

Representation of Self, Landscape and Ethnography of the Yangtze Valley in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*

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ABSTRACT: Gao Xingjian, Chinese Nobel Laureate in Literature is known for his highly innovative narrative style and whose creative use of language “undoubtedly place him in the forefront of world literature” (Tam vii). His fiction *Soul Mountain* (2000) depicts an introspective journey in the early 80s into the remote mountains and ancient forests of Sichuan in southwest China. On his long journey as a political refugee from Beijing, Gao Xingjian employs the strategy of storytelling to disperse his loneliness, and at the same time narrates the impact of the Cultural Revolution on both the human and physical ecology of China. The search for true life in *Soul Mountain* becomes an attempt to return to the authentic life, which the protagonist finds in the folk songs of the ethnic tribes such as the Qiang and the Miao. The novel explores the environmental landscape of the Yangtze valley that connects human/spirit dwelling places, including forests, mountains, rivers and streams. Folktales, myths, oral histories, ballads, ritual incantations and ordinary stories of daily life all invoked in real or imagined detail the spatial positioning of a community of people. The paper seeks to examine the intertwining aspects of physical environment and analyse how literature can provoke environmental reflection by expanding preconceived understandings of the non-human environment as a dimension of personal and communal sense of place. Further it seeks to bring out a better understanding of the intertwined aspects of landscape and the self in ethnographic representation and its depiction in *Soul Mountain*. The novel contains numerous references to Chinese myths and symbols that make a strong connection between the places visited on the journey and the entrenched Chinese cultural traditions behind the landscape. The Yangtze valley is always read like a text with cultural and literary meaning embedded by the narrator in his search for cultural memories.

Keywords: Ethnography, Self, Landscape, non-human, Yangtze valley,

Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* is an autobiographical novel in its depiction of the story of a wandering man who takes a journey in search of the self and its relation to the collective. It is a journey with a two-fold structure—a physical journey in the real world alongside a spiritual one in the realm of imagination. The novel depicts the “I” narrator's travel along the Yangtze River valley and the “you” narrator's highly symbolic spiritual journey in search of *Lingshan*. The thematic substance of *Soul Mountain* may be traced to two traumatic and interrelated events in Gao Xingjian's life: his being targeted for criticism at a time when the memory of the persecution of writers during the Cultural Revolution was still palpable, and his being wrongly diagnosed as having lung cancer. Gao Xingjian's close encounter with death had dislodged many forgotten fragments of his past and he recaptures these as well as his emotional experience of confronting death in his novel. It traces a five month journey of the protagonist from Beijing to Sichuan province and from there followed the Yangtze River to the coast. There are eighty-one chapters and each chapter is about the individual's experience, material or psychological, in one place or at one time. Gao Xingjian in “Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*” makes the following observation:

In order to write it, I made three trips to the Yangtze River during 1983 and 1984, the longest of which was a journey of fifteen thousand kilometres. I have wandered along the Yangtze, from the giant panda reserve that is the home of the Qiang people right down to where it meets the China Sea, and from folk customs and practices I have returned to urban life. (103).

While the narrator travels mostly in the southern and southwestern hinterland of China, he also carries out a psychological journey within his inner world, seeking the symbolic and elusive goal of reaching the place called Soul Mountain. There is a rich description of the geographical features of that region, the scenery and ethnography of the Yangtze valley. The 1500 kilometers journey in *Soul Mountain* takes him to the provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai in the southwest of China and then along the Yangtze River to the provinces of Jiangsu and Jiangxi in the east. For a better understanding of the intertwining aspects of terrain, topography, river

