CHAPTER THREE

NEW NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Early Attempts: From Didactic Drama to the Theatre of Imagination

Alarm Signal (Juedui xinhao), The Bus Stop (Chezhan) and Wild Man (Yeren), written by Gao Xingjian in the years 1982–1985, heralded changes in the history of modern Chinese drama, and were held in high esteem by several professional critics as well as average theatre-goers. In the early 1980s, Gao's plays were accepted as the most advanced of the time, but they were soon followed by other works which proved just as attractive.

The formal innovation of Alarm Signal, one of Gao Xingjian's earlier plays, was overshadowed by its slightly irritating didactic tone, although it showed the first signs of the techniques which were used and modified in his later plays. Alarm Signal seemed to be quite a stereotypical story about the young generation of Chinese people who felt lost in post-revolutionary reality; they had no opportunities to obtain an education in their early youth, and afterwards they had no work, so they lived day by day, with no prospects for the future and no hope. This type of subject matter was common in literature at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. In Gao Xingjian's play, however, the frequently used plot acquired the structure of a modern morality play, featuring the 'Everyman' who is the young unemployed Blacky, the 'Angel' impersonated by the Conductor who delivers speeches on the essence of work and responsibility, and the 'Devil' of the fin-de-siècle—the Train Robber who tries to persuade Blacky that he should rebel against the merciless world and strict standards of decency.

According to Gao, the plot of Alarm Signal was not built and understood in the traditional manner, nor did the play aim to tell a story. However, it was consistent and transparent, so that one could easily spot the starting point of the plot and subsequent stages in its development.

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1 Gao Xingjian, "Dai Juedui xinhao yanchu de jidian jianyi" (Some suggestions on the stage production of Alarm Signal), in Gao Xingjian, Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu (In search of modern theatre), Beijing 1988: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, p. 87.
until its culmination—when one of the characters had to make a moral choice—and its dissolution. The correctness of the dramatic structure consisted in the ability to suspend the plot; the play is like a good detective story;² because the audience does not know what decision will be taken by the main character until the very last moment. Gao opined that the relationships between the dramatis personae were more important than the plot. The main task of the stage director and actors was to understand this relationship and to place it in the appropriate theatrical activity. For this reason, the playwright suggested that proper rehearsals with the text should be preceded by etudes of dialogues improvised by actors, in order to make them understand the circumstances.³ Although, according to the playwright's stage directions, he was more interested in presenting a psychological motivation for the character's actions than in telling an interesting, thrilling story with a deep moral sense, Alarm Signal differed also from a typical psychological drama. Gao Xingjian noted that one should not search for meanings hidden between the lines, but one should rather focus on the adequate translation of thought processes onto individual activities on stage.⁴

The plot seems to be linear and the impression of coherence is strengthened by situating it in a train compartment which travels towards a certain destination—a place where an offence is committed. The motive of travel plays the important function of merging together the dramatic structure, but it also affects the way in which the characters exist on stage. The topos of a journey, as a road to cognition and self-recognition is recurrent in Gao’s works, not only as a universal symbol with comprehensive contents, but also as an important technique for structuring the text. The structure of his novel Soul Mountain is also based on the very motive of journey in the literal sense of the word, understood as travelling through space, and in the symbolic sense, as a journey within oneself. Gao writes:

I am on a journey—life. Life, good or bad, is a journey and wallowing in my imagination I travel into my inner mind with you who are my reflection. The perennial and perplexing question of what is most important

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⁴ Ibid. p. 88.