

GAO XINGJIAN'S *BUS STOP*: DYSTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA¹

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์วิธีการที่เกาสิงเจียนนำเสนอความคิด ดิสโทเปีย (dystopianism) แบบยุโรปเข้ามาปลูกถ่ายใน บริบทจีน ซึ่งในยุคนั้นตกอยู่ภายใต้การจัดการทาง อุดมการณ์แบบยูโทเปียซึ่งเหมาะเจาะตรงกับจากมาร์กซ์ แก่นเรื่องแนวแปลกวิสัยว่าด้วยการรอคอยยูโทเปีย ซึ่ง เปรียบเสมือนการรอรถประจำทางถูกนำมาใช้ในฐานะ กลวิธีเพื่อวิพากษ์ความโหยหาโลกอุดมคติในแบบของ คนจีน ขณะเดียวกันก็วิพากษ์แนวคิดยูโทเปียทั้งระบบ ไปด้วย เมื่อแก่นเรื่องการรอโลกอุดมคติใน รอโกโดต์ ถูกย้ายมาในบริบทจีน เกาสิงเจียนได้ผสมองค์ประกอบ แบบตะวันออกเข้าไปในการละครของเขา ทำให้บท ละครของเขาเป็นทั้งตะวันตกและตะวันออกอยู่ ในตัว สร้างนวัตกรรมใหม่แก่การละครในบริบทโลก ความกำกวม (absurdity) ใน ป้ายรถประจำทาง ทำให้

ความโหยหาในยูโทเปียของคนจีนกลายเป็นวัตถุแห่ง ความปรารถนาเพื่อปรารถนา เมื่อความปรารถนาถูก ปรารถนาไปเรื่อย ๆ ก็ไม่รู้สึกว่า ตนเองกำลังปรารถนา (eternal zero) และกลายเป็นเรื่องการเมืองที่เปลือยกาย (naked politics) ต่อสาธารณะ เพราะมันเป็นยูโทเปียที่ หล่อเลี้ยงให้เราปรารถนา และเราก็โหยหายูโทเปียอยู่ อย่างนิรันดร์

Abstract

This article aims to discuss how Gao Xingjian recontextualizes European dystopianism into China under Mao Zedong's ideological manipulation of "utopia," which the latter adopted from Karl Marx. The theme of absurd eternal waiting for a bus in Bus Stop is technically employed to criticize the Chinese dream of utopia and the idea of utopia itself as a whole. When the theme of waiting in Waiting for Godot is relocated into a Chinese context, it diverts from Western drama by means of Gao Xingjian's dramaturgical innovation as a blend of the East and the West. The absurdity in Bus Stop makes Chinese utopian desire fetishized as an eternal but ubiquitous zero, and becomes naked politics as utopia for desire and desire for utopia.

Introduction

Chaos of the World

The possible is not necessary to be
realizable,
The unrealizable is conversely
believable,
The believable cannot be realized,

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Chaos of the world³.

From Wandering Soul and
Mysterious Contemplation
(Gao Xingjian 2012:220)

The concept of dystopia was not originally rooted in ancient Chinese culture, it was imported from the West in the early 19th century from the group of European absurd dramatists, such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and so on.⁴ Gao Xingjian (1940-), the Chinese Nobel Laureate, relocates and transplants them into the Chinese context to criticize the concept of utopia which Mao Zedong propagated through the Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Thus, it is tantamount to both cultural translation and adaptation. To discuss the cultural dialogue of the two cultures, we should beforehand probe how

³ 可能未必可行
不可行卻可信
可信並非可行
人世的悖論

⁴ “The Theatre of the Absurd is unquestionably a product of Western society. This is not to imply that Western society is absurd. As a matter of fact, many highly “absurd” societies could not produce such a literary genre. For example, there have been countless instances of “absurdity” in mainland China, particularly during the ten-year-long ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.’ But, this (the absurdity in long Chinese history) has not encouraged the creation of a Theatre of the Absurd. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the Theatre of the Absurd which has emerged in mainland China is imported from the West, ... , Although it is not difficult to find materials which explain why the Theatre of the Absurd is a product of Western but not Chinese society.” (Ma Sen 2001:77)

utopia camouflages its real self under the mask of rhetoric and how Gao Xingjian attempts to debunk the irrationality inside the logic of utopia. In the second part, I will demonstrate how he substantiates the rationality in dramaturgical absurdity in order to claim that the very absurdity is a kind of rationalism and his utopia is eternally dystopian and by the virtue of dystopia, his utopia is ubiquitous.

Unmasking Utopia

In this part, I argue that the idea of utopia is a non-critical philosophy, in other words, a topical philosophy or *topos* in Greek term, but claims itself to be a critical philosophy or *critica*. *Topos* in Latin means the process of self-absolutization of an idea in order to proclaim that it has no need to be explained, interpreted or even elaborated further for it claims to be self-evident as an exuberantly philosophical speculation. It acts like a topic without the need of predicate for it is self-sustainable as a utopia par excellence. Questioning *topos* is also unnecessary. Many ideas of utopia are *topos*, such as: the utopia of communism, utopia as other-worldliness in Eastern religions, utopia as the Land of God etc. *Topos* of utopia manifests itself in our everydayness through our unconscious sayings, such as: “not believe but don’t blaspheme,” “to attain Nirvana, you have no need to question or contemplate,” “to reach Thainess, you have to touch it with your heart,” or “to touch Japanese art, you do not have to reason, it can be called *satori*,” these sayings block our faculty of reasoning, and let us feel we are reuniting with *topos*, a utopia of unquestioning. In additions,

these sayings legitimate our common sense as verisimilitude but we forget that verisimilitude is not reality or *vérité*, and our common sense can be wrong. *Topos* can be developed from these implicitly violent statements: (1) truth is beyond language, we have to disdain language to attain it (2) truth is direct experience, we have to attain it by direct experience as well. (3) a truth is “over there,” but “alibi,” we can touch with the heart, not language or reason.