systems biosphere, landscape, place and geography in *Soul Mountain* can be divided into three segments based on the upper, middle and lower courses of the Yangtze River. The Yangtze River is the longest river in both China and Asia. Its basin, "extending for some 3,200 km from west to east and for more than 1,000 km from north to south" (Pletcher 63). From its source on the Plateau of Tibet to its mouth on the East China Sea, the river traverses or serves as the border between ten provinces or regions. The upper course of the Yangtze flows across the Plateau of Tibet and descends through the deep valleys in the mountains east of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. The middle reaches of the Yangtze River is composed of the Jiangnan Plain in Hubei Province, the Dongting Lake Plain in Hunan Province and the Boyang Lake Plain in Jiangxi Province; and the plains in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River is made up of the Chao Lake Plain in Anhui Province and the Yangtze River Delta in Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and Shanghai City. More than three-fourths of the river's course runs through mountains. The Yangtze has eight principal tributaries. On its left bank, from source to mouth, these are the Yalong, Min, Jialing, and Han rivers; those on the right bank include the Wu, Yuan, Xiang, and Gan rivers. The journey in *Soul Mountain* begins from Qinghai Province which comprises the upper course of the Yangtze River and descends deep valleys in the mountainous terrain of the Sichuan and Guizhou Province. The middle course stretches from Sichuan, Guizhou up to the Hubei Province. The lower course of Yangtze River comprises of Hunan, Hubei, Anhui and Zhejiang Province.

Soul Mountain presents the journey of a person trying to come to terms with himself to comprehend the meaning of the world as it relates to him. The novel uses pronouns instead of characters, psychological perceptions instead of plot, and changing emotions to modulate the style. The novel recounts two journeys that are woven together by alternating uses of a "you" and "I". The splitting of the characters makes it possible for him to differentiate his journey across the vast regions of China, from the Tibet plateau to the east coast via the middle valley of the Yangtze River. Chapter 1 of *Soul Mountain* begins with "The old bus is a city reject. After shaking in it for twelve hours on the pot holed highway since early morning, you arrive in this mountain county town in the south" (*Soul Mountain* 1). This is the beginning of a journey in search of a place named *Lingshan*. *Ling* meaning spirit or soul and *Shan* meaning *Mountain* in Chinese, which is located at the source of the You River. The person whom the "you" narrator met in the train tore up his empty cigarette box and drew a map of the route up *Lingshan*. He has no idea as to what kind of a mountain soul mountain is, where it is located and how to reach there, which makes it hard for the readers to decide whether the mountain actually exists or not. The protagonist visits various remote villages, ethnic groups, nature reserves with ancient forests and the giant panda, isolated monasteries and temples, and is witness to ancient folk and shamanistic practices. The book contains large segments of conversations, folk songs and chants, examine how primeval instincts are repressed by civilization and how attempts during the Cultural Revolution to eradicate superstitious practices has been to a large extent superficial. *Soul Mountain* thus presents a series of field researches, enriched with philosophical, historical, and literary meditations. Visits to remote temples and villages, the collecting of local songs and customs, the adaptation of stories and legends, all confer a deliberately composite construction to this ethno text.

The novel presents us with a vision of the habits, customs, occupations and daily manners of the local people. It also leads into an investigation into the religious, moral, social and emotional climates of the society in that area of China. This is the setting that provides the narrator with abundant resources in his search for authentic Chinese folk culture and cultural diversity within Chinese civilization. The novel makes a strong connection between the places visited on the journey and the age-old Chinese cultural heritage behind the landscape. Gao Xingjian is often considered as an exponent of root-seeking literature, a literary movement that began in the early 1980s, has been the most pervasive and influential literary trend in post-Mao Chinese literature. The followers of this school set out "to discover the nation's cultural heritage buried deep in the ancient lands and to examine its implications for the Chinese literary imagination. Soon after, many writers, particularly those who had spent years during the Cultural Revolution in rural China as educated youths, eagerly joined the movement" (Ying 159). China had experienced a period of amnesia, in which the nation's rich past was erased from the collective memory of the Chinese. Gao feels that it is the responsibility of a writer, to help the nation reconnect to its past, to sort out, the cultural roots. Only by doing so, he argued, would Chinese literature be able to "dialogue" (Ying 159) with the rest of the world. In the essay titled "In Search of the Chinese Soul in the Mountains of the South" Kam Louie expresses her view in these words:

Both Gao's novel and the root-seeking school are concerned with individual explorations of and nostalgia for imagined pasts that are incongruent with official histories. These official histories, be they Confucian or Communist, show a China which is centred in the north, with Confucius, Beijing and the Yellow River as prominent cultural symbols. The search for alternative roots, however, took the 1980s writers south, with the poet Qu Yuan, the wilderness of the southwest and the Yangtze River as cultural icons. The sources for this alternative tradition are said to be found in the ancient The Songs of the

South, local gazetteers and the numerous records and tales of the strange found in unofficial writings of the past millennia. (146-47)

Gao Xingjian in his novel explores “environmental landscape” that connects human and spirit dwelling places, including forests, mountains, rivers and streams. Folktales, myths, oral histories, ballads, ritual incantations and ordinary stories of daily life all invoked in real or imagined detail the spatial positioning of a community of people. *Soul Mountain* contains numerous references to Chinese as well as western myths and symbols. The protagonist “I” visits various remote villages, ethnic groups, nature reserves with ancient forests and the giant panda, isolated monasteries and temples, and is witness to ancient folk and shamanistic practices. It also explores the degraded natural environment in south west China. During the journey which covers both human dominated cities and more nature friendly rural areas, the impact of the human interference with the environment is widely observed and severely criticized by the people encountered. The narrator clearly mentions clear cutting of forests, siltation of rivers, and the environmental threat planned by the Three Gorges Dam:

The Min River has turned into a black muddy river but the Yangtze is much worse yet they are going to block off the river and construct a dam in the Three Gorges. (*Soul Mountain* 48)

The author’s ethnological propensity, as shown in *Soul Mountain* proves transgressive in several ways: defending buried minority cultures, which are the casualties of the ravages of dominant culture, protecting individual memory from established historiography, and finally, examining the dark areas of one’s personal past in order to become reconciled with the self. In Chapter 24 there is a long description of an ancient mask. This mask sculpted out of wood, no doubt dating back to the last Imperial Dynasty, and which survived the destruction of the anti-superstition campaigns and of the Cultural Revolution. The narrator found it in the storage rooms of a museum in the southern province of Guizhou, a region inhabited by ethnic minorities. The object excavated has fairly realistic features, with a pair of horns on the top of its head, two sharp fangs pointing up towards its nose, and two eyes with holes in them, giving it a threatening and surprised expression. In all likelihood, it “represents the god who opens the mountain ‘Kaishan’ or the god who opens the road at the beginning of the ritual” (Zhang 25). To the description the narrator adds a rather psychological interpretation of the mask: “This face also accurately expresses the animal nature in human beings and the fear of this animal nature within themselves” (*Soul Mountain* 141). This shocked reaction expresses the growing, sometimes painful awareness of man in self contemplation, as an “understanding of nature and the self is fully encompassed in the round black holes of the eye sockets” (*Soul Mountain* 141). These annotations thus show an attention that transcends the simple ethnological dimension of discovery, making a metaphorical use of it that connects with social relations and the examination of identity.

Landscape here refers to the perceived settings that frame people’s senses of place and community. A place is a socially meaningful and identifiable space to which a historical dimension is attributed. This idea can be illustrated from an episode in *Soul Mountain*. In Chapter 9 there is a story related to the death of a girl who killed herself by drowning in the river. Her body was found thirty li downstream at Xiashapu and later on “Yu Crossing” (*Soul Mountain* 42) was curved into the rock and painted in red and the tourists all climb to it to have their photos taken. Thus a physical space endowed with meaning becomes landscape a contextual horizon of perceptions, providing both a foreground and a background in which people feel themselves to be living in their world:

People used to die at this spot all the time, you say, and they were very often children and women. Children would dive off the rock in summer, the ones who didn’t re-surface were said to have been trying to die and had been reclaimed by parents of another life. Those forced into taking their own lives are always women – defenceless young students sent here from the city, young women who had been maltreated by mothers-in-law and husbands. (*Soul Mