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An Existentialist Analysis of Gao Xingjian and the Globalization of Existentialism

Abstract: The pre-exile dramaturgy of Chinese writer Gao Xingjian is indicative of Chinese dramatist experimentation flourishing in twentieth-century China. Even though his dramatist work has been broadly researched, the existential elements in his plays *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* have received minor attention. Scholars have already hinted at the prospect of these two plays being analyzed from the perspective of existentialism – and they have explicitly declared his post-exile dramas to be existentialist – yet that has never fully developed into a complete theory. This thesis will present a new critical perspective on Gao’s selected pre-exile dramaturgy, by employing Hans van Stralen’s theory on literary existentialism and his two most salient concepts of existentialist, close-reading analysis: the three semantic topoi of existentialism (the limit situation, the other, and engagement) and three existential themes (enclosed space, authentic outsider, and negative/absent action). Using existential theory to read Gao’s plays, this thesis elaborates on how Gao’s unique adaptation of topoi and themes expands the existential concept, bringing the power dynamics of the collective to the fore and offering critical insight on the dimensionality of space. Ultimately, this will modify the Eurocentric character of existentialism and broaden it with the inclusion of Gaoist-inflected existential ideas.

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5. Introduction

This thesis will define whether Gao Xingjian’s *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* are existential plays, and, consequently, it will further establish him as an existential playwright. I will delve into the birth of Gao Xingjian’s experimental dramaturgy, connecting his two plays to the concept of existentialism, while during the analysis I will prove that his writing can expand the Eurocentric concept by imbuing existential literary motives with new layers. The purpose of this thesis is to fill in gaps in the existing literature around Gao, which has placed him in an existentialist framework because of his post-exile plays, his pre-exile play *Alarm Signal*, and his novels, but has only referred to his plays *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* as “reminiscent of the pessimism expressed by twentieth-century existentialist philosophies” (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 303). Since there is extensive literature on *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* being connected to absurdism, Zen Buddhism, theatre of the tragic and several other concepts, but not enough scholarly work analyzing them as existentialist plays, my research will shed new light on how these plays can be placed in an existentialist framework.

The introduction will provide context behind Gao and his work, to better understand how he will be linked to existentialism. In section 1.1, I will showcase the historical background behind Gao Xingjian’s writing, explaining the socio-political adversities he faced and how they afflicted the production of his works. The socio-political climate of China in the twentieth century serves as a prelude to section 1.2, which establishes the cross-cultural communication between the East and the West. There will be discussion on the interrelation between twentieth-century Chinese theatre and Gao Xingjian, with the concurrent influence from the West on both. Sections 1.1 and 1.2 thus illustrate how existentialism can be traced in Gao’s pre-exile plays, albeit it being a mainly Eurocentric concept concerning texts by European writers. Subsequently, I will give background information on Gao Xingjian’s oeuvre and what links have already been established by scholars connecting him to both existentialism and other literary concepts, focusing on the plays *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore*, but alsohis novel *Soul Mountain* and his plays *Wild Man* and *Alarm Signal*.

In 1.3, existentialism and literary existentialism will be introduced. I will explain the distinction between the two by scrutinizing their backgrounds and discussing how the former gave birth to the latter. This distinction will clarify how the philosophical ideas of existentialism have been reinvented and applied to literary texts, thus shaping the genre of literary existentialism. There, another connection between Gao and existentialism will be presented by recounting his notions on freedom and their resemblance to French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Once the reader is acquainted with existentialism, literary existentialism, and Gao’s connection to Sartre, I will present the main book used for analysis; literary scholar Hans van Stralen’s *Choices and Conflicts: Essays on Literature and Existentialism*. Van Stralen’s chapters are dedicated to different existentialist philosophers, explaining how together they comprise the movement, while the introductory chapter utilizes their ideas to formulate a common framework and decipher literary motives included in existential texts. By the end of this thesis, I will have argued for a reimagined version of Van Stralen’s book, one that includes a chapter on Gao and the literary existential discourses found in his plays.

In sections 1.4 and 1.5, I will initiate the exposition of the main concepts of existential analysis – as specified by Van Stralen – which are the three semantic topoi of existentialism (the limit situation, the other, and engagement) and three existential themes (the enclosed space, the authentic outsider, and negative/absent action)[[1]](#footnote-1). The three semantic topoi of existentialism will serve as the primary concept of analysis, because they pervade the plays from beginning to end and signal the trajectory which the narrative should typically follow in a literary existential text. The existential themes will be utilized as a supplementary set of concepts which are specific to aspects of existential texts, while they do not necessarily pervade the plays in their entirety. If we are to delineate another significant difference between the two literary concepts, the three semantic topoi can operate as an independent instrument of analysis, whereas the existential themes cannot.

In chapters 2 and 3, I will present the background of each play and provide a short summary, before I move to the close-reading analysis. I will discuss what scholarly ideas have already been expressed about the plays and what links have been made to other movements, while I will include Gao’s comments on his works. I will proceed with the close-reading analysis based on the three semantic topoi and the three existential themes. I will discuss how both sets of concepts apply to the plays, which will validate my argument that they are, in fact, existentialist, and I will elaborate on the points the plays deviate from the theory, which will validate my argument that Gao’s literary discourse can enrich the concept of existentialism and expand it.

By the end of the thesis, I will have produced a close-reading analysis of Gao’s plays, employing the set of literary devices mentioned insofar, tracing links between his dramaturgy and the genre of literary existentialism. I posit that the concept/genre of existentialism is not solely Eurocentric; its canon can become globalized and expand by incorporating a Chinese playwright’s dramatist insight.

* 1. Political instabilities in twentieth century China

Gao Xingjian was born in 1940 in Nationalist China during the Japanese invasion. As an artist, he has written novels, plays and poems, he has received global reputation for his paintings and has also produced a film. He is one of the few Chinese writers still alive today to have grown up in pre-communist China, experiencing the transition of multiple political regimes; from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Nationalist China to Mao’s China, and then the Cultural Revolution.

Gao grew up in an environment where his interest in Western literature was encouraged and set the foundation for his future artistic fusions[[2]](#footnote-2). During that time, Western art was flowing freely in China, and M. Lee narrates that Gao’s “early cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibilities must have begun with his reading of Chinese translations of Western children’s books, and then further developed by his fondness for listening to Western classical music and playing the violin” (Lackner and Chardonnens 21). His artistic propensities were able to develop in a political environment that did not propose restrictions on the arts, and the first foundations for artistic experimentation were being set.

In October 1949, Mao Zedong “declared the founding of New China, and, packaged with compelling nationalistic propaganda, guidelines for remodeling society” (Lackner and Chardonnens 21). Gao, like everyone else, entered a new environment in school, where he had to abide by the new policies and serve the nation and socialism (21). As John McDonald further explains, the only art that circulated China at that tumultuous time was a slew of images that depicted peasants happily doing their work to serve socialism and the Motherland (Lackner and Chardonnens 43). Most art seen by the citizens propagated their moral duty to perform functions for the collective; “It was not art that ‘served the people,’ as Mao has demanded, but art that served the state; that served the interests of power” (43).

The Maoist era in China cultivated Gao’s interest in pursuing the truth in his art, which he defined as “the ultimate ethics of literature” (43). There was hardly any artistic work that resembled the truth in that epoch, according to McDonald, and truth appeared like an inadequate substitute for the ideal (43). There existed nothing remotely realistic about Socialist Realism, and art ceased to be a documentation of the hard living conditions for the people—instead, it was purposed as a source of inspiration for people to keep working hard for their country (43, 44). Thereby, Jessica Yeung explains that:

The efforts displayed in Gao’s early writings at promoting Modernism in China also acquire significance from the act of contradicting official positions, and of foregrounding the aesthetics of literary techniques, which is of secondary significance according to Mao’s guidelines. To negate Socialist Realism is to negate the Maoist hierarchy of pragmatics over aesthetics, collective responsibility over individual autonomy. (144)

Gao realized that if he were to devote himself to the arts in the conventional way, this would mean a life of producing propaganda posters to assist the government.

Mao was eventually overthrown during the Cultural Revolution, an ongoing act of social vandalism which raged between 1966-1976 and urged Gao to leave Beijing. The Cultural Revolution was one of endless mass movements and mass criticism meetings orchestrated at the highest levels of national politics (Lackner and Chardonnens 22). Military Commissions were formed to round up unfortunates who had sided with the wrong factional leaders (22). During that time, Gao discovered that his colleagues had plotted to frame him for producing criticism at a mass meeting, which led him to flee to a remote Chinese mountain, until the Cultural Revolution abated five years later and he was able to return to his workforce in Beijing (22).

The unstable political environment in China, based on Liu Zaifu, instigated Gao to advocate for a “cold literature” with no -isms; a literature that did not support or propagate any political ideas (Lackner and Chardonnens 73). He also urged other writers to pursue the exploration of truth—the ultimate purpose of literature—because politics has no place in the arts and endangers the artist’s freedom (73). It has been suggested that Gao’s reluctance to overtly engage in political commentary in his work is one of the many reasons the Swedish academy awarded him the Nobel Prize in 2000, as his “‘cold’ literature, his self-proclaimed non-committal stance, perhaps ironically, is celebrated as a form of resistance” (Kyoung 448). That would not come as a surprise, considering a big percentage of the bibliography on Gao describes him as a dissident writer, and, despite his avowal of abstaining from politics in his art, many critics have associated his work with political connotations.

The end of the Cultural Revolution signaled a more relaxed political climate in China, which allowed Gao to produce short stories and essays on European Modernism undeterred. That is when Gao wrote his first two plays, *Bus Stop* and *Signal Alarm*. The latter was written second, yet Gao staged it first due to its realistic material and the plot containing topics of morality; the good life and how to achieve it by abstaining from and criticizing the immoral (Song 70). It was more appropriate to stage *Signal Alarm* at the time, as people were still recovering from the destructive outcomes of the Cultural Revolution, and the absurdist elements in *Bus Stop* could distress the social milieu. Despite China’s withdrawal of limitations on art, it is evident that artists were still restricted by the socio-economic shifts in the country, and texts that challenged communist practices or collective values were heavily criticized.

* 1. Cross-cultural communication in Gao Xingjian’s dramaturgy

The twentieth century saw extensive exchange and mutual influence between European drama and Asian traditions. The reception of Western writers, their works, and their literary techniques first started with the 1919 May fourth Movement, which signaled China’s intellectual revolution. From that point onward, during the twentieth century, modernist writers like Henrik Ibsen and Samuel Beckett, and literary movements like realism, romanticism, expressionism etc. were heavily consumed by Chinese literary reformists with the intention of modernizing China and its culture (Luk 64). Many outstanding dramatists, including Gao Xingjian, were able to develop new ideas and explorations because of such fruitful dialogue.

To establish and determine the influence Chinese theatre received, one first needs to distinguish between traditional Chinese theatre, or *xiqu* (often referred to as ‘Chinese Opera’ in the West), and contemporary Chinese spoken drama, or *huaju* (Labedzka 102). The influence received from the West “resulted in a re-evaluation of Chinese theatrical heritage, which embraced both the traditional music drama (xiqu) and the spoken plays (huaju), and contributed to a new perception of Western theatre” (18).