Critica in Latin means a philosophical stance which takes all critical inquiries as its diverse predicates and holds its boundlessly diverse predicates as utopia-in-itself or utopia of reason. This totally differs from *topos* that swallows all predicates into its belly in order to wipe out all questioning or *critica*. *Topos* is the death of philosophy or the philosophy of death, because it hinders our *critica* or intellectual journey; it lures us to a pitfall of its “eternal” life, so a good metaphor for *topos* is that ““death cannot die,” but life, in fear of death yet attracted to the *topos* of death.” (Noriaki 1997:79) René Descartes (1596-1650) was the first founder of *critica* and the first philosopher who claimed what is science or not science (knowledge or not knowledge), and that nothing is unquestionable in the name of Critical Philosophy to pursue the truth. The saying: “I think, therefore I am,” does not signify the strengthening of self which Buddhism is against, but merely signifies that one’s self is a product of pure reasoning which can be considered as a knowledge. To say self is a product of critical inquiry and self is questionable, in

the process of questioning, a modern science is born.

Topos is a philosophical terminology which Giovan Battista (Giambattista) Vico (1668-1744) applied to react against Descartes’s spirit of critical inquiry, such as: if A can be attained by one’s heart, a Cartesian must argue that “can A really be attained by one’s heart? “how can one turn out to be Chinese to study China? or “if we transform ourselves to be Chinese, do we lose objectivity in seeing? If a topicalist claims that A is better than B, a criticalist (or Cartesian skeptic) puts forth one strong argument in favor of A, and then another, contradictory one in favor of B, only to conclude by asking “is A really any better than B?”

Topical philosophy manipulates our conception by means of exterminating other criticisms outside its essential *topos* as a corpus and, at the end, becomes a utopia par excellence transcending all *critica*. Self-absolutization of *topos* makes its posterior predicate as an explanation or elaboration useless and unnecessary for it proclaims to be critical as a thing-in-itself. To reach *topos*, we have to get rid of all inquiries and reunite with a utopia of unquestioning where monstrosity leaps out. In this light, utopia-in-itself is implicitly dystopian, it allures us by imposing a seeming rationale, and meanwhile obstructs our faculty of meditation. The absurd drama of Gao Xingjian plays as important role in the history of Chinese literature to debunk the irrationality under the mask of the utopian idea that Mao Zedong propagated during the Proletariat Cultural Revolution in his own rational

way as a blend of the East and the West. As a result, his absurd dramaturgy is a kind of rationalism or a utopia of criticism. It is necessary to make clear that the idea of the absurd has no root in China and the Chinese in the ancient world did not use the technique of the absurd against any idealized world. China from the past to the present has encountered countless absurdities, such as the homicidal enactment by the Qin Emperor towards Confucian scholars, bloody wars, political upheavals from the Tang to the Song period, peasant rebellions, and literati uprisings from time to time, Chinese literati in order to find inner peace, have turned to express their idealized dream into classical prose, such as *taohuayuanji* (The Record of the Peach Blossom) of Tao Yuanming (陶淵明, some take refuge in poetic creativity in the form of *youxianshi* (游仙詩) as Ji King (嵇康) or Ruan Ji (阮籍) of Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties; they release their suffering into literary works to idealize or even to fantasize what they want to be.⁵ No one takes the absurd as a philosophical movement or a literary technique against their idealized utopia. The strong addiction to absurdity being employed to protest

⁵ In the ancient Chinese context, utopia was described in the classical prose of Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) of Southern and Northern Dynasties. The text describes an idealistic place which the poet longs for. Due to relentless wars and political upheavals, literati in that period tended to pursue an idealized place, or “elf land,” (仙境) to escape from world disorder and find his inner peace of soul which is personalized in the form of “wandering immortals poetry” (游仙詩).

against the utopian vision was imported from European movements of art in the trend of dehumanization. Gao Xingjian applied it both conceptually and technically for the purpose of debunking the myth of utopia that Mao adopted from Marx. Mao studied *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx in a Chinese version, translated by Chinese avant-garde writers, when he was a librarian at Beijing University Library. A striking assumption which enchanted Mao is the progressive evolution towards the communist utopia by class revolution. Mao reinterpreted the term “class revolution” as a class struggle by armed force under the name of the Red Guard (紅衛兵) to hasten violently the process of evolution during the Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Mao’s utopian version is a pragmatical version of Marx’s theoretical speculation.

The idea of utopia relies on the rationality of the world or the assumption that the world can be explained by man’s reason or progression. One says utopia depends on some religious belief with the Land of God after post-apocalypse in the Christian context or the Pure Land (Sukhavati) with innumerable Buddhas in Mahayana Buddhism. We more or less involve “utopia” to different extents, if we believe that tomorrow is maybe better than today,⁶ the believers at least have their own internal logic in their religious conviction. This notion leads to the progressive

⁶ “Utopia” in its absolute meaning manifests in our everydayness, such as, if we believe that the rape of today will lead to the enactment of better law in the future. However, the absurdist is against this conviction, rape is an eternal return.

dialectics of human history, which evolve from a primitive community to the absolute communism,⁷ a utopia without class struggles that mankind eternally longs for. Unfortunately, the etymology of the word “utopia,” or the Greek οὐτόπος signifies “a place which is nowhere,” its deconstructive meaning elusively suggests a place which is nowhere but exists everywhere. It is nothing but ubiquitous. Having one’s own internal logics in religious conviction is not a problem, the problem is to claim that the internal logics is “critical” by its own nature, and questioning is accused of being non-critical, non-reverent, or even misunderstanding which leads to “re-education” of spirit, especially in children.⁸

To argue that the utopian idea is a non-critical conviction which claims itself to be critical, I apply Noriaki’s classification of Critical Philosophy versus Topical Philosophy in my discussion. *Topica* or *topos* is a kind of conviction which masks

itself as a critical philosophy. Its topicality means that it swallows its posterior predicate or argument into the so-called “utopia” of faith par excellence. The idea of utopia accordingly concerns *topica*; it violently consumes *critica* or critical philosophy into its sumptuary belly and claims itself to be *critica* or critical philosophy. Thus, I call it *topica* or topical philosophy, which is closely related to rhetoric and oratory. Nakamura’s demonstrated *topica* in the Greek sense is nothing more than “anti-philosophy,” he accepts that critical philosophy can include rhetoric that alone protects it against abstraction and impoverishment but rhetoric itself cannot cover and becomes *critica*. Nakamura concludes his most recent work, *Topos*, and defines it with these words:

Just as the self (or individual) emerges from the corporate body and the hero from the chorus, the theme emerges from the topic and the subject from the predicate; the function of the subject from the predicate; the function of the subject / theme is found in the *self-conscious union* with the predicate / basis. In other words, we must drop a plumb line deep into *the ground of our existence that ground from which we spring, so that by self-consciously merging with that ground, we can then stand apart from it*. When the self, the hero (protagonist), the theme, and the subject forget the existence of the corporate body, the chorus, the topic and the predicate, when they lose the

⁷ In Chinese textbook for pedagogical instruction, “primitive community” is translated into “primitive communism” (原始共產主義) which connotes Marx believes that communism remains practical from primitive society whose mode of production lies in self-sustaining commune. After that, “primitive communism” is respectively developed into slavery (奴隸主義), feudalism (封建主義), capitalism (資本主義), and the final stage of evolution, communism (共產主義).

