert and Beverly O’Grady. The event included public literary conversations with Gao and Alvarez, lectures by Alvarez and Mabel Lee, scholarly panels, an exhibition of Gao’s paintings, a screening of his film *La Silhouette sinon l’ombre*, performances of excerpts of his plays *Nocturnal Wanderer* and *Escape*, and the premier staged reading of *Ballade Nocturne* in English, directed by the translator.

21. In envisioning translation as an act that occurs interstitially (in the “in-between space,” “third space,” or “beyond”) allowing emergence of a “new historical subject,” Carbonell is in direct conversation with Homi Bhabha and Frederic Jameson (see Carbonell, 1996: 91–94).
22. For more on issues and paradigms in feminist translation of male texts, see Chamberlain (1988), Godard (1990), Simon (1996), Spivak (1992), and von Flotow (1997). von Flotow’s contrast of three feminist translation strategies of supplementing, prefacing-footnoting, and “hijacking” is particularly illuminating.
23. For insightful discussions of multiple pronouns, see Coulter (2006) and Lovell (2006) among others; for discussion of polyphony, see Labedzka (2008) and others; for summary of Gao’s theory of the tripartite actor, see Conceison (2002) and others; for overall treatment of Gao’s dramas, including these facets, see Quah (2004) as well as Labedzka (2008) and Coulter (2006).
24. Specifically, a feminist acquaintance in France, Valerie Milhau, used this phrase after reading Gao’s original text in French and being deeply affected by its message, its artistic composition, and its unique, profound, and elegant use of the French language. When I shared Milhau’s choice of the description “homage to woman” with Gao, he was pleased and reiterated this was an apt characterization of his play. (Taped interview at La Rotonde, Paris, July 8, 2008).
25. Conversation with Gao Xingjian, South Bend, IN, September 11, 2007.
26. Taped interview at La Rotonde, Paris, July 8, 2008.
27. Ibid.
28. For further explanation of these three principles as defined by Yan Fu (1854–1921), see Wang (2004: 70–75).

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