The cultural import from the West produced ambivalent reactions in China; while some critics and writers rejoiced for the reinvention of traditional Chinese drama, others were more critical of influence originating from the West; they deemed Western practices a modernizing factor which would endanger Chinese tradition. Eventually, the connection between the West and modernization surfaced most conspicuously in Chinese theatre; xiqu started being deemed conservative, obsolete, and representative of feudal values (Yeung 9). Gao, on the other hand, was one of the writers championing an amalgamation of tradition and innovation, as described in his essay “The Aesthetics of Creation”:

Artistic creation is a kind of cognition, and this cognition is in turn based on the understanding of earlier generations, because no understanding can start from scratch, but always builds on the understanding of those who preceded us. The understanding that our predecessors had is a reference point for all of us, regardless of whether or not we agree with it, or only partly agree with it, or are striking off in a different direction altogether. (Gao 49)

Tradition stood against the implementation of innovation, and innovation meant revolution, which aimed at the negation of tradition. However, Gao advocated for innovative creation that did not promote the negation of traditional art. He constructed plays that borrowed elements from *xiqu*, such as polyphonic dialogue or traditional Chinese dances, and blended them with modern inspiration derived from some of his favorite playwrights; mainly Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett[[3]](#footnote-3). Discussing the fusion of elements from xiqu and huaju, Song affirms that:

As an artistic form that was introduced to China from the West at the beginning of twentieth century, drama is different from traditional Chinese operas. Since the outset, it transplanted Western mainstream realist theatre ideas and later coexisted with other traditional artistic forms, exerting mutual influence. As an important element in modern Chinese drama, the experimental plays of Gao Xingjian are not an invention but a rediscovery, a transplant that professes to go back to the tradition, while creatively transforming it. (78)

For example, *Wild Man*, the third experimental play Gao wrote (in 1985), orchestrates the rejuvenation of traditional performance techniques stemming from ancient Chinese theatre, instead of solely adhering to imported dramatist techniques (Gao qtd. in Roubicek 185). With the production of this play, he claimed that if Western-style theatre were to become a successor in China, this should occur as a fusion with the traditions of Chinese theatre (192). Labedzka also verifies that “Gao wrote *Wild Man* as a kind of defense of the literary heritage of China and so took on the task of creating a contemporary epos (xiandai shishi)” (181). As Thomas Y.T. Luk further indicates, “Gao’s ultimate goal is to link up the two theatrical traditions and create something new out of the blending of the East and West, past and present. He describes this process as ‘huaxifang’… [‘de-Westernizing’], by which he actually means digesting, deconstructing, and inventing a new theater paradigm” (78). Despite many critics’ suspiciousness over the cultural imports received from the West, Gao, with his coalescing aesthetics, thus “demonstrated a clear impulse toward an ‘Eurasian theater’ in [his] search for a new paradigm” (Luk 78). It is also essential to provide Gao’s testimony on his fusional aesthetics:

Chinese culture as a whole requires a new impetus to reestablish itself after years of stagnation and self-satisfaction. I turn to modern Western theatre as a rich source of inspiration in the belief that national culture should provide a basis for, but not a limitation on, the development of Chinese culture. I am sure the synthesis of Western and Eastern theatre is possible and believe that pursuing it may stimulate the theatre as a whole. I am grateful for the inspiration which modern Western theatre has given me. (qtd. in Roubicek 193)

It is deduced that we can provide readings of Gao’s works referring to certain Western concepts because of the cross-cultural communication analyzed insofar, which, in combination with the next section, further justifies an existential interpretation of Gao’s plays.

* 1. Existentialism and the connection to Gao

This section will discuss the links that are to be formed between Gao and the concept of existentialism. I will provide a background to existentialism as a philosophical movement, which serves as the context that gave birth to literary existentialism. I will proceed by depicting the links that have already been formed by scholars between existentialism and Gao’s texts, which will summarize how Gao is a different kind of existentialist and how we can speak of a Gaoist-inflected existentialism. Lastly, I will engage with Gao’s correlation to Sartre, by recounting the latter’s influence on the former and their comparable views on freedom and the individual. The similarities detected in their essays on freedom and the individual are of vast significance, because they represent principal concerns of existentialism. Hence, this section will further attest to the motivation behind examining whether Gao’s plays are in fact existentialist.

Existentialism and Literary Existentialism

The dramatist strategies Gao used not only gave birth to experimental theatre in China, but also led to him being analyzed through existentialist literary conventions, a genre of literature that blossomed in the 1950s thanks to the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simon De Beauvoir, and many others. Literary existentialism peaked during the 1950s because of the imminent threat World War II posed in re-establishing human ethics and exploring the depth of the human psyche to understand which are the driving forces of human existence[[4]](#footnote-4). Humanity started to perceive itself in terms of its own fragility, and that manifested “in philosophical existentialism [because] the term ‘existence’ is always connected with a *rift* in human existence, a form of estrangement which is typical for modern man and which has been profiled more and more clearly since the second half of the 19th century” (Van Stralen 22). Authors wrote to understand and display this newly found rift, to locate the cracks in modern bewilderment, and to shift society’s attention towards the causal relations of human estrangement, while “with the use of the term ‘existence’ in philosophical existentialism, thinkers have tried to consider the possibility of ending this estrangement” (22).

Existentialism as a philosophical movement refers to the course of thinking from Greek antiquity to French existentialist philosophers in the twentieth century, including many philosophers exploring the meaning of human existence. What is distinct about existentialism is that it is characterized by the philosophers who comprise it; philosophers who – at times without knowing it – were in cross-temporal interaction with one another and are joined together into a framework of shared ideas despite sometimes not being in concord or expressing dissimilar beliefs. In other words, existentialism as a philosophical movement does not appertain to a specific dogma with established theories and notions, but this cluster of ideas that surfaced in different philosophical works through a cross-temporal interaction. For the sake of consolidating a general overview of what philosophical theories this movement represents, we can use Van Stralen’s book to summarize the existentialist philosophers’ main core of thinking: **“**In existentialism… the accent is put much more on the concrete existence and on the question of how the unique individual can independently find essences. What is more, in existentialism it is thought that essences are applicable solely to the situation of the *individual*” (51).There is emphasis, then, on the composition of the individual, and how its nature rests upon the situated, inward discovery of essences. This fundamental aspect of existentialism is invoked more concretely by Sartre’s “existence precedes essence”, which demarcates that “man seeks values which are applicable to his situation, they have not been given to him beforehand” (52).

Literary existentialism, on the other hand, is understood through “the influence that philosophical existentialism has exercised upon it” (55). The values expressed by existential philosophers shape the themes which pervade literary existential literature. These literary patterns are structured in Van Stralen’s book as the three semantic topoi of existentialism and diverse existential themes, from which three will be presented later for analysis.

Gao and established links to existentialism

Gao’s first connection to existentialism can be traced back to his essays, where he advocated for the fusion of traditional Chinese theatre and European modernism, which included existentialist ideas. Yeung suggests that Gao “systematically advocated an anti-Realist stance in contemporary Chinese fiction writing. He consistently championed the writings of French Modernists, especially Sartre” (5). Gao’s literary essays and first plays coincided with a reinvention of Chinese drama in the 1980’s, which included a predilection for profound philosophical rumination and a fascination with the psychology of dramatist characters (Labedzka 19). Chinese audiences of the time were knowledgeable of Western modernism and highly invested in existentialism and postmodernism (19). Modernism in China showcased formal experiments with innovative technical devices, also found in Gao’s dramaturgy. According to Yeung, “These included nineteenth-and twentieth-century ideas on anarchism, nihilism, existentialism, Freudian psychology and so forth” (56).

Although this sub-section is dedicated to linking Gao’s plays to existentialism, his novel, *Soul Mountain*, is a notable mention of how the writer included existential notions in his oeuvre. Schmidtz states that the predominant approaches to Gao’s novel are existentialism and Zen: “The Existentialist attitude is that life's meaning, or lack thereof, is of momentous import. We seek meaning. If we don't get it, we choose between stoicism and despair” (qtd. in Jian 105). The main character in the novel is perplexed and tormented by existential questions, such as life’s goals and meanings, the authentic individuality and freedom of the self, as well as the accompanying negative existential emotions of anxiety, nausea, and despair (Jian 106). After exiting the state of estrangement, the protagonist in *Soul Mountain* becomes depressed because his ‘awakened self’ urges him to seek answers to his existential questions and discover meaning in order to find out who he really is (110).

One can further link Gao to existentialism because of his established connection to the theatre of the absurd. Gao’s plays, and primarily *Bus Stop*, which has been influenced by Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, have been characterized as the first absurdist plays in China. Sen affirms that *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* are plays of the absurd (Tam 82). In its core, the theatre of the absurd also includes existential ideas, yet the primary differentiation between existential ideas in existentialism and in the theatre of the absurd, is that the latter’s existential elements are not grounded in a realistic narrative (like Sartre’s existentialism, for example) but in ‘metaphysical dislocation’ (Yeung 57). In discussion of Gao’s post-exile plays *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, *Between Life and Death*, *Nocturnal Wonderer* and *Weekend Quartet*, Yeung claims that all these plays voice an intense existential crisis (143). She explains that the characters of these plays “are each enveloped in cocoons of their own psychological enclosure” (143), whereas “This is not the case in classic Existentialist works such as Sartre’s Huis clos or Camus’ L’Etranger, in which the protagonists’ existential angst is contextualized in more realistic social scenarios” (143). The lack of realistic contextualization and ‘metaphysical dislocation’ will become evident during my research as well, through the analysis of distorted temporal and spatial relations; in *Bus Stop*, the characters experience minutes like years, whereas in both plays the characters experience open-space environments as enclosed spaces[[5]](#footnote-5).

Since Gao’s existentialism also draws elements from the absurd and differs to a certain extent from that of Sartre or other European writers, it is important now to outline a few more basic points of deviation that allow us to speak of Gaoist-inflected existentialism. One of them is Gao’s emphasis on the collective. Where other existentialists focus mainly on the inward journey of characters towards freedom on an individual level, Gao entangles them together in one journey to highlight the collective versus the individualistic. As Yeung posits, “Gao Xingjian’s plays displayed an increasingly distinctive emphasis on the split between the individual self and the collective, and… stress is put on the individual as a component in the overall composition of the masses” (101). One other variance in Gao’s existentialism is the theme of space; it receives both literal and allegorical dimensions. Existentialism typically enmeshes characters in enclosed spaces, within which the protagonist is called to face the other and become awakened. That is not the reality in Gao’s plays selected here for research, as the spaces they depict are not enclosed or restricting. Gao conveys the sentiment of spatial restriction by trapping the individual in the masses, further highlighting the dynamics of the collective. What also contributed to Gao staging his plays differently than other existentialists is the innovation in Chinese theatre in the late twentieth century. When Western playwrights staged plays in the traditional Italian-style stage, Chinese playwrights like Gao preferred to stage their plays outside the theatre, in open-air spaces (Labedzka 23).

Sartre’s existentialist ideas revisited through Gao’s notions on freedom and fate

Similarities between Sartre’s and Gao’s ideas on freedom form one of the theoretical cores which grounds existentialism as a global philosophical concept, and not just a Eurocentric one. Their correlation on the matter is fundamental because the concept of freedom pervades both existentialism and the formation of the literary existential motives selected here for analysis. Thereby, Gao expressing similar ideas on freedom justifies how the application of the semantic topoi and the existential themes take place in *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* and why, consequently, we can define them as existential plays.

Jean-Paul Sartre has been one of the main contributors in existential thinking and one of the forebears of literary existentialism, as his works belonged in the literature that birthed the existentialist movement.In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he formulates the state of the individual by foregrounding its free nature; either sketching it as free on its own, or in correlation with the “Other”[[6]](#footnote-6). The perpetual cycle of existence manifests through different modes of being: being-for-itself, being-in-itself, and being-for-others. Being-for-itself is described as the mode of being in its most stripped away form; it “is present unto itself and thus—in contrast to [being-in-itself]—does not coincide with itself; therefore it has no identity at all” (Van Stralen 48). It refers to the “precondition for free action” (48) and, in its rawest form, describes a state of free consciousness that is not rendered or afflicted by conditions. On the other hand, being-in-itself is the dimension of being which coincides only with itself and entails inward awareness of a free, unconditioned consciousness[[7]](#footnote-7). It “forms part of the individual’s identity, [and it] is not a preordained entity but equals the sums of the individual’s personal choices and the related acts” (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 306). To summarize, being-for-itself appertains to free, unconditioned consciousness and being-in-itself is what one is conscious/aware of in self-consciousness.

In *Polyphony Embodied: Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian’s Writings* (2014), Liu Zaifu quotes one of Gao’s lines from chapter 39 of the book *The Soul Mountain*: “To be self-activated and to exist for yourself is a freedom that is not external to you. It is within you, and it depends on whether you are aware of it and consciously exercise it” (Lackner and Chardonnens 73). Gao’s lines delineate existence as a unique freedom owned by the individual, and he declares that there are two fundamental elements to that freedom: ownership and awareness/practice of that ownership. This is where the first connection between Sartre’s and Gao’s philosophies can be made. They both elaborate on the unique, unconditioned freedom that belongs to every individual; the modality of being which manifests by excluding the self from any social mirroring and dives deep into the unconscious and conscious function of its essence[[8]](#footnote-8). They both talk about the existence and awareness of freedom, a nature that is not “conferred, nor can it be bought, it is [one’s] own awareness of life” (74). It cannot be conferred as Gao indicates, because it is a pre-condition available to every human being and a natural state that precedes any acquisition of meaning, also expressed by Sartre’s “existence precedes essence”.

Insofar, Sartre’s and Gao’s ideas refer to individual freedom outside any relations to the “Other”, which signifies whatever social relations one may have in life, or even their faith in God. This is where Sartre initiates the term “being-for-others”, which signifies the modality of being as an object perceived by someone else’s consciousness[[9]](#footnote-9). This exceeds the individual modality of freedom, as it transcends one’s unique, free standpoint in the world and places them in a perpetual interaction with their surroundings[[10]](#footnote-10).

Gao expressed similar notions regarding the dominance of individual freedom in a social environment. To avoid endangering the uniqueness of individual freedom, he states that “[f]reedom takes no account of others, and has no need for acceptance by others. It can only be won by transcending restrictions imposed on you by others. Freedom of expression is also like this” (qtd. in Lackner and Chardonnens 74). For Gao, social perceptions and values are thus construed as “restrictions”, as boundaries one must overcome to cultivate awareness of their own freedom. It is an inward journey, a dimension of consciousness one must master having under control so that their freedom is not disrupted.

1.4 The three semantic topoi of existentialism

To understand what thematic elements characterize literary existentialist texts, Van Stralen adopts three core mechanisms: the limit situation, the other and engagement. These three semantic topoi can either function interactively with one another or distinctively on their own. In sections 2.1 and 3.1, these three topoi will be used as the main close-reading device to analyze *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* as existential plays.

Most literary existentialist texts commence by depicting a particular situation of which the character(s) does not have a clear overview and cannot exactly comprehend (Van Stralen 75). The individual may find itself in a static situation which segues into an event that triggers confusion or instability. This event is fabricated either by circumstantial personal becomings, such as an illness or an accident, or by the general social environment, i.e. a political attack or the war, leading the individual into estrangement (75). As a result, “the situation comes under pressure and thus becomes a *limit situation*” (75). At that moment, the character is being triggered by well-known existentialist emotions, like fear, nausea, shame, but primarily “the sensation of being mortal/finite or the realization that one has been thrown into the world, come to the fore” (75). This can also be correlated with the concept of freedom as expressed by both Sartre and Gao: the individual experiences—rather abruptly—limits to its own freedom by coming to terms with the finity of its own life; a finity that manifests either through the unravelling of unfortunate personal incidents or because of the imminent threat the social surroundings impose. These realizations and feelings of nausea and fear start surfacing as denial, yet gradually “the main character realizes that the reality at hand cannot be denied, which can effectuate an atmosphere of absurdity” (75). The disruption of the individual’s facticity, which appertains to “the basis and conditions of human existence” (75), becomes subject to negative changes and a forced reorientation into reality. Reorientation can either unwind instantly or gradually in the text and is characterized as an *awakening*. As Van Stralen indicates:

[T]he protagonist gains insight into the break between existence and values: his specific problem becomes clear to him, but there are no suitable solutions for his unique situation. Frequently, this thinking about his personal status leads to reflections on the *‘condition humaine’* and doubts about the traditional views of life in general. In other words, the limit situation reveals a break between experience and reason, between the ‘I’ and the other, between the pre-rational and the rational domain. (76)

This is where Van Stralen introduces the second topos of analysis, the “Other”, which can take the form of other people who surround the main character, society, or even God. The other poses the ‘pressure’ factor because it serves as an imminent attack or threat to individual freedom, and can consolidate the activation of nausea, fear, or shame (76). In the case of an isolated individual, the other is embodied by their inner monologue or by their portrayal of God. It can thus be argued that the other is whatever pressuring force stems from any other source that is not the individual’s unique being. What matters is not so much the origin of the other but the negative emotions it triggers, which eventually lead to the awakening; the realization that “the other has power over the hazardous situation and can often be accused of being the cause of this” (76). That is when the individual confronts the significance of choice as it is forcefully bestowed upon it (76).

Whatever conscious decision the character makes after that point is a form of engagement, which is the third topos of analysis and consists of a tripartite modality (76). First, the character resigns to the triggering negativity they experience and feels compelled to re-enter the masses with a clear overview of the limit situation in which they existed before their awakening (76). Secondly, what continues is “the acceptance of the situation, in which a number of unquestionably new insights lead to a reorientation of the world” (77). Frequently, in this stage, the character experiences melancholy or sorrow, because of the newfound wisdom with which they address their surroundings (77). The painful acceptance of the situation is what adds an extra layer of authenticity to the individual, which surfaces images of a “lost innocence of his youth” (77). The third part of engagement leads the individual to self-liberation, “which is based on a deep confidence in the scope of human freedom and of a certain realization of responsibility for society and the other” (77). The attention of the character is now recentered, and they have a different access to reality through their newfound philosophy and approach to the situation. In other words, the situation appears to be altered to the individual, and there is an improvement in how they are grounded in the new reality.

The close-reading analysis will commence by viewing the characters in the limit situation and examining the emotional responses they project. Each of the plays employs a different agent as the other, and by examining how the other is corporealized differently in the plays, I will explore the diverse causal relations between the characters and their other. Lastly, the analysis will determine whether the characters have been led to the process of engagement, and whether they gained a new-found wisdom throughout the narrative in order to counter their negative emotional responses and fulfill their voyage towards the discovery of freedom. By this, it is not implied that engagement will lead all the characters towards catharsis, but in contrast it will describe whether they have managed to salvage their freedom regardless of the adversities of the limit situation and the other. There will be differences, of course, in the two dramatist narratives, and the application of the semantic tripartite *limit situation-other-engagement* will not unveil in a linear formula as mentioned above. This will delineate whether Gao’s plays can be read through a literary existentialist perspective, but also whether there are differences in the ways the mechanisms apply to his works compared to Van Stralen’s theory.

1.5 Existential themes

In this section, there will be an introduction of themes discovered in existential texts which function in correlation to the three semantic topoi and can further consolidate the reading of *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* as existential plays. These existential themes include the authentic outsider, the enclosed space, and the negative/absent action, and they are also taken from Van Stralen’s book. What these themes have in common is that they all resonate with the existential narrative axes that are the three semantic topoi, and they manifest by interacting with them, or as their sub-elements. Moreover, they either emphasize aspects of both plays that can be interpreted as existentialist elements, or they may appear in one of the plays and not the other. In the latter case, there will be a review as to why there can be no application of the theme, providing further explanations.

The first existentialist motive is the *authentic outsider*, which applies directly to both plays. The authentic outsider usually takes the role of a pariah, a character of low social status who has been cast aside by society. There is a distinction between the authentic outsider and higher social classes, especially in the works of Sartre and Camus, which include characters such as criminals, prostitutes and vagrants, who have evaded the bourgeois, essentialist sphere (Van Stralen 85). The authentic outsider struggles against the other and is circumstantially burdened by their strife to preserve or regain their authenticity and freedom. Thereby, “he/she strives for moral purity...to rid himself of bourgeois essentials and by doing so to discover his authentic nucleus” (85).

The next theme is that of the *enclosed space*, which, through its unique application on both plays, will expand existentialism with new literary discourse. This is a prevalent theme in literary existentialism, and particularly in plays, where the structure of the stage is of vital importance. In the confinement of a secluded or limited area, such as a prison cell or a cellar, the character is compelled to confront the other or have a conversation with themselves. As Van Stralen claims, “In the enclosed space, man is often reduced to his body and thus subjected to the gaze, the power of the other. At the same time, the subordinate realizes that he can or should escape this subjection to power, after which the fight with the other can commence” (85). This motive applies unconventionally in both plays and will shed new light on how one defines or perceives spatial boundaries based on Gao’s insight. It is a prime example of how these literary devices are not always fitting in narratives, and how different works may enrich them with new elements.

The *negative/absent action* will apply perfectly to *Bus Stop* but contrastingly to *The Other Shore*. It regards performative passivity or the absence of an action, especially at a point in the play that the reader/spectator would reasonably expect one (88). It does not appertain to authorial forgetfulness or an intentional omission, but to “a conscious intent” (88). The reader might come across a negative/absent action when “the limit situation makes its entry in the life of the character and when he/she...refuses to face up to the seriousness of the situation or declines to confront the altered circumstances adequately” (88). Consequently, it revolves around intentionally not completing an action or event, or prolongating it where it would be considered inconvenient.

1. *Bus Stop*: the play

In this chapter, I will first provide the background of *Bus Stop* and the links established between the playand diverse literary concepts, while also including Gao’s comments on his work. Next, with the application of the semantic topoi and the existential themes, I will provide an existential analysis of the play. The examination of the semantic topoi will unfold according to theory, yet it will reveal that Gao leads the existential characters to a re-established freedom through a collective effort and not an individual one, which will offer new critical perspectives on existentialism. During the application of the themes, I will showcase how the authentic outsider and the negative/absent action apply perfectly to the play, and how the unique application of the enclosed space sheds new light on the dimensionality of space.

The continuous communication between the West and the East in the twentieth century manifested in one of Gao Xingjian’s first dramatist works, *Bus Stop*. Ma Sen suggests that *Bus Stop* reflects“an equivalence between the post-war European existential crisis manifested through the birth of the Absurd theatre in the tragic mess of China following the Cultural Revolution” (Kyoung 445). *Bus Stop* contains many resemblances to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and critics have used that connection to establish Gao as an absurdist playwright who reformed traditional Chinese theatre. Even though *Bus Stop* was the first play Gao wrote (in 1981), he was instructed by his deputy director to stage his second play, *Alarm Signal*, instead,because of *Bus Stop*’s inherent absurdist character. It was staged two years later and aroused significant controversy, which concluded with the play being cancelled after ten performances. As Tam writes:

It is the absurd social conditions in contemporary China that form the basis of Gao’s play, which was an immediate stir to both the Chinese audience and critics for its shocking effect and apparent violation of the traditional style of stage presentation… The controversy this play aroused, however, was chiefly on its ideological inclination and challenge to the socialist doctrines of literature and art rather than on its artistic achievements and innovations, which are unique among contemporary Chinese plays. (44, 45)

The controversy included a divide between critics, with “[e]ven the mildest criticism accus[ing] *Bus Stop* of being an unsuccessful appropriation of *Waiting for Godot*” (Song 71). During public statements Gao rejected any influence from Beckett’s play. He described how any potential commonalities between the two plays stem from *Waiting for Godot* influencing the contemporary drama stage in general, not his play specifically (71). He did not necessarily deny any resemblances or the absurdist nature of his work, but he primarily wanted to underline the difference of aesthetics between the two plays. For Gao, his play emphasizes a return to “action”, whereas *Waiting for Godot* is the vanguard of anti-plays (71). As he states:

Characters in my play are those who want to move yet [are] unable to move because of restrictions from within and without. It is not that they lack movement, but that they want to move but cannot move. This is the recurrent, obvious and simple movement in *Bus Stop*. While in *Waiting for Godot*, people were just waiting with no intention to move. They talk from the beginning to the end, indulging in language games. When Beckett denied the most basic rule of plays, I emphasized the most ancient sources of the play—the action. (Gao qtd. in Song 71, 72)

It can be hypothesized that Gao wanted to dissociate himself from any alleged similarities to Beckett because he did not want to become the target of Chinese critics and the “anti-bourgeois-contamination” campaign[[11]](#footnote-11). As Kuoshu affirms, “[a] Party-authorized critic used the *Bus Stop*’sresemblance to Beckett's play to label it anti-socialist, assuming that the futile waiting in the play shows a loss of confidence in socialism, a loss ascribed to contamination by ‘bourgeois, idealistic, egoistic world views’” (461). Despite Gao’s emphasis on the structural differences, similarly to “*Waiting for* Godot, the characters in the *Bus Stop* are tormented betweenthe proper wish of achieving something through waiting and the existentialist frustration of having nothing done” (Tam 48).

Regardless of any similarities or differences between Gao’s and Beckett’s works, scholars have constantly highlighted many aspects of Gao’s plays, and particularly *Bus Stop*, that appertain to the absurdist movement. For example, Thomas Y.T. Luk writes:

[Bus Stop] uses many of the dramatic devices of the theater of the Absurd, for example, circular structure, antidramatic action and nonlinear development, cross-talks, physical antics, semantic and phonic play on words, illogical use of time and space, flimsy characterization, and so on. Thematically, the play exploits the futile waiting of a group of people for a bus. (73)

Luk explains coherently the structure and themes that pervade Gao’s play, which can be used to analyze him as an absurdist playwright.

Letizia Fusini has argued that Gao’s plays, including *Bus* Stop, also entail tragic elements. She suggests that some aspects in his plays are reminiscent of twentieth-century existentialist theory (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 303), the core ideas of which are also pinpointed in tragic dramaturgy. Portraying characters who face existential difficulties in their limit situations is a manifestation of the tragic as well, since “the tragic may be finally understood as a ‘situation’, and one that is both stringent and provocative: a set of enforced conditions that, because of their nature and impact, suggest both a participation and a response” (Storm qtd. in Fusini 303). The main denominator is again that of individual identity, and how it is perceived through the confrontation with limit situations and the other. In that regard, Fusini’s analysis “of the tragic as a metaphysical reality which pre-exists dramatic tragedy seems to accommodate Gao’s tendency to envision tragedy primarily as a structure of existence, an inescapable destiny that inheres within our human genes; not a man-made way of interpreting reality, but a reality itself ‘to which art responds’” (305). This further attests to Gao’s multifaceted structure of themes in unconventional ways, which led to him being analyzed from different literary perspectives.

The concepts through which Gao has been analyzed have been selected here because fundamentally they bear some resemblances to existentialism. Both absurdism and tragic drama highlight the identity of the individual at stake. The characters appear unstable and confused in their processing of reality, and there is a close examination of human identity in a dramatist context. The individual appears at loss, producing effort to experience internal, reflexive absolution, and must usually undergo phases of excruciating denial before coming to terms with reality. Elements that concern the unstable identity of the individual are relevant in all the above-mentioned movements, yet their manifestations and how the disoriented individual regains its freedom are some of the core ideas which can be used to differentiate an existential reading of Gao’s play from an absurdist or tragic one. In the close-reading analysis, the individual will take the form of an existential unit, dissected amid its confrontation with situations and barriers that threaten its unique freedom and trigger intense, negative feelings of anguish, fear, and distress.

2.1 Revisiting *Bus Stop* as an existentialist play: the three semantic topoi

This section concerns the close examination of Gao Xingjian’s *Bus Stop* through the tripartite literary existentialist concept of the three semantic topoi. Gao employs a group of eight characters (Old Man, Silent Man, Girl, Glasses, Mother, Hothead, Carpenter and Director Ma) who are located at a suburban bus stop awaiting the next bus in order to travel to the city. The play commences with the arrival of the Old Man and the Silent Man waiting at the bus stop, while one by one the other characters appear. Impatient to get to the city as quickly as possible, they try to collaborate and form a perfect queue to get on the bus. This is where the strife commences; the characters do not seem to agree on a specific way to form the line. They start fighting with each other as they realize that the buses continuously ignore their existence and never stop to pick them up. They eventually realize that one year has passed. The group becomes even more frustrated as time lapses pointlessly, witnessing their plans remaining unfulfilled and their lives withering in tumult. The suddenly inconvenient weather (rain, hail, snow) and the growing darkness worsen the situation. The characters enter an existential crisis, as they are uncertain of the flow of time, and whether this journey is brought upon by fate or their irrational personal choice to stay and wait for a bus that never stops. However, this leads to a shift in group dynamics; they all huddle under a sheet to protect themselves from the unpleasant weather and decide to start walking towards the center. What further convinces them to abandon their waiting is the realization that the Silent Man sneakily left the group a long time ago to pursue the same strategy. Walking towards the center, they enter complex, synchronous dialogues in duos and triplets, each one expressing their own anguish and questioning the actual existence of the bus stop while the buses never cease to drive by them.

The characters enter a unique, limit situation; waiting for the bus. The bus stop serves as a confining foreground which leads the characters to the exploration of their individuality as well as the discovery of their own freedom. What modifies this context as a limit situation is “the depiction of a specific situation into which the character has not yet got a clear insight” (Van Stralen 75). All the characters have seemingly gathered at the bus stop to perform a casual, everyday action, yet “then there follows an event, not construed by the individual[s]...which thoroughly alters [their] circumstances” (75). The bus never stops, and the characters find themselves confused and stranded in a place which somehow restricts them and prevents them from leaving. Their freedom is tested, and this triggers negative, existential emotions, such as agony, fear, and frustration. The characters realize that their existence has been thrown into instability, and the situation at hand is not under their control, but under the control of circumstantial events; the buses’ uncertain arrival. Moreover, the limit situation makes the characters realize that “reality at hand cannot be denied, which can effectuate an atmosphere of absurdity” (75). That is not surprising, as it was established that Gao’s existentialism includes absurdist elements too.

Constricted in a triggering situation with no clear resorts, the characters are obliged to engage with the limit situation and come to terms with it. This manifests through the characters’ reorientation towards the current reality. They start assimilating the facticity of the situation; they understand that they are susceptible to the “basis and conditions of human existence” (75) and accept “the fact that the universe is as it is” (75). The assimilation and acceptance of factual reality are construed as an “awakening” in literary existentialism, and in the text the awakening unwinds gradually as the characters suffer all the more in the static process of waiting and slowly accept that no bus will stop for them.

The awakening leads to a positive reconfiguration of the current limit situation, yet it also brings them to a confrontation with the other. The other has an elusive nature in *Bus Stop* and can take many forms. Since the other symbolizes the defining force that “can pressurize the world of the individual –in existential thinking – either alone or collectively” (76), here it can be interpreted as every character for each other or as the bus association. I will demarcate the bus association as the pressuring force because it represents the bourgeois, essentialist morale, which has power over the lower classes and casts the characters aside, like pariahs. Based on Xia’s account, the bus association can be signified as the other because “the author gives a realistic account of travel conditions in buses that most Chinese people can identify with. They also contain critical observation of the running of the transport system with potentially political implications” (229). Kuoshu’s points further validate that:

People and their relationships to the bus automatically remind the audience of social problems… Getting into the bus becomes a battle of pushing and elbowing the others away. In this chaotic situation, so-called "backdoorism" (favoritism) becomes more and more prevalent in interpersonal relationship - those who are in favor with the bus company, or the bus driver himself, will be let on the bus through the back door while the others battle to squeeze in through the front door. (463)

The bus association then serves as the other here because it reflects societal norms. By structuring the other this way, Gao engages in political commentary. More information about the dynamic between the characters and the bus association as the symbol of bourgeois, essentialist morale will be discussed in 2.2.

As the narrative unfolds, the characters experience angst while waiting for the bus. They initially pinpoint the source of their negative emotions in the inability of other people, Hothead in specific, to abide by social conventions, which in this case is the formation of a queue to get on the bus:

OLD MAN. (trembling with rage): Get in line!

HOTHEAD. Why do you keep stirring up trouble? You think I’m afraid of you?

OLD MAN. Are you looking for a fight? (Chen 559)

The Old Man is one of the characters that is most driven by his negative emotions and cannot come to the realization that the bus is not going to stop regardless of the nature of their queueing. Even though the source of the Old Man’s and Hothead’s existential emotions is being subjected to the bus association’s neglectfulness, they get in a fight and project their emotions onto each other:

OLD MAN: Young man, didn’t you learn anything in school?

HOTHEAD: It’s none of your business. If you’re so learned, why aren’t you riding in a limousine?

OLD MAN: Waiting for a bus is nothing to be ashamed of; it’s social morality. Didn’t your teachers teach you that? (559)

Despite being victims of the same limit situation and the same other, they initially mis-target their attention and treat each other as the other. This activates a lashing out towards one another, instead of the understanding that they share a ‘common enemy’. Once the play progresses and they understand that the factor which led them to existential angst was the bus association, they realize that “the other...has power over the hazardous situation and can often be accused of being the cause of this” (Van Stralen 76). That is when they are bestowed with the power of choice, and the collective effort to counter their other becomes pressing.

The conscious decisions manifesting during this turbulent situation are characterized as engagement, which takes a tripartite form. Firstly, engagement occurs with the characters coming to terms with the limit situation and resigning themselves to the negative emotions (Van Stralen 76). The characters in *Bus Stop* realize that waiting for the bus is pointless, and just like the Silent Man, they will have to adapt to the situation and walk together towards the city center to fulfill their goals. Nevertheless, engagement does not come right away; the turbulent situation instigates existential questions and prompts the characters to commit to a decision:

GLASSES. What if the bus comes right after we leave? (Facing the audience, muttering to himself) And if it comes but still doesn’t stop? My head tells me I should start walking, but I’m not one hundred percent sure. What if it’s the wrong decision? But I must make a decision! Desk, dog, pig, book. Go or wait? Wait or go? That is the question of our existence. Perhaps fate has decreed that we should wait here for the rest of our lives, until we grow old, until we die. Why don’t people take their futures in their own hands instead of submitting to the dictates of fate? Then again, what is fate anyway? (Chen 573)

According to Fusini, this polarization exhibited by Glasses illustrates how the existential individual suffering in the limit situation “swings between the opposite poles of self-assertion and self-destruction, thus revealing a concrete psychological predicament based on split personality” (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 303). Based on Van Stralen, the existentialist characters now feel “obliged to re-enter the masses with a clear insight into the limit situation in which [they] belonged before [their] awakening” (76), while they yield “to auto-destructive tendencies or resentment” (76). The mass they re-enter more knowledgably now is the collective unit they have formed together, while the auto-destructive tendencies surface here as the outcome of an intense existential crisis, evident in Glasses’ monologue.

Reorientation towards the acceptance of reality and new decisions to counter the negative situation at hand comprise the second stage of engagement. The characters are now “sadder but wiser” (77) and they have “adapted more to their surroundings” (77). This stage produces action, and the introduction of a confident decision. Reaching the conclusion that further waiting would be futile, the characters now decide to collectively walk towards the city like Silent Man:

GLASSES. There’s not going to be any bus. (With great determination) Let’s start walking, like that man. While we were wasting our time at this bus stop, he’s already gotten into town and gotten something done. There’s nothing for us to wait for anymore. (Chen 579)

Glasses’ lines here serve as the consolidation of the characters’ reorientation, and their determined attitude towards the group’s adversities.

The third stage of engagement manifests as a new “attitude to life, which is based on a deep confidence in the scope of human freedom and of a certain realization for society and the other” (Van Stralen 77). This becomes evident in Gao’s play with the characters re-establishing their freedom by countering the limit situation, which is achieved through collective effort. Apart from the Silent Man, the characters gain new insight in their negative situation by attempting to resolve it in unison:

MOTHER. Shall we start off?

GIRL. (looking at Glasses): Are we going?

OLD MAN. Where are you going?

HOTHEAD. Into the city. Right, master?

CARPENTER. You just follow me. (Chen 584)

They all march together, helping each other and making sure everyone gets to the city. There is, in this way, an ethical obligation to the fellow man and a moral responsibility to make sure everyone makes it:

MOTHER. But my bag is too heavy.

GLASSES. Lady, I’ll carry it for you.

(He picks up her bag.)

MOTHER. Oh, thank you so much. Grandpa, watch your step, don’t step in the water.

GIRL. Be careful.

(She supports the old man.) (585)

Furthermore, there is a new profound awareness regarding the existential aspect of waiting, which the bus association subjected the characters to. The actor who plays the carpenter reinstates the process of waiting from a newfound, optimistic perspective:

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER. I don’t mind waiting. When people wait, it’s because they hope. (587)

Engagement does not lead the characters to catharsis, but to a reimagined way of addressing reality; a way which does not make the conditions less unpropitious than they were but bolsters the characters with the right cognitive tools to restore their freedom and not become effaced in the confrontation with the other.

*Bus Stop* expands the tripartite theory because engagement unfolds through collective reformation. Characters in literary existentialist texts are predominantly portrayed confronting their other and reaching engagement through reflexive effort. Nevertheless, Gao entangles his characters into a collegiate confrontation of the limit situation and the other, emphasizing the role of interactive synergy in individual, existential struggles. Xia also notes that “Gao seems to endow his characters with the strength and determination to overcome their perpetual paralysis and delusion by relying on their collective strength and care for each other in the impending journey” (236). Gao’s emphasis on collective values thus offers a new critical discourse to Van Stralen’s theory and allows the reader to reimagine the process of engagement.

2.2 Existential themes in *Bus Stop*

The Authentic Outsider

Literary existentialist texts often portray characters who are social outcasts; prostitutes, thieves, prisoners, and vagrants are some examples. They comprise the pariahs “who have all escaped the bourgeois, essentialist morale” (Van Stralen 85). Authentic outsiders are motivated by a desire for authenticity and freedom. They often exhibit “psychic problems” due to the pressure imposed by circumstantial events and are in constant battle with the other (85). The authentic outsider is in constant interaction with the other to reach their awakening and oppose themselves to characters in estrangement. Despite the confusion thrown in their way because of the limit situation and their continuous emotional triggering by the other, they strive “for moral purity, which one can often understand in terms of *reduction*: the outsider wants to rid [themselves] of bourgeois essentials and by doing so to discover [their] authentic nucleus” (85).

In *Bus Stop*, almost all characters can be characterized as authentic outsiders. Apart from the Silent Man, every other character represents a unit that is struggling with their status in society. It is expressed by most of them how people waiting for the bus are not treated with respect, either by the bus association or by society, and that people from higher classes receive different treatment:

[OLD MAN]. It’s just like waiting for the bus. When you stand in line according to the rules, there are always some who don’t go by the rules. They push to the front, wave to the driver, and the door opens for them. They’re the “preferred passengers with connections.” God! How I hate that term! (Chen 557)

The Old Man’s rage reflects Kuoshu’s ideas presented in 2.0, who described the favoritism people of higher social statuses received in China. The theme of the authentic outsider creates a juxtaposition between the lower social classes who must wait for the bus and abide by the rules, and people of higher social classes who have a privileged head start.

What unites the authentic outsiders here is that they are waiting for the bus. The process of waiting separates them from the upper classes and places them in the periphery. Although focusing on their differences in the first half of the play, they eventually unite in a collective effort to reach the city center. They realize that there are more things connecting them than separating them. The battle against the other (the bus association) brings them to a continuous rivalry with the bourgeois, with values they do not identify with. What alleviates their existential anguish during fighting for their authenticity is discovering their role among group dynamics; it becomes important for them to “come to authentic behaviour in the midst of the community” (Van Stralen 85). As authentic outsiders, they are “continuously battling, in particular the behavior of the immoral other” (85).

The theme of the authentic outsider transcends the personal and enters the communal. As analyzed in 2.1, the collective effort is emphasized and expanded in Gao’s play; it signifies that the battle with the other entails individual reorientation, yet unique individual struggles can fuse into one, collegial defense when the other is the same.

The Enclosed Space

The theme of the enclosed space is prevalent in literary existentialism, as “[i]n no other literary movement is there such frequent mention of the role of doors and rooms” (Van Stralen 85). Events take place in a limited space; a confining environment in which the character is pressured into confronting the other or forced into conversation with themselves. The spatial restrictions forced upon the character can symbolize the restrictions brought upon by the other. The character is found in confinement, reduced to their body, called to action so as to redefine their freedom. As Van Stralen writes:

The motive may be understood within the break described above as the visualized friction between freedom and limitation. This tension may lead to absurd situations and the cessation thereof. This representation of affairs can be enforced so powerfully that the reader gets the impression that the world as a w*hole* is experienced as an enclosed space by the character. (86)

The theme of the enclosed space examines spatial relations and spatial dimensionality in the play. *Bus Stop* has limited stage directions:

Place: A bus stop in the suburb of a city (A bus-stop sign stands in the middle of the stage. The words on the sign are no longer legible due to years of exposure to the elements. Beside the bus-stop sign are two rows of iron railings where the passengers line up. The railings are shaped like a cross, with each of the four posts a different length. This shape is symbolic of a crossroads, or a fork in the road on the journey of life, or a way station in the lives of the characters.) (Chen 556)

Although the staging in *Bus Stop* does not imply an enclosed space (since action takes place in an open area), the sense of confinement is still palpable throughout the text. The characters feel stranded in an open space from which they can easily leave, yet something is keeping them attached there. The road to the city center is not far, but when the characters are called to take initiative and walk there, the road is presented like a chaotic maze. For example, the Old Man ponders over being able to make it due to his old age:

OLD MAN. Still going into the city? Will I ever get there at my age? (Chen 585)

While he continues by saying:

OLD MAN. You people go ahead; don’t let this old fellow slow you down. If I drop dead somewhere along the way, may I trouble you all to dig a hole for me? And don’t forget to put up a sign and write a few words on it[.] (585)

It appears that escaping the bus stop, the place established as the enclosed space, entails both emotional distress and pragmatical difficulties. The characters are burdened by their indecisiveness; should they abandon the bus stop, not certain whether they will still be able to fulfill their goals at the city center since years have passed, or should they keep waiting idly?

There is an underlying sentiment grounding the characters to the bus stop before they depart. This negative sensation is attributed to being overtaken by the other; they rely on fate instead of personal choice. These last moments of the characters in the enclosed space are important because they indicate the authority the other imposes on them, and how they must give in to their existential anguish in order to enter the stage of engagement.

Gao extends the confines of space and imbues them with an allegorical layer; space does not have to be narrow or small to feel suffocating for the characters. They are the ones who determine however constricted they feel in specific spatial arrangements, and what level of impact a place has upon their individual. Space can thus be construed as a more abstract reality that engulfs the individual and catapults it into a battle with their negative, existential emotions.

This theme takes on an ambiguous nature in Gao’s text. So far, the enclosed space has been analyzed in terms of an open area eliciting the feeling of confinement due to the connotations attached to it. However, the enclosed space can be demarcated as an entanglement of bodies who inflict pressure and restrict each other. Throughout the play, the characters remain next to one another, both in physical and emotional proximity. Especially in the beginning, they develop a relationship that relies solely on the arrangement of their physical proximity; they must form a perfect queue to get on the bus:

OLD MAN. (angrily): The bus is not going to stop if we all act like this.

MOTHER. Hey, you people in front—please get in line!

GLASSES (TO HOTHEAD). Get in line, get in line! Can’t you hear?

HOTHEAD: What’s the matter with you? After all, I’m in front of you.

MOTHER: There are not that many of us. Wouldn’t it be better if we got on the bus in an orderly fashion?

GLASSES (TO HOTHEAD). You were behind her.

OLD MAN (TO THE SILENT MAN). Ill-bred.

HOTHEAD. You’re well-bred?

MOTHER. Do you think you don’t have to stand in line? (Chen 559)

The verbal annoyance connoted in the dialogue coincides with the bodily annoyance the characters experience, as their dissonance leads to confusion and havoc. They are surrounded by an abundance of space, yet it is the act of gathering in narrower, more enclosed proximity that causes discomfort and triggers negative emotions. If we treat the characters as each other’s enclosed space, then the other remains the same; it is the bus association and what it represents. In this interpretation of the enclosed space, the bodily embroilment that arises serves as a restricting space for each of the characters, through which they must come into confrontation with the other.

Gao therefore transcends the theme and establishes a new manifestation of spatial causality. Van Stralen analyzes enclosed space literally as a narrow or limiting area, yet Gao imbues spatial boundaries with symbolic dimensions. Space can be ample and nevertheless feel constricting, because inside that zone the individual must still confront the other. The way Gao portrays spatial dimensions is not surprising, considering that Chinese drama in the 1980’s offered “a wholly novel approach to the theatrical space that often differentiates it from its modern Western counterpart” (Labedzka 23). Gao shifted the attention from the setting of the play to the action happening within it, highlighting the interaction of actors. This is further validated by Labedzka:

The ways to implement space in Chinese experimental theatre are endless. The more limited the setting and the use of sophisticated machinery, the more scope there is to stimulate the actors’ and spectators’ imaginations. Gao Xingjian was aware of this quite early in his career and he made use of it in his play *The Bus Stop* (Chezhan, 1983) suggesting it should be performed on small stages, in conference halls or in the open air. (23)

Furthermore, Gao frequently discussed the narrative strategies employed by Western playwrights and how they inspired him, while the French post-war modern novel illuminated him with the idea that time and space are not experienced by people as continuity (Labedzka 99), hence the metaphysical dislocation of space. When quoting Michel Butor, Labedzka elaborates that “the space in which we live is not the space described by classical geometry, and the time respective to this space is not the time described by mechanics; we experience both these dimensions only as interrelated fragments” (99). This would in continuation explain why the characters in *Bus Stop* experience time abstractly, and why ten years have lapsedso abruptly in just one scene. Contrary to his Western existentialist counterparts, Gao experimented with spatial and temporal relations and rendered them symbolically on stage, illustrating how they are not always linear, but they can also manifest in fragmentary form.

The negative/absent action

The theme of the negative/absent action is prevalent in literary existentialism and can be detected in absurdist texts as well. It transcends the conventional realist narrative, in which the reader can sometimes predict what actions will take place. With the negative/absent action, the reader experiences the performative absence of an action, where they might have logically expected one (Van Stralen 88). This performative unpredictability is not attributed to authorial recklessness or forgetfulness, but to “a conscious intent” (88). It is frequent for this theme to manifest when the character first encounters their limit situation, which leads to an initial denial of the situation and the negative trigger it produces (88). Thereby, this theme preserves the narrative in an idle state, to examine how the character experiences that dormancy and how they encounter their negative situation.

This is the most dominant and directly applicable theme in *Bus Stop*,as the play circles around dormant waiting that takes time to transform into a conscious action. The characters appear hopeless waiting for buses that never stop to pick them up. The waiting consumes them and places them in an indecisive state that resembles an existential dilemma:

GLASSES. Go or wait? Wait or go? That is the question of our existence. (Chen 573)

It is only until the end of the play that they decide they should follow the paradigm of the Silent Man, abandon the bus stop and head to the city. Up to that point, the reader is confused by where the narrative is heading. The characters continuously ponder over their decision to stay and see if one of the buses will eventually stop and end their existential agony, or whether they should stop relying on circumstantial events and take action in their own hands.

This theme highlights the gravity of the limit situation, the impact of confronting the other and the resolution that engagement brings. The dormancy of the characters indicates the crippling nature of their limit situation. Gao emphasizes the aspect of waiting caused by the bus association by prolongating it, during which the psyches of the characters are illuminated. There is an end to the negative/absent action, which leads to engagement and resembles a narrative climax. It may occur that in some literary existentialist texts, the negative/absent action pervades the text and never reaches the point of a conscious counteraction, yet Gao takes advantage of the prolonged waiting to emphasize the characters’ internal rehabilitation. He interrupts the waiting with activity before the “negative attitude can grow into a way of life, especially where the engagement ends in acceptance or resentment” (Van Stralen 89). The initial, intentional absence of conscious actions is what makes its cessation so impactful and reverberating of the characters’ engagement. They now possess a newfound cognitive capacity with which they confront the other and salvage their freedom from being eradicated. They eventually defy the bus association by refusing to be subjected to any further waiting, and this heralds the commencement and completion of engagement.

3. *The Other Shore*: the play

In this chapter I will analyze why Gao Xinjian’s *The Other Shore* is an existentialist play. I will first provide the historical background and a synopsis of the play before I proceed with previous scholarly research. In sections 3.1 and 3.2, I will examine the play according to Van Stralen’s three semantic topoi and existential themes. The findings will show that the limit situation and the other manifest based on the theory, but none of the characters reach engagement. Due to that fact, the analysis of engagement will not unwind with the same linearity the theory dictates; I will first analyze Man’s failed attempt to engage the Crowd in issues of morality and truth, and then I will proceed by explaining why engagement does not occur. Moreover, the theme of the authentic outsider will apply directly to the play, the enclosed space will apply in the same unique way it did for *Bus Stop* (further validating that Gao produces new critical perspectives on the dimensionality of space), and the negative/absent action will apply contrastingly. Finally, throughout this chapter, I will again highlight Gao’s emphasis on collective values and group dynamics, because it is a trait that sets him apart from literary existentialism.

*The Other Shore* was written by Gao Xingjian in 1986 and, just like *Bus Stop*, it was initially scheduled to be staged by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, yet it faced political controversy and was banned from being produced by Chinese authorities. It is the only one of Gao’s pre-exile plays that has never been staged in Mainland China, which “is somewhat ironic given the fact that Xingjian originally wrote *The Other Shore* as a ‘pure drama’ and as an exercise for actors, and he has steadfastly stated his belief that literature should remain independent and free of political considerations” (Mazzilli 21). *The Other Shore* engages with many themes and elements which are characteristic of Gao’s writing, and highlights issues of collectivism and individualism, which are considered greatly political in the Chinese Communist context (Hacht 195).

The play commences with a group of actors playing with a set of ropes, with the lead actor guiding them through the basics of the game. The game follows a passage to the other shore, where characters are introduced to new physical and emotional dimensions, with dreamlike events and characters appearing and disappearing after interacting with one another. The plot is characterized by “the sequences of exits and entrances that shape the development of the play, which, in turn, does not follow temporal or logical order” (Mazzilli 22). The play is grounded by the interaction between the Man and the Crowd with one another and subsequently with external characters such as the Woman, Card Player, Zen Master, Plaster Seller and others, who enter the stage, engage in dialogue, and then disappear slowly after. It has an episodic nature, and comes to life through a sequence of events, which builds up its rhythm and momentum once it gets closer to the end. The pressing role of the Crowd, Man’s journey to self-discovery amid the collective, and the reduced length of scene units create a climax towards the end: “Exploring longings and exploitative human relations, [the play] shows the gulf between individual sensibility and mass behavior, which swings from desire for leadership to hatred and violence” (Lackner and Chardonnens 58).

The title of the play has led to its analysis through Zen theory, as it refers “to the concept of ‘paramita’ or ‘nirvana,’ the land of enlightenment in Buddhism” (Hacht 194). Song postulates that through *The Other Shore*, Gao initiated his aesthetic experimentation of abstract drama amalgamated with Zen thought, to voice a transcendental concern (77). As Hacht points out, “[a]ccording to Buddhist belief, humans experience an actual visible life full of suffering, but by living according to the virtues of ‘paramita’—morality, patience, meditation and wisdom—they can cross the ‘river of life’ to the other shore and experience enlightenment” (194). To live by the ethics of prajñā paramita, the characters must encounter the adversity of defining what the other shore is, and this constant theme illustrates the surreal ambience that enshrouds them (Mazzilli 23).

The journey of self-discovery, and the conquest of inner peace or “enlightenment” is prevalent in Zen theory, and the stages of reaching enlightenment are reminiscent of the existential voyage described by the three semantic topoi. Firstly, Man enters a deep, core-changing struggle once the group reaches the other shore, which serves as his limit situation. According to Labedzka, the topos of “journey” as a voyage towards cognition and self-recognition is recurring in Gao’s works, both as a symbol of universality and as a structuring mechanism (94), which, in *The Other Shore*, also serves as a transitory phase towards the semantic topos of the limit situation and the grounding of Man in his existential quandary. Secondly, an encounter with the other occurs, revealing the pressuring force Man must confront. Thirdly, the Man gains newfound insight on his individuality and becomes turbulent when trying to enter engagement, because that involves an attempt to preserve his freedom amid the masses.

Man approaches engagement through his interaction with Shadow, which has led Letizia Fusini to produce a tragic reading of the play:

The genesis of what I have re-defined above as the Gaoian ‘tragic mode’ may be traced back to the pre-exile play *The Other Shore* (1986), which ends with the doubling of the character of Man who eventually leaves the stage in a peaceful state of mind, accompanied by the personification of his own consciousness, embodied by the newborn character of Shadow. (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 312)

Fusini analyzes Gao’s play focusing on Man’s individuality as it manifests through internal dialogue. Shadow reflects Man’s inner thoughts and delineates the tragic struggles of the self lucidly and vividly. Fusini claims that this dramatist technique avails the “final *sparagmos* of the protagonist’s identity” (312), which “is presented as the outcome of a lengthy and rocky dramatic process aimed at achieving self-knowledge” (312). Although according to tragic theory Man eventually reaches catharsis because he dissociates from the masses that cause his tragedy, based on literary existential theory this event defines his failure of achieving engagement.

The ways in which the play has been read as Zen or tragic are similar to an existential interpretation. Just like the Man strives for “enlightenment” (according to Zen theory) or “self-knowledge” (based on a tragic reading), this thesis utilizes the existential term “engagement” to describe Man’s efforts for inward rehabilitation.

3.1 Revisiting *The Other Shore* as an existentialist play: the three semantic topoi

The starting point of analysis regards the characters’ transferring to the other shore. Initially, the actors are playing a game with ropes, under the lead actor’s guidance. They gradually enter their roles as the characters they portray, and under the lead of the main actor, abandon their place to cross the waters onto the other shore. There, the surrounding environment is completely new to them, and their strenuous journey has left them tired and bewildered. What enhances the importance of their bewilderment is their initial zeal to cross the water in hopes of a better, more promising place:

ACTORS. (One after another.) Yes, to the other shore! To the other shore! The other shore! To the other shore! To the other shore! The other shore! (Fong 47, 48)

Their disappointment after reaching the other shore soon starts to build up, with the characters realizing that the nature of things is not as they expected:

[ACTORS]. This is a ditch of dead water. There’s only oblivion. (50)

Meanwhile, Gao portrays the new emotional state of the characters through the stage directions as well:

Bewildered, the Crowd slowly walk out of the dead water. Music is faintly heard. The Crowd gradually reach the shore and lie down totally exhausted on the ground. (50)

The first scene functions as the preface that impels the characters into the limit situation. Just like in every literary existentialist text, and in *Bus Stop*, the play commences with the portrayal of a situation that bewilders the characters. Afterwards, as Van Stralen writes, “there often follows an event, not construed by the individual, i.e., an illness, a political attack... which thoroughly alters his circumstances” (75). This forms the limit situation to which the characters are subjected. The event that takes place as the limit situation in this narrative is not a political attack nor a war, but the journey and arrival at the other shore. Fusini further validates the use of this semantic topos by Gao in *The Other Shore* by stating that he includes twentieth-century existentialist structures “to portray characters ‘in situation’, that is, in agonizing circumstances, which generally revolve around a deep identity crisis” (“Towards a Theatre of the Tragic” 303).

There are palpable ramifications that manifest after their arrival, which illustrate that “the situation has acquired a threatening character” (75); their memory is hazy and their linguistic capacities disrupted. This occurs at the same time the Woman appears, a mysterious presence who tries to restore everyone back to their normal state. Her contribution validates the Crowd’s crestfallen psychological state, as she tries to restore their memory and teach them language:

Woman appears in darkness. Like a strand of light mist, she walks around to inspect the people who have lost their memories. She drifts among them, touching and waking them up one by one. They lazily open their eyes and look up, turning their bodies and staring at her. They try to speak but in vain. (Fong 50)

Their bewilderment is so intense, that their speech appears infant-like:

WOMAN. This is a hand.

CROWD. (Still mumbling.) Th…The…This…ee…ha…han…hand.

WOMAN. Hand—

CROWD. Hand—band—sand—hand—

WOMAN. This is a foot.

CROWD. Th…Th…This…ee…fo…foo…foot. (50)

Apart from the hindrance of speech, the characters appear to have a distorted perception of their identity; their inability to perceive the function of personal pronouns is indicative of this. Therefore, the Woman also engages in little games with them, which help the Crowd reorient in their current reality:

WOMAN. Say, me—

CROWD. Say me say me say me say me say me!

WOMAN. (Shakes her head and points to herself, from her eyes to her mouth, and from her body to her feet.) Me.

WOMAN. (Together at last.) Me.

WOMAN. Good!

…

([S]he points at one person among the crowd.) You.

CROWD. (All pointing at the person.) You! (Fong 51)

The character of the Woman is significant in an existential analysis of the play due to her multi-layered role. She is defined by a certain duality in the limit situation: even though she helps the characters achieve reorientation through language, her mysterious presence appears hypnotizing and disorienting; she resembles a siren that uses her song to seduce the shipwrecked and command them to her wish. In the first interpretation of the Woman, she helps the characters reflect on their limit situation and achieve reorientation, whereas, based on the second one, she could be one of the first manifestations of the other. Due to Woman’s eventual annihilation by the Crowd and the latter representing the masses, in this thesis the Crowd will be designated as the other and not the Woman.

The outcomes of the limit situation are not frequently so palpable and salient in other existentialist texts, as they are in *The Other Shore*. The “sensation of being mortal/finite or the realization that one has been thrown into the world” (Van Stralen 75) often develop more gradually and subtly. The impact of the limit situation typically envelops negative existential emotions such as fear, shame or nausea and leads the characters to existential monologues or dialogues. Nevertheless, apart from all that, *The Other Shore* portrays characters who are so pressurized by the limit situation, that they project a distorted version of their identity and cannot utilize language. Gao thus maximizes the effects of the limit situation by saliently and vividly delineating the characters’ existential dislocation.

The Other

The characters’ confrontation with the Other segues, which makes the limit situation even more pressuring. The other manifests as one of the core barriers the characters – and particularly Man – face once they reach the other shore and it enhances the limit situation’s effect because of its elusive nature. The characters cannot exactly pinpoint it, and that makes it hard to confront. An outcome of this is that the Woman is misconstrued as the other, which results to her death.

The assassination of Woman by the Crowd results in the distinction between Man as the existential protagonist and Crowd as his other, which “can pressurize the world of the individual – in existential thinking – either alone or collectively” (Van Stralen 76). This is deduced because Man appreciates Woman’s benevolence and achieves reorientation, whereas the Crowd grows belligerent against her:

[THE CROWD]. You’re snaky, you teach us words so that you can talk to our men and seduce them!

You may look so kind and gentle, but who knows if you’re a whore or not?

She’s trying to seduce our husbands! (Fong 53)

The Crowd develop a more hostile attitude once they start assimilating the function of pronouns. They use that knowledge to operate within a collective apparatus, which is further evident by the lack of diverse characters and the fusion of multiple voices into one. What is important about this scene, however, is that the other wishes to eliminate the Woman because she is the source of knowledge and truth:

(Woman draws back as the Crowd surrounds her from all sides. They are excited by their own increasingly venomous language. She cannot escape from the stares of the Crowd, so she turns to Man for help and hangs on to him.)

…

(The Crowd drag her away from Man and jump on her. In the confusion they strangle her to death. When Man pushes his way into the Crowd and shakes her body, there is no response.)

(Witnessing this, the Crowd is stunned.) (53, 54)

Yeung verifies that it is “after this episode that the Other for Man is established as all other people who threaten his autonomy” (148), meaning primarily the Crowd. Despite their insertion into the limit situation, Man manages to maintain unclouded judgment, whereas the Crowd are confused by the new reality. This haziness instigates their unanimous actions; their inability to handle their negative, existential emotions instigates their seeking comfort in collective power dynamics. Their individuality is thus effaced, and they are victims of mob mentality.

On the other hand, Man perceives and treats the Woman differently. He acknowledges her helping role in the new frantic environment, and seeks comfort in her presence:

MAN. (To Woman.) You’re so kind. (Fong 53)

He tries to protect her against the hostile Crowd but fails. He also experiences confusion and negative existential emotions, yet he does not mis-target them towards the Woman. He acknowledges the gifts she bears for the group, and her contribution to his reorientation.

The above analysis delineates the relations between the characters that exist from the beginning till the end of the play, Man and the Crowd. The principal manifestation of the other is the Crowd themselves and the impact they have on Man and each other. The Man comprehends the sinister dynamics of the large mob and chooses to distance himself from them:

CROWD. What do you think we should do? We need a leader, a flock of sheep also needs a leader. We’ll follow you.

MAN. I detest you, I detest myself. It’s better for us to go our separate ways.

CROWD. No, don’t abandon us. We’ve made up our mind to follow you, and you want to leave us? (56)

The murder of the Woman functions as an awakening, and “the protagonist gains insight into the break between existence and values: his specific problem becomes clear to him, but there are no suitable solutions for his unique situation. The most essential outcome of the awakening is the insight that the other... has power over the hazardous situation and can often be accused of being the cause of this” (Van Stralen 76). Man is now aware of both his limit situation and the other, and is called upon making a choice.

Engagement

In literary existentialism, engagement is a tripartite stage which heralds the completion of the existential protagonist’s awakening and their newfound freedom with which they re-enter the masses (Van Stralen 76). In *The Other Shore*,engagement will fail to apply directly to the plot because Man escapes the masses, which occurs during the first stage. I will examine why this occurs in Gao’s text and what information there is to be elicited.

Apart from re-entering the masses, in the first stage the existential protagonist also strives to preserve his individuality by criticizing or abstaining from being associated with the un-awakened mob (Van Stralen 76). Since Man eventually does not re-enter the masses and exits the scene, I will first focus on the criticism he targets towards the Crowd. The criticism of the immoral by Man takes place once the Card Player appears. The latter challenges everyone to a rigged game of cards, with the losers having to degrade themselves by sticking pieces of paper on their face. Everyone from the Crowd frivolously indulge in the game. Man, however, figures out the Card Player’s tricks and does not participate, instructing the Crowd to abstain as well:

MAN. Don’t you understand? You’re not really playing cards, he’s playing a trick on you. You can’t win. Your card, yours, and yours are all no trumps, including all the cards still in the deck. The only spade in the deck is in his hand! (Card Player giggles.) (Fong 62)

Usually, the awakened character in the first stage of engagement just critiques the immorality of the un-awakened masses, however, Man also tries to re-direct the Crowd’s clouded judgment towards the path of morality:

OBEDIENT GIRL. [W]hy did you say it was a no trump?

MAN. I think it should be…

OBEDIENT GIRL. But what should be is not necessarily the truth.

CARD PLAYER. You’re a loser because you’re a pighead. What do you mean by “should be”? It either is or isn’t. To hell with “should be.”

MAN. But why can’t we have “should be”? (Fong 65)

Man is insistent on actively engaging everyone in issues of morality and truth, even when it seems like a lost cause.

Man’s attempt highlights Gao’s emphasis on collective values. Literary existentialism generally focuses on the individual’s journey of freedom or self-actualization, nonetheless Gao reframes these qualities as outcomes that can emerge in a collective context. His focus on the collective can be justified because, as Hacht points out, “Thematically, the play addresses issues of collectivism and individualism—themes that Xingjian has addressed throughout his career, and ones that are considered to be highly political in the Communist Chinese context” (195). Yeung also affirms that *The Other Shore* is“a story about an individual negotiating his relationship with the collective” (102), while further claiming that Gao’s pre-exile plays place stress on the individual as a constituent of the general structure of the masses, with “the wish to fit into the collective and to contribute to the collective welfare” (101). Gao’s rendering of individual identity in collective contexts enriches the concept of existentialism with critical commentary on the interaction between the two.

The failed attempt of Man to reach engagement by re-entering the masses is substantiated by the gradual resignation to his existential crisis, and that becomes evident when Shadow appears. As a character, Shadow represents Man’s inner monologue. It follows him around, replying to his own thoughts and critiquing passive Man on his choices:

[SHADOW.] You seemed to feel that you were Jesus Christ, that you were the loneliest person, the only person who was suffering in this world. You felt that you were pervaded by the spirit of self-sacrifice, even though you were not sure for whom you would be sacrificing yourself.

…

SHADOW. In fact it is nothing more than a kind of self-pity. You are unwilling to end like this, you are so vain. (Exits.) (Fong 80, 81)

It appears as if Man’s consciousness is attacking him, rather than producing critique. As Van Stralen writes, the character at this point of self-reflection should be ‘sadder but wiser’, adapting more easily to his surroundings and replacing his existential pain with authenticity (77). Engagement does not occur because the pain mentioned by Van Stralen is in this case transformative; it leads Man to indulging in his existential ire and being overtaken by it. The inner reflection incarnated as Shadow has proven noxious for Man’s preservation of the self, and it will conclude with Man exiting the masses emotionally paralyzed.

The end of the play concludes Man’s evasion of social re-integration, with him choosing self-annihilation instead. This becomes evident when Shadow reappears; it leads the way for Man to exit the scene. He shows no opposition, no denial, and follows in a calm, silent way:

Man: (Weakly.) Who are you?

Shadow: Your heart.

(As the Crowd watch the drooping, blind, and deaf heart slouching past them, Shadow quietly drags Man away.) (Fong 82)

Man’s confrontation with the other leads to a defeated renunciation of society and the masses. This consolidates the misapplication of engagement because if the existential character is “to opt for isolation, then this decision implies fear of every other who seeks contact lovingly or inimically” (Van Stralen 81). Man’s awakening after encountering the limit situation and the other has alienated him, and the achieving of an existential catharsis collapses. His silent exit from the scene is symbolic of his self-annihilation; by not re-establishing his relation to the masses, Man consciously condemns himself to the perpetuation of his existential crisis.

With Man’s relinquishment, Gao illustrates that the confrontation with the other is not always successful and engagement may not follow through because of the struggle between the individual and the collective. He juxtaposes individualism and collectivism by demonstrating the struggles of the individual (even in the post-awakening phase) trying to reenter the collective. The stages of engagement can teach the existential protagonist the ways of preserving their identity in the chaotic collective, yet in Gao’s text the awakening leads to an existentialist pessimism, with the main character choosing self-annihilation instead of social re-integration.

3.2 Existential Themes in *The Other Shore*

This section will discuss the application of the existential themes on *The Other Shore*. I will analyze the following points: i. the theme of the authentic outsider applies perfectly to the play, ii. the enclosed space applies uniquely to the play, in the same way it did in *Bus Stop*, and iii. the negative/absent action manifests in contradiction to existential theory. The direct application of the first theme will strengthen my argument that *The Other Shore* is an existential play, whereas the enclosed space will foreground Gao’s different existential interpretation of the dimensionality of space. Lastly, I will explain how the nature of the negative/absent action and its contrasting adaptation by Gao share a common denominator, that of the defining action.

The Authentic Outsider

To recapitulate, the theme of the authentic outsider, according to Van Stralen, involves the centering of the narrative around characters who have evaded the bourgeois, essentialist morale; prostitutes, criminals, vagrants, thieves etc. are some of the authentic outsiders often seen in the literary existentialist works of J.P. Sartre and Albert Camus (85). The pressurization of the limit situation leads the outsider into developing psychic problems, while the confrontation with the other leads them to the thought of succumbing to it (85). Authentic outsiders are characterized by their criticism towards un-awakened people, and through their perpetual battle with the “immoral other”, they strive to preserve their moral purity and their authentic freedom (85). Finally, it is essential that the authentic outsider do not “become detached from the (human) world, but that he [try] to come to authentic behaviour in the midst of the community. Moreover, he will try to engage his fellow man in his moral striving” (85).

In the episodic nature of the play, with multiple characters and events unravelling constantly, I designated Man as the main character, as he is present almost throughout the play and his character development is crucial in the analysis of the three semantic topoi. He is an authentic outsider because he is setting himself against corrupt ethics even when he must suffer through the process. This suffering entails the preservation of his moral purity. He is never afraid to critique the relation dynamics unraveling among him. Even though he came against a mob goaded by the devious Card Player and his rigged game of cards, he strived to maintain his moral compass and establish the truth. There were times that his confrontation with the other had him sacrifice his ethics and his freedom; during the game, Man initially expresses that all the cards are no trumps and that the game is rigged, until he starts reconsidering due to peer pressure:

[CARD PLAYER]. Tell me, was it spades or a no trump?

MAN. I think…that’s still a no trump.

CARD PLAYER. You’re no fun, you make people miserable. Tell me, people, is this guy bad or what?

…

OBEDIENT GIRL. (Takes pity on Man.) You can’t turn a spade into a no trump. What’s with you? Please, try to take hold of yourself.

MAN. Maybe it was really a spade… (Fong 63-65)

The pressure eventually gets to him and he collapses on the floor:

MAN. It…seemed…like a…sp…

CROWD. (Beating their chests and stamping their feet.) Speak up!

Louder! Can’t hear you! You’ve got to clear this up!

MAN. Sp…Spa…It’s spades…

(On his knees and collapses.) [65]

His collapse is indicative of his surrender to immorality; the moment he strays away from his path, this produces direct, physical consequences on his body, making the transition even more lucid.

The Mad Woman is another authentic outsider because she appears as a social pariah in the text. The moment she enters the scene, she is targeted by the Crowd and must face their threats:

MAD WOMAN. (Approaching Young Man.) They say I’m a whore, but they didn’t say anything when they sneaked into my bed to sleep with me. They say I’m bad as if they haven’t been bad before, as if they haven’t had fun with a woman’s body before!

…

[CROWD.] Here comes the mad woman.

The mad woman’s here!

The mad woman’s here!

MAD WOMAN: You’re mad! (Fong 70, 71)

The role of the Man Woman in the play displays a core irony. She is the opposite of mad, she is the carrier of reason and truth, and that is what scares the Crowd and makes her an instant target. Normally, the narrative is shaped from the perspective of the authentic outsider, however, with the brief appearance of the Mad Woman, the narrative shifts towards the perspective of the other. The reader witnesses the other feel in jeopardy because of the authentic outsider and obliged to eliminate the threatening source. The Crowd know that the Mad Woman can expose their lies, hence their baptizing her “mad” and invalidating her critique:

MAD WOMAN. Why? You’re scared because I’ll tell on you, right? You’re hiding something, aren’t you? Right, keep away from me, as far away as you can. I know exactly what’s going on in those shitty little heads of yours. (Snickers.)

MEN IN CROWD. Take her away! Take her away!

(Women in the Crowd come forward to drag Mad Woman away.) (71-72)

The Mad Woman is an authentic outsider because she criticizes the Crowd on matters of truth and morality, even if she is in a disadvantageous position. She attempts to engage the Crowd in her “moral striving” but, eventually, she loses the battle:

(The Crowd move forward to tie up Mad Woman with ropes and gag her mouth. Crying and wailing, she becomes hysterical, but is finally dragged away by the Crowd.) (72)

Both Man and Mad Woman are authentic outsiders due to their journey of moral preservation and imparting ethical values. What differentiates them, however, is the nature of their fight with the other. The Mad Woman’s confrontation has a short-lived character. She may be annihilated by the Crowd, but her appearance is impactful and incarnates irony. The Man, on the other hand, displays his authentic nature through a more perpetual struggle with the other, which eventually leads to conscious detachment from the collective.

The enclosed space and spatial causality

The analysis of *The Other Shore* through the theme of the enclosed space will be reminiscent of the analysis of *Bus Stop*. I will explore how Gao molds the theme by structuring the confinement of space as a metaphysical modality. Since this theme is modified in both case studies in the same way, analysis can be used as proof that Gao’s work expands existentialism by introducing new literary discourse.

As aforementioned, the theme of the enclosed space is predominant in literary existentialism; events are usually staged within the confines of prison cells, cellars, train carriages, or even hell, limited areas in which the character is thrown into confrontation with the other or conversation with themselves (Van Stralen 85). The confining nature of the area sublimates the restriction imposed by the other. The dynamics surfacing within that enclosed space are so powerful “that the reader gets the impression that the world as *a whole* is experienced as an enclosed space by the character” (86). Thereby, the enclosed space functions as a friction or *rift* between limitation and freedom.

The play deviates from a direct application of this theme because the staging directions imply an open space:

(The play can be performed in a theatre, a living room, a rehearsal room, an empty warehouse, a gymnasium, the hall of a temple, a circus tent, or any empty space as long as the necessary lighting and sound equipment can be properly installed. Lighting can be dispensed with if the play is performed during the day. The actors may be among the audience, or the audience among the actors. The two situations are the same and will not make any difference to the play.) (Fong 43)

The area must be ample enough for the actors to interact with each other and with the audience. Therefore, the feeling of confinement needs to be mediated in a different way.

Early in the play, we detect a group of actors engaging in rope games. This scene reveals how the power dynamics will be orchestrated throughout the play. Being interconnected by the ropes, the actors experience the implications of spatial causality by affecting and being affected by others. They do not flow freely in the area, as they always experience the impact of performing an action and receiving a counteraction; they form a cluster of codependent interactions:

[ACTOR PLAYING WITH ROPES]. Okay, I want you to take hold of this end of the rope. You see, this way a relationship is established between us. Before that you were you and I was I, but with this rope between us we’re tied to each other and it becomes you and I. Let’s try running in opposite directions. See, now you’re pulling me, but then again I’m also holding you back, like two locusts tied to the same string, neither of us can get away from each other. (Fong 45)

The ropes become the device that tethers the characters into a web. The game with the ropes initiates the chaotic entanglement of bodies in a confined space.

The Crowd functions as the enclosed space that constricts Man and impels him to confront the other within that confinement. Since I designated the Crowd as both other and the enclosed space that catapults the main character into a confrontation with the other, this makes the other and the enclosed space – in this case – one and the same. This duality attests to the pressuring force of the Crowd even more and highlights the efforts of Man to transcend limitations and achieve freedom. It also conveys that the mob of people comprising the Crowd is the world experienced as an enclosed space by the Man.

The entanglement of Man in the mass restricts him into an inescapable confrontation:

(Speaking to the shadowy Crowd.) Why do you keep following me? I need some peace and quiet, I need to be alone! I don’t need to be stared at by a crowd, I don’t need you, just as you don’t need me. (58)

No matter where he wishes to go, the mob of people keeps following him, confused and erratic. They form his psychological and territorial boundaries: he has no mental space to exist freely and no physical space to move uninterrupted.

The enclosed space instigates discussion between the character and their own self. That occurs when Shadow appears, which serves as Man’s inner monologue; it inaugurates Man’s self-reflection. Therefore, there are three main entities that finally consummate the theme of the enclosed space; the Man as the character imprisoned in the enclosed space, the Crowd forming the enclosing space by confining him in their web of bodies, the Crowd as the other, and the Shadow as the inner monologue that emerges through the confrontation with the other.

The theme of the enclosed space illustrates how Gao manufactures spatial structures with allegorical extensions. The limitations imposed by the physical, concrete boundaries of space can also be imposed by an entanglement of bodies. Gao presents people and their codependent dynamics as an entrapping ground and as a catalyst to how freely or unrestrictedly one can move in physical reality. Just like in *Bus Stop*, *The Other Shore* remodifies the concept of space to display how layered or diverse the portrayal of spatial confinement can be. Moreover, as it was mentioned in 1.3, the enclosed space is structured differently by Gao because of the absurdist elements found in existentialism; the distorted spatial dimensions grounded in a non-realistic narrative lead to a metaphysical dislocation. Gao’s amalgamation of existential and absurdist elements in his structuring of space represents a Gaoist-inflected existentialism.

Negative/Absent action and the episodic nature of the play

The negative/absent action theme fails to apply directly to *The Other Shore*, but it illustrates Gao’s emphasis on the effects of the limit situation and the other. As a theme, its basis relates to the non-performance of an action or activity, at a point where the reader may reasonably expect one (Van Stralen 88). The theme is often detected “at the moment that the limit situation makes its entry in the life of the character and when he/she—in terms of existentialism—refuses to face up to the seriousness of the situation or declines to confront the altered circumstances adequately” (88). The theme’s intentional non-performance of an action will be correlated to the rapid, ongoing sequence of actions in *The Other Shore*.

The core of analysis in this sub-section relies on the factor of “undesirability” which the continuous absence of an action produces. Since the non-performance of actions does not take place in the play and there is a perpetual depiction of multiple actions, rapidly introduced one after another, the theme is reversed and fulfills the same purpose contrariwise. What the constant non-performance of an action and the constant performance of multiple actions have in common is the desire for a *defining* action; a meaningful event produced by the existential character which aligns the trajectory of the narrative towards a logical result.

Both the absence of actions in literary existential texts and the rapid introduction of actions in *The Other Shore* purposefully produce a narrative chaos to confuse the reader and make engagement unattainable. Both cases highlight the tormenting character of the limit situation and the other; they display how the road to engagement does not manifest in a linear pattern and, if the existential individual does not take action, this can grow into negative dormancy. Then, as Van Stralen mentions, dormancy “can grow into a way of life, especially where the engagement ends in acceptance or resentment and where not making a choice is chosen as a way of life” (89). The passivity of not making a choice and not producing a conscious action are common in the play. Despite the multiple events that take place Man remains in dormancy, striving to confront the other but failing and eventually exiting the scene. It is only until Man completely detaches himself from the Crowd and removes himself from the scene that he produces a defining action. However, despite finally producing a conscious, defining action, Man still fails to enter engagement, because he does not re-enter the masses. Since there is a direct correlation between the semantic topos of engagement and the negative/absent action, it can be assumed that the latter fails to apply directly to the play because the former does too.

Although this theme does not apply to the play, Gao has produced a subversive interpretation which instigates the same emotional response, both from the readers and Man. The rapid sequence of events still has the reader waiting for a defining action/event that offers meaning to the chaotic, episodic nature of the play, while it also highlights the effects of the limit situation and the other on the existential protagonist. In the rapid sequence of events, dormancy still prevails throughout the character’s existential crisis, and the reader awaits engagement to occur.

4. Conclusion

The analysis affirms that Gao Xingjian’s *Bus Stop* and *The Other Shore* are existential plays. The literary theory utilized to achieve this conclusion – the three semantic topoi and the existential themes – indicates that Gao forms structures that are identical, contrasting, or uniquely dissimilar to literary existentialism. The identical applications of the topoi or the themes suggest that the plays are, in fact, part of an existential framework, whereas the indirect or contrasting application of theory presents existential discourses found in Gao’s dramaturgy that can modify the Eurocentric character of the concept with Gaoist-inflected existential ideas.

The tripartite theory of the semantic topoi applies perfectly in *Bus Stop* and almost perfectly in *The Other Shore*. Their point of divergence is the topos of engagement, the final stage in the existential character’s self-reflective journey. Even though in *Bus Stop* the characters are ultimately able to re-enter the masses with a new-found perspective on the world and a re-established view on freedom, *The Other Shore* does not portray Man having found equilibrium between the existential personal and the inimical societal. Instead, there is a complete resignation to his existential crisis following his awakening, which does not allow the character to re-enter the masses and leads him to self-annihilation.

The failure of the existential protagonist to complete engagement, as well as the contrasting application of the theme of the negative/absent action, could indicate that *The Other Shore* is not an existential play. However, the vivid representations of the self and the other in a saliently delineated limit situation suffice to define the play as existential literature. This is further corroborated by Van Stralen, who indicates that “The semantic field ‘the other’ is undoubtedly the central topic in existentialist literature” (Van Stralen 82). Additionally, by not portraying Man in engagement, Gao foregrounds the negative existential emotions stemming from the encounter with the limit situation and the other. Finally, the direct application of the authentic outsider theme and the reimagined version of the enclosed space also substantiate that *The Other Shore* is an existential play.

If we are to reimagine Van Stralen’s book with a chapter on Gao, first there should be a section explaining Gao’s emphasis on the collective. Literary existentialist theory pinpoints the relation between the self and the other, the individual and the collective, yet it does not analyze the reconstitution of individual freedom through synergistic endeavors. In *Bus Stop*, the characters counter the limit situation and the other by helping each other enter engagement; they make sure that no one remains subjected to the alienation imposed by the bus association, and head towards the city center together. In *The Other Shore*, Man tries to activate the Crowd’s moral compass and lead them to a path of self-righteousness, even if this eventually leads to his self-annihilation. The comparison of the two analyses showcases that in the first instance, the assimilation of the individual into the collective leads everyone to engagement, whereas in the second instance it leads Man to detachment from the masses and failure to enter engagement.

A second defining characteristic found in Gao’s existentialism is the dimensionality of space, as showcased by the application of the enclosed space theme. Space becomes an abstract concept because Gao imbues physical boundaries with symbolic dimensions. Both plays portray open-air spaces in which the characters feel entrapped because they attach themselves to each other, and as a web of bodies they individually experience the effect of producing an action and receiving a counteraction. There is emphasis on the confining character of social entanglement and the effect of the other on the existential characters. As a result, space can be ample and nevertheless feel constricting, because inside that zone the individual must still confront the other. With the exploration of spatial causality, the plays delineate that space is not always experienced by the existential characters through classic geometry or as continuity, but as a metaphysical dimension with distorted boundaries.

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1. Out of the four existential themes and the two existential characteristics indicated in the book, I chose these three themes because Van Stralen designates them as the most predominant in existential literature, whereas the motives not included in the analysis do not surface as frequently. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This information is extracted from Letizia Fusini’s *From Politics to Poetics: An Exploratory Study of Gao Xingjian’s Tragic Aesthetics in Escape*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is derived from Izabella Labedzka’s *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre: From the Word to the Image*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is extracted from Hans van Stralen’s *Choices and Conflicts: Essays on Literature and Existentialism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moreover, the setting of *The Other Shore* is metaphysical because it feels as if there are strange powers suffused with the other shore. The characters lose their capacity for speech and their memories, which are both bestowed to them by the dream-like presence of Woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is taken from several pages of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, which was translated by Hazel E. Barnes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sartre. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The connection between Gao and Sartre on aspects of freedom and individuality has also been briefly examined by Sy Ren Quah in *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theatre* (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sartre. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sartre. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This hypothesis is derived from pages of Harry H. Kuoshu’s *Will Godot Come by Bus or through a Trace? Discussion of a Chinese Absurdist Play.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)