⁸ In the context of traditional Buddhism, “not believe” means “blasphemy,” this saying is violent in itself, for it proclaims to be rational and legitimate as it camouflages in the mask of rationale. Actually, it is totally non-critical.

tension of that relationship and become self-sufficient, then they immediately lose their power as well. (Noriaki 1997:61-62)

The utopian idea in such a way can be reinterpreted into two methods, one from anthropomorphism based on Renaissance humanism with progressive dialectics of mankind which strongly believes in reason, liberty and equality. Through reason, human society must finally reach utopia. However, the other side of anthropomorphism lies in its deconstructive meaning, for it can elude *critica* and unconsciously let in the realm of religion. "All we are told is that just as the predicate includes the subject, so is philosophy or criticism included within *topica*, and the felicitous tension between both, spoken of as a "self-conscious union." To say that "philosophy is criticism and criticism alone is philosophy" renders everything outside criticism non-philosophical but the "virtue" of affirming *topica* rather than "anti-philosophy" is that *topica* absorbs everything into itself, even criticism. As a result, if philosophy does not reject *topica* and grants the latter existence at all, *topica* will, as "topical philosophy," suddenly find a place within philosophy." (Noriaki 1997:62) For this reason, the philosophy of utopia is imbedded with violence. The violence is that it claims its religious predicate as a philosophy.

This is opposite to Descartes's four principles (*préceptes*) of logic (and I have limited my discussion to Descartes's volitional causation), which begin: "the First was never to accept anything for true

(*vraie*) which I did not clearly (*évidemment*) know to be such; that is to say. Carefully to avoid precipitancy (*précipitation*) and prejudice (*prévention*), and to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind (*mon esprit*) so clearly (*clairement*) and distinctly (*distinctement*) as to exclude all grounds of doubt." (Descartes 1637) For Descartes, a clear, disinterested and cautious discernment of truth and falsity was paramount: "superior men have no reason for any great anxiety to know these principles of critical philosophy, for if what they desire is to be able to speak of all things and to acquire a reputation for learning (*docte*), they will gain their end more easily by remaining satisfied with the appearance of truth (*vraisemblance*), which can be found without much difficulty in all sorts of matters than by seeking the truth itself (*vérité*), which unfolds itself even slowly and that in only some departments, while it obliges us, when we have to speak of others, freely to confess our ignorance." (Descartes 1637) Because Descartes holds that *critica* is a *topos* or utopia par excellence, his spirit in eternally critical inquiry in philosophy significantly differs from the Renaissance Age that grounds its belief in utopian humanism.

Volitional causation in Cartesian philosophy privileges thinking prior to body or subject which is merely a by-product of reasoning as in his saying: "I think, therefore I exist," and if I don't think, I am not existing. Thinking or questioning proves our existence. A similarity of Descartes and Berkeley is that Berkeley holds a necessary perceptual

relation between mind and body as a natural connection and utilizes the set of mind-body ontology in order to perceive the self and the external world when he says: "to be is to be perceived" as well as "I am existing, if I am perceived by myself". That is the beginning of philosophical inquiry in history.

If we identify a utopist (or one who is faithful to utopia) as a criticalist (or one who pursues rationalism as rationalist), if I am correct, it also follows that "utopianism (or communism, even idealism) in its own self is criticism, and criticism alone is utopianism," a utopia of criticism and for criticism. However, a utopist in traditional idealism or even communism demands to seal off all criticisms in the name of the ideological state of apparatus. Mao Zedong intended to terminate all criticisms and take his faithful utopia as a criticism (or critique of feudalism in old society). This action led Marxism and Maoism to lump together and exchange their greetings in the Village of Not-Even-Anything (無可有之鄉,⁹ a place which has no need of any criticism outside the village for its self-claim in criticism, a disguised *topos* indeed. As for the aforementioned poem by Gao Xingjian, the poem shows us his hidden

⁹ I borrow the term "wuke you zhixiang" (the Village of Not-Even-Anything) from the text of Zhuangzi (莊子) who describes the indescribability of Dao (the Way), and reappropriates its meaning that the fundamental requirement of sporting in that utopia is the abandoning of both language and knowledge. This is in fact an ideal expression of the nature of *topos*.

methodology in criticizing Marxist utopia, that is, Marx like many other theorists is prone to create its "certainty" (當然) or "sollen" in German by grounding "ex hypothesi" which "is supposed to" (應該) be like this, and becomes "probable" (理所當然) or self-explanatory" (自明), Gao Xingjian, on the other hand, seems to criticize utopia from the viewpoint of the real or "sein" (實然) in this world, namely, "sein" does not need to follow the principle, but the principle must follow "sein," or existential reality. The utopian evolution of Marx and Mao dialectically remains probable, but we cannot apply its probability to substantiate "sein", which forever lies in "dystopia" as a self-evidence, "the real both cannot substitute the principle; at the same time, nor can the principle substitute the real; the real cannot expound and prove the probability; nor can the probability expound the real. A theory has a certain value in its own right, so does the real. A theory is not the real and vice versa. A theory can be merged into the real. That means a theory and the real, in the first place, are two different entities, or else there is no need to merge them together."¹⁰

¹⁰ I apply He Zhaowu on Edmund Burke (1729-1797) to reinterpret the poem. The original passage in Chinese can be read in this way: 這些都是就『當然』(sollen)方面立論，它們根據假設(ex hypothesi)就『應該』是如此，是理所當然、不言自明的真理。……。柏克的思想方式則一反其道而行，他的觀點另闢蹊徑，是從『實然』(sein)方面著眼的，是從社會現實的效益或利害著眼的，他不喜歡抽象的思辨論證，而是另行標榜由慎思熟慮而得出的現實可行性

(He Zhaowu 1995:11-12) Gao Xingjian accepts that utopia, in the first place is never existing in this world. It is a matter of the real, so we always seek for the existence of utopia in the future. Nonetheless, it does not mean the real proves that mankind should not have the idea of utopia. Conversely, when we say mankind should attain utopia, it does not mean mankind, in this world, has already reached that utopia somehow in practice, so a theory and the real are two different matters, we cannot utilize a theory to reject the real, as we cannot utilize the real to reject a theory. That is what Gao Xingjian calls “chaos of the world” (Gao Xingjian 2012:220); it is absurd but meaningful and rational in its own way, Mankind from ancient times to the present has misunderstood the chaos for its implicit complexity sacrificing his or her life to protect it or even politically deceives others for self-devotion in the name of “utopia”.

By means of the analytical approach of *topica* and *critica*, the utopian idea consumes *critica* in its larger *topica*. We

作為是唯一的尺度，現實生活是複雜的、多姿多彩的、形形色色的，而且決不會是完滿的；我們無法把它們強行納入某一嚴謹的邏輯體系之內。這裡的關鍵並不是現實要服從原則，而是原則要服從現實，.....，事實既不能取代法理，法理也不能取代事實；實然不能論證當然，當然也並不能說明實然。理論有理論的價值，事實有事實的價值。理論不就是事實，事實也不就是理論。理論與事實相結合，正是以理論與事實相分離為前提的，否則就無所謂相結合了。

will find that utopia itself is no longer an authentic historical progression of mankind, for utopia itself is dystopia, that is to say, utopia in *Republic* by Plato with a well-ordered class governed by the sage-kings or *Utopia* by More is violence in itself, as a dystopia. I will give three examples to support the aspects of dystopia in *Republic* and *Utopia*. If we look into the rigid structure of class in *Republic*, the concept of family will be eradicated, for everything enacting to youths will be controlled and censored by the state; the problem is of Plato's abolition of the family within the ideal city, “all these women shall be wives in common to all the men and not one of them shall live privately with any man; the children too should be held in common so that no parent shall know which is his own offspring and no child shall know his parent.”(Plato 1892:119) The prescription may be compared to the belief in the value of infanticide, “the children of good parents they will take to a rearing pen in the care of nurses living apart in a certain section of the city; the children of inferior parents, or any child of the others born defective, they will hide, as is fitting, in a secret and unknown place” (Plato 1892:121-122).

In *The Republic*, we find a model of society that, by contemporary standards, may seem decidedly dystopian, a “nightmarish society in which few would want to live.”(Murfin and Ray 2009: 125) Plato's *Republic* provides for rule by a largely hereditary guardian class. The society is structured in such a fashion that everyone stays narrowly confined by defined roles, making it almost impossible

for anyone other than the guardians to rule. Plato does not believe in “grassroots” democracy. (Ferguson 1975:68) Based on a rigid class system, a “vindication of slavery” and royalty in Plato’s “philosopher kings” is propagated. It seems as if everyone in the set of class (guardian rulers, auxiliaries such as warriors and producers such as craftsmen, artisans and farmers) completes his proper role in the class system and utopia may be actualized.

Plato supports utopia with a well-governed “class system” in his political philosophy. He is probably not interested in defining the perfect state. He merely uses the state as a large-scale picture of the soul in his search for the perfect soul and then for justice. “Plato does not intend his ideal city to be considered as an actuality or even as a practical possibility.” (Ferguson 1975:68) Seemingly, Thomas More desired “classless society”, which can be identical with the communist ideal. As More describes in *Utopia*, the citizens in his utopia have no personal secret or privacy, because everyone is transparent in his or her morality. Everyone abundantly gets “everything that is needed for a comfortable life.” (More 1516:76-77) After all, when “the head of a household needs anything for himself or his family, he just goes to one of these shops and asks for it . . . he's allowed to take [it] away without any sort of payment, either in money or in kind.” (More 1516:80) In utopia, “there's no such thing as private property” (More 1516:73).

Compared to Derrida in terms of privacy problems, Derrida deconstructs his private

life in the way he somehow needs a private secret and questions why great philosophers always erase their private life from their works. Meanwhile, he is also curious about the other’s secret life. It seems to him that wherever individuals cannot possess a private life, it turns out to be authoritarian. A spoken documentary is a silent violence in itself.¹¹ (Dick and Kofman 2002) In Mao Zedong’s idealized utopia, there is no so-called “private life.” One’s private life must be publicized, it conversely lies in the deconstructive meaning that it is your personal affair and has nothing to do with me; hence, a desire for publicizing the private, indeed, is a desire for privatizing the public, as Lacan says: “the desire of self is a desire of the other.”

The play, *Chezhan* 車站 (The bus-stop) was published in *Shiyue* 十月 (Beijing), No. 3, 1983. It was also staged as an “experimental play” at Beijing People’s Art Theatre in Beijing, China. Directed by Lin Zhaozhua 林兆華. It was soon banned and Gao was severely criticized during the “spiritual pollution” campaign. But Gao was recognized by Mainland drama critics as the one who started the experimental theatre on the Mainland. Gao learned that the government intended to send him for political reform. To avoid harassment, he undertook a five-month tour from July to November, of the forest and mountain regions of Sichuan Province, tracing the

¹¹ “Derrida Transcript,” in *Derrida* (documentary film). A transcript of the conversation between Derrida and interviewer was recorded by Dick and Kofman in 2002.

course of the Yangzi River from its source to the coast, covering a distance of close to 15,000 kilometres. (Terry Siu-han YIP 2001:315) The logic of absurdity by Gao Xingjian in artistic contact with and influenced by the West is to blur the relationship between *topos* and *critica*, and let them reverse their positions. By means of its rationality in chaos, *Bus Stop* powerfully criticizes and debunks the mask of Chinese utopia in Mao Zedong's era. Its publication has been banned to in mainland China since the play was completed in 1983. The following analysis is to reveal the rationality inside the dramaturgical irrationality as a utopia of criticism and, above all, to demystify the idea of utopia that remains dispersedly prevalent in contemporary China.

Paradox of Desires: Desire for Utopia and Utopia for Desire

In this part, I argue that Gao's dramaturgical absurdity is a kind of rationalism in an artistic expression. His Chinese art of the absurd derives from the stance of "self-detached self-contemplation" of Chan Buddhism, which Gao Xingjian applies to his experimental drama. The stance of "self-detached self-contemplation" renders a detaching sense of humor to mock nameless characters and turn his absurd drama into a lyrical comedy. The simultaneous and consecutive polyphony of characters is an interpretive product of "poetic drama" or *zaju* 雜劇 (poetic drama set to music, flourishing in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), usually consisting of four acts called *zhe* 折, with one character having the singing role in each *zhe*). Gao Xingjian

intertwines polyphonic monologues into *Bus Stop* for the purpose of symphonic effect to make musical art mingle with temporal art (or dramatic art).

A desire is never simply the desire for a certain thing. It's always also a desire for desire itself. A desire to continue to desire. Perhaps the ultimate horror of a desire is to be fully filled in, met, so that I desire no longer. The ultimate melancholic experience is the experience of a loss of desire itself.

From The Pervert's Guide to Ideology—Illustrated screenplay & screencap gallery, directed by Sophie Fiennes, with Slavoj Žižek¹².

When we desire something, such as utopia, if we desire it exceedingly and long-lastingly and we do not feel desiring at that moment but our desire becomes a fetish. Desire for utopia has been a fetish of the Chinese since Mao Zedong propagated utopian dreams and became an ideological state of apparatus (ISA) after he promoted it in the Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The fetish was politicized by proclaiming that the Chinese utopia is a final stage of mankind's material history led and propelled by the Communist Party without caring for many antithetical voices of writers or thinkers (such as Gao Xingjian, Liu Zaifu, or the groups of Misty Poets 朦朧詩人) who

¹² *The Perverts Guide to Ideology* is available on DVD from 14th October 2013. I quote its origin in DVD form.

subterraneously ignite the idea of dystopia: “my utopia is dystopian, and by dystopia, my utopia is ubiquitous,” like Gao Xingjian who gave a special lecture (in June, 2012 at the National Taiwan Normal University), entitled “Transcending All Ideologies” (跨越意識形態) in which he did not think that modern men are transcending. A fixation in any ideology is like a waiting for a bus as a desire for fetishization, for awaiting-in-itself as the subject of predicate becomes objectivized long-lastingly, in other words, a *topos* of desirous progressivism. His philosophical standpoint significantly differs from the absurdity of Albert Camus (1913-1960), who holds that “we could, among absurdities, reach a better society with some progressive meanings”.¹³ Camus’ idea remains a strongly humanistic belief in modernism, whereas Gao Xingjian’s is not. The Chinese Nobel Laureate’s philosophical attitude lies in that of the traditional Taoist or Chan Buddhist who is bent on seclusion or exile to the margins of society (社會的邊緣) in order to cultivate “self-detached self-contemplation” (抽身靜觀), casts an indifferent eye to observe the world of humans and in his detached position somewhat aloof. However, while Taoism aspires to an understanding of *Dao* and Buddhism aspires to Nirvana, Gao Xingjian persists in studying and contemplating the self in its perplexities; the former he finds in its inner peace, The latter’s writings are soaked with pain and

suffering in the world, and there appears to be no salvation for each individual helpless in the face of the predicament. A writer as the voice of an individual is impotent to change himself or his world. He can assert his existence by means of thinking and of the production of discourse as he proclaims: “I discourse, therefore I am.” (我表述，故我在)。Gao Xingjian proposes if we cannot transcend all ideologies (of utopia), we are always fixated in the pitfalls and its eternal redemption can be paid as a misfortune of mankind (人類的不幸), such as war of violence. The play symbolizes the trap of a modernistic worldview as the hopeful waiting for a bus at the beginning of the work which was performed in a real bus station in Paris to make it realistic to audiences out of the abstraction of the play and, in the same way, to intensify the absurdity by its dramaturgy. The setting is described detachedly for self-scrutinizing in this way:

(In the middle of the stage is an upright stop board. Attacked by the wind and the rain for many years, the written characters of the stop board turn out to be unintelligible. Beside the stop board, there is a pair of steel bars for lining up. They reveal a character of intersection, they vary in length, extend in all directions and have a flavor of symbolism, what they reveal might just be an intersection, might be an intersection point on the long way of human life or might be one stop of one’s life.) (Gao Xingjian 2001:10) (my translation)

¹³ Camus’s humanistic idea is elaborated by his short allegory of Sisyphus, whose smile is for that undaunted, and self-proud challenging of destiny.

A rational sense of humor in the Theatre of the Absurd by Gao Xingjian is nothing else than the Chan Buddhism stance called “self-detached self-contemplation” or observation-contemplation (觀想) (Gao Xingjian 1996:174-175) whose narrator consciously mocks seven nameless characters who are waiting ridiculously for a bus in the way of transcending bird-eye-view. It is unimportant whether the bus will come, what is essential is that, in the process of desirous awaiting, the irrationality of life in critically revealed and becomes the core of life artistically, so another name of the *Bus Stop* is portrayed in his ink painting entitled “Lyrical Comedy” (抒情喜劇) attached to the play book. (Gao Xingjian 2001:7) At the beginning of the play, as Gao Xingjian says, life does not follow logic; to present the illogical is a way of questioning the rational (Gao Xingjian 1981: 34, 39, 41, 72-73, 79-80), the theme of a front door (in the formal transaction for tobacco in folks) turns out to be a back door (or backdoorism), the reversal is rational enough to reach the point of absolute absurdity. The narrator employs the pronoun “you” to pull readers or audiences into the semi-solo conversation:

Old Man: (takes out a cigarette)
Do you smoke? (the Silent man shakes his head). It is better to be a non-smoker. Don't mention inflammatory trachea, despite spending money, even if I want to smoke finer cigarettes I can't afford to. When talking about the “Big Front

Door,”¹⁴ okay, that long line, lining up to the street, a winding line like a snake. One is limited to buy two packs of cigarettes, once it's your turn to buy them in line, the shop assistant turns aside his face and leaves. You ask for that, no answer to you. Is that for “for customer service”? Pretend to be the front door! That “big front door” indeed can walk out of the big back door! This is like standing in line for a bus. You are standing well-disciplined in line, he (from the same line) dashes to the front, waves at the chauffeur, and the front door opens. (Gao Xingjian 2001:12) (my translation)

While waiting, one character abruptly questions in a leisurely talk, public transportation “for passenger service” probably lies in the meaning of “passenger for them service”:

Glasses: Scheduler of bus company surely chitchats to others, forgot the hour.

¹⁴ “Big Front Door” (大前門) here has two meanings, its denotation is a brandname of cigarette or an antonym of backdoorism in connotation. There is a saying in folks: “the rich smokes *daqianmen* 大前門, and the poor smokes *dayingpai* 大英牌.”

Mother: This is “for passenger service”?

Old Man: That’s passenger for them service! Even though there is no passenger waiting at the bus stop, they have to stop for a while, can one complain them or not? You can’t do anything but put up with such waiting. (Gao Xingjian 2001:32) (my translation.)

The chaos of rationality in dramatic verisimilitude is also represented in the contradictory dialogue on demand and supply in human economic needs. To customers, it is called “product shortage,” (短缺商品) and to the department of commerce, it is called “insufficiency in product sources” (貨源不足) or “inadequacy in product supply,” and it is the problem that demand surpluses supply or supply cannot respond to demand and how one can solve the absurd problem of demand and supply in the world. The narrator links the “Big Front Door” of tobacco transaction into the controversy of demand and supply in a loose, illogical, ungrammatical ways so that the theme of rationality reaches the zero of absurdity:

Director Ma: That’s “Big Front Door”.

Old Man: This cigarette is not easy to buy.

Director Ma: Of course. Three days ago, they were at bus

stop to find me out, I handed them twenty cartons. I don’t think that will be serious.

Old Man: Give me one too.

Director Ma: It’s difficult to produce in shortage condition.

Old Man: All “Big Front Door” do come from the back door, it is not strange that a bus ought to stop, but it does not stop.

Director Ma: What does it mean?

Old Man: Nothing.

Director Ma: What does nothing mean?

Old Man: There is not any meaning.

Director Ma: What does “not any meaning” mean?

Old Man: There is not any meaning, it means there is not any meaning.

Director Ma: Not any meaning means not any meaning, but it doesn’t mean nothing.

Old Man: Let you say what it means.

Director Ma: Not any meaning is a clear meaning of what has been no meaning. You

mean I am a director who
leads others to open the
back door, right?

Old Man: That's what you say by
yourself. (Gao Xingjian
2001:37-38) (my translation)

The rest of characters are preoccupied by their inner worlds of semi-soliloquy in a trivial manner. For instance, Glasses is obsessed with reciting English vocabulary in a silly gesture to take the entrance exam in the city, Mother yearns for returning home in the city to look after her naïve son, Girl longs for a romantic appointment with her boyfriend in the city and the narrator returns to the question of demand and supply again:

Director Ma: (to Old Man) I ask
you what is called "lack of
products".

Old Man: Can't buy it.

Director Ma: To customers, you
can't buy it, to the
department of commerce,
it's called insufficiency in
product sources. Insufficiency
in product sources causes the
contradiction of demand and
supply. Can you solve this
problem?

The narrator blends the contradiction of demand and supply with the problem of birth control loosely so that the passage of logic in narration becomes absolutely absurd:

Director Ma: You know that, do
you still smoke? Let us see,
advertising for the sake of
advertising. Is it not for
many years to promote
family planning? Do new-
born-children remain fewer?
The populace still increases
the same, doesn't it? Adults
learn to be addicted to
smoking. Ones who smoke
grow more quickly than
tobacco leaves. You say can
the contradiction of demand
and supply be solved?

Glasses: (loud voice) Open your
books! Open your pigs,
it's incorrect, Open your
dogs—it's incorrect,
incorrect!

Director Ma: That's a point! But,
this is the affair of the
department of family
planning,
can my department of
commerce solve this? You
blame me for opening the
back door, my back door
merely can look after
some well-connected
customers, can the front
door be opened to sell this?
Please tell me, there are
always ones who can buy
it, or can't buy it, if
everyone can buy it, the
contradiction will disappear,
won't it? (Gao Xingjian
2001:41-42) (my translation)

Besides the polyphony of monologues of each character that Gao Xingjian applies from the technique of zaju (雜劇, he periodically inserts distressed overtones, which he suggests, by using the lyrical melody of Mei Lanfang called "Farewell My Concubine" 《貴妃醉酒》 or Zhou Xinfang's called "Xu Ce Reports to Emperor" 《徐策跑城》 to catch the Chinese sense of antiquity, if possible (Gao Xingjian 2001:120), into a certain section so as to create a lyrical voice in a bigger sense,¹⁵ that is, a meta-monologue of all monologues. The meta-monologue is used to declare the long lasting voice of an individual who seeks for his or her meaning of life in the absurd world and discovers that if life has a meaning, its meaningfulness lies in meaninglessness, and by virtue of meaninglessness, utopia is here and now. All nameless characters, who are represented in a self-arrogant, self-proud and self-loved manner at the bus stop to enter the city with hopeful aspiration at the beginning of the play, turn out to be gradually soft-spoken and respectful to one another at the end of the play, once they realize the absurdity of the world. They let their "Big One" or "Big Other"¹⁶ (那主兒) go into the city, a

pseudo-utopia, or a fantasized utopia, which is full of human arrogance and violence, a symbolized place which the Communist Party propagates in the period, and above all, it is unimportant to them anymore to recognize how long they wait for the bus. All the characters turn out to be less caring for the passing time to the point of time forgetting, for their utopia is here, at the bus stop.

Lout: Hey, what about Big One?

Old Man: Who is leaving?

Lout: You are really old, muddle-headed. That's the master who sits on your head. You already threw out your big brother and he alone quietly goes to the city.

All characters: (besides Girl, they are all excited.) Who? Who? Tell me who, who is leaving?

Old Man: (slaps his leg, suddenly enlightened.) That's it, I have once greeted him before.

¹⁵ Soberly and lamentingly contemplative music eludes in the following pages. (Gao Xingjian 2001:42, 54, 61, 66, 73, 86-87, 101)

¹⁶ The term "Big One" or "Big Other" is applied from the psychoanalysis of Slavoj Žižek to translate "nazhu" (那主) in Chinese. I think that "nazhu" literally should be translated as "invisible master," however, the Žižekian term in the sense of self-ism or solipsism is more fitting, as presented in a film of Žižek's: "so what is the Big Other, this basic element of every ideological edifice? It

has two quite contradictory aspects. On the one hand, of course, the Big Other is the secret order of things, like divine reason, fate or whatever, which is controlling our destiny. But it is maybe the least interesting aspect of the Big Other ... as the agency which guarantees the meaning of what we are doing." From *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*—Illustrated screenplay & screencap gallery (picture 19), directed by Sophie Fiennes, with Slavoj Žižek.

Mother: Who? Tell me who is leaving?

Glasses: (figures it out.) He carries his backpack, stand in the front line. Reading all the time

Mother: Oh, when you were fighting just now, he tried to part you.

Carpenter: That's right, why can't I see him when he leaves?

Glasses: He has already got on the bus, hasn't he?

Director Ma: Has (the chauffeur) already opened the bus door for him?

Girl: (at a loss) The bus actually didn't stop, he went alone to the city by himself.

DirectorMa: Towards this way or that way? (Point to opposite direction of the two)

Girl: Along highway, already goes in the direction of the city.

Director Ma: Have you seen?

Girl: (desolate) He also takes a look at me, and goes in the direction of the city without looking back.

Glasses: Perhaps, he has already arrived at the city.

Lout: Definitely.

Old Man: (to girl) Why didn't you tell me earlier?

Girl: (confused and uneasy) We all are waiting for a bus, aren't we?

Old Man: He really has a calculating mind.

Girl: When he looks at the others, his eyes are staring, as if seeing through us.

Director Ma: (a little nervous) I hope he is not a cadre sent by the city to investigate. He didn't pay attention to our chatting when I and Old Man make an accomplice in thoughts.

Girl: Disappeared in a minute, he loitered up and down as if thinking about something.

Director Ma: He didn't investigate anything, such as, our demand and supply condition of cigarettes, our opening back door to sell "Big Front Door," did he?

Girl: Didn't hear he spoke a word.

Director Ma: Why don't you reflect him the problem of the bus company? Public has a lot of opinions about that. (Gao Xingjian 2001:56-58) (my translation)

By applying the Zizekian concept of self, self as ideological edifice, as he says "so what is the Big Other, this basic element of every ideological edifice? It has two quite contradictory aspects. On the one hand, of course, the Big Other is the secret order of things, like divine reason, fate or whatever is controlling our destiny. But it is maybe the least interesting aspect of the Big Other ... as the agency which guarantees the meaning of what we are doing." (Zizek 2013), this is the long wishful thinking of spatially extended journey of the "Big One" into the city. In the process of desirous waiting, after every character enjoys his or her ambition, which may be materialized there, but which cannot be fulfilled, they begin to drift into sub-consciousness and let his or her ego inflation symbolized as the Big One go in the direction of the city as if casting another self gone into a fantasized utopia, a utopia for desire, a utopia which is full of man's self-arrogance, egoism, self-deception, other-deception and ideological violence. Then, every character seems to forget about the "Big One" and shifts his or her conversation topic to question over and over why the bus has not come yet. One proposes we ought to cross the street to wait on the opposite side, or endlessly presuppose this or that in a ridiculous way, but realistic in the situation; for example, whether we are waiting at the right stop, if the bus does

not come, whether we ought to return home or be patient and keep waiting, if we walk back home right now, what are we supposed to do when the bus comes, or if the bus doesn't stop, why the stop board is existing. One when angry shouts at the bus to bomb it, if it comes, one sees a bus passing by with foreign tourists and asks in an absurd way whether we have the foreign currency.

Each character questions these possibilities absurdly and semi-subconsciously and at the same time, expresses intermittently his or her romanticized utopia in the city; Old Man intends to enter the city with hyper-arrogance to participate in a chess competition, Lout with rascal temperament is eager to enter the city to buy a cup of yoghurt, Mother longs for her stupid son in the city, Girl hopes to see her boyfriend again at a garden in the city, Glasses are enthusiastic to take part in the entrance examination of this year; Carpenter fears that his talent in wooden sculpture will be gone, if he cannot enter the city to show his inherited skills, it seems that there is only Silent Man looking beyond these aspirations. After they let their "Big One" go, they all forget about time passing, the text extends its lyrical voices in space as a symphony of polyphonic monologues, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively, crosses the boundaries of musical art and temporal art (or dramatic art), manifests the existential dilemma of modern man and touches the sublime of absurdity:

Glasses: (seeing watch with startling.) Terrible.

(Girl comes to see his watch. The rhythm of music accompanies the spoken digits, and leaps out.)

Glasses: (continues to push the button of the display light.) fifth month, sixth month, seventh month, eighth month, ninth month, tenth month, eleventh month, twelfth month, thirteen month ——

Girl: January, February, March, April ——

Glasses: May, June, July, August, September ——

Girl: Totally, one year and eight months.

Glasses: Just a year passed.

Girl: That's two years and eight months.

Glasses: Two years and eight months No! Not correct, totally three years and eight months. No! Not correct, five years and six months ... No, seven months, eight months, nine months, ten months

Glasses continues his monologue: “six years —— seven years —— eight years —— nine years, we have waited for ten

years” (Gao Xingjian 2001:73-75) (my translation), as if one's desire to wait permeated every nucleus of his existence and was extended endlessly. The narration in Chinese seems to be more fragmented, ungrammatical and vaguer but coherent in the irony of situation. Then, every character discusses time is subject to the topic of objectivism or relativism and gradually realizes the meaningfulness of vanity in everydayness in the rain ; Old Man begins to question whether it is necessary to take part in the chess competition ; Glasses describes his pain in waiting for the entrance examination to Lout, who is incapable of understanding ; Mother willingly keeps longing for her disabled son with her whole heart ; Lout accepts that it is unnecessary to go to the city to buy a cup of popular yoghurt and teases the others to play a poker with him (Gao Xingjian 2001:85) and jokes with them that the coin we throw is our decision to keep waiting or walk to the city, as if waiting itself were no longer important and happiness can be found here and now ; Carpenter with his tool bag is ready to build willingly a small tent for the others as a shelter from the rain, to continue their waiting and forgets about his profession of joinery in the city.

Girl, with cowardice and shivering in love at the beginning of the play, is distantiated into two selves, one is lingering mnemonically in the first impression of the audience and the other is determinatedly walking off the stage to conduct a dialogue with the audience in a lyrical way, the pronoun “you” the Girl uses to refer to herself drags the audience into her semi-monologue to converse with

her; meanwhile, it powerfully arouses the audience to enquire for themselves:

(Girl drifts in contemplation, from the rain shelter, walks out of her playing role, step by step, metamorphoses in a clearer facade, walking to the audience, entirely detaches from the role she bears and the light on the stage little by little dims to the point of absolute dark.)

Girl: Who cares it's raining or snowing, three years, five years or ten years, how many years can you live in one life,

(The following three voices below simultaneously are intertwined in the conversation)

Girl: Your entire life is a waste of time like this.

Glasses: (whispering voice) It rains, it rained.

Old Man: (more whispering voice) Ninth horse advances eight paces, forth cannon recesses three paces.

Girl: A waste of time like this, a waste of time like this.

Glasses: It is raining, it will rain?

Old Man: Sixth pawn stands still five paces, fifth chariot advances one pace.

Girl: You murmur like this, and complain all your life?

Glasses: It snows, it snowed,

Old Man: Fifth bodyguard recesses six paces, forth cannon stands still seven paces.

Girl: Is it a waiting in the eternity of eternity of pain like this?

Glasses: It is snowing and it will snow.

Old Man: Third chariot advances five paces—fifth bodyguard recesses six paces.

Girl: The old is rotten, the new-born is coming to the world.

Glasses: Rain is rain, snow is snow.

Old Man: Third chariot advances two paces, forth cannon recesses one pace.

Girl: Today, when passed, still
has another today, the
future always has not
come.

Glasses: Rain is not snow, snow is
not rain,

Old Man: That fifth elephant
recesses three paces and
forth cannon stands still
seven paces.

Girl: You are waiting endlessly
and murmur all your life.

Glasses: Rain isn't snow and
snow isn't rain!

Old Man: Seventh elephant
recesses five paces, third
cannon advances seven
paces,
commander!

(The light is raised gradually on
the stage, Girl comes back to the
floor and returns to her role. The
wind and the rain have already
stopped.) (Gao Xingjian 2001:102-
104) (my translation)

When the others forget their utopia with
the Big One, who let their fantasy go to
the city, the utopia comes and is presented
before the bus station. When the time for
utopia has vanished, the remnants lie in
the present tense of dystopia, small
happiness in everydayness is
overwhelming from Mother: "only if
everybody bears up to one another, how
wonderful heart-by-heart understanding

really is" (Gao Xingjian 2001:98), telling
us that the world has no meaning, if it has
a meaning. If it lies in the full realization
of meaninglessness by means of unveiling
utopia and unmasking our fanatic self in
utopia. Mother utters in a murmuring way,
she has longed for his incapable son since
her waiting at the bus stop for many ten
years ago, but her child has not grown up
for many years after waiting and she
remains longing for longing, and,
ironically, it is she who is a child in
desirously waiting for utopia and never
becomes mature, like her complaint in the
soliloquy which is uttered simultaneously
with the others on the stage,
metamorphoses into a symphony of
individual voices in the sublime of vanity:
"a mother always says to her son : Walk,
walk," "My Little Treasure, walk! Child
forever cannot learn to walk," "Child
never fallen over cannot learn to walk. Be
a mother ..." (Gao Xingjian 2001:111,114)
(my translation)

The setting at the bus stop at the end of the
play is imperceptibly changing and more
abstract: "All directions echo many
dashing sounds of cars mixing up with
motorcar horns. In the middle of the stage,
the light gets gradually brighter. All the
performers return to their playing role.
Silent Man's music turns to be a march of
harmony." (Gao Xingjian 2001:116) (my
translation) After everyone demystifies his
or her fantasized utopia, they help one
another with kindness and sympathy as
though the very absurdity they share
detriggered the fanatic selves among
them and by means of the detriggerization
of self, utopia is presented at the bus
station. Lout in his old age willingly hands

Mother up to keep walking, the rest of them walks slowly but firmly in their heart of dystopia towards utopia. The play ends with the reunion of Director Ma, which connotes that after their unmasking utopia, they are willing to wait for utopia forever in this world:

Glasses: (setting his eyes on Girl with tenderness) Let's go.

Girl: (nods her head a little.) Well.

Mother: You, where is my bag?

Lout: (energetic) I'm carrying.

Mother: (to Old Man) Take a look at your pace. (goes to support him with hands)

Old Man: Thanks a lot.
(Everybody cares for each other, mutually holds up and is going to set off.)

Direct Ma: Hey, hey, wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm lacing my shoes." (Gao Xingjian 2011:116-117) (my translation)

Conclusion

The utopian idea is alive whenever it clings to the artificial logic of *topos* or Topical Philosophy which is antagonistic to questioning, but pretends to be critical, while *critica* or Critical Philosophy has a spirit that lies in pursuing the truth of utopia in Cartesian and Berkeleian

philosophy. In pursuing the truth of utopia, utopia potentially turns out to be dystopian.

Bus Stop is a kind of dystopian counter-discursive site against the utopian visions offered by Mao and his regime and those established by important Western thinkers, such as More and Marx, from whom Mao derived his concepts. It criticizes the utopian idea as a non-critical philosophy for it claims its religious foundation with theoretical probability as mankind's historical necessity. To materialize the historical necessity, Mao exterminate all criticism by claiming himself as a kind of criticism and that is the logic of utopia in general. In the process of excluding other criticisms, it implies a kind of violence both in theory and in practice, so the utopia-in-itself is dystopian in its deconstructive meaning. *Bus Stop* plays an important role in Chinese literature in criticizing the myth of the modernistic worldview by means of applying absurdity as a utopia of logic both in concept and technique which Gao Xingjian has learned from Western avant-garde dramatists and meanwhile blended them with the Chinese elements. Thus, *Bus Stop* is a literary translation and transgression from the original. It is an in-between literary discourse in contemporary China to announce its manifesto that my utopia is dystopia, and by virtue of dystopia, my utopia is ubiquitous.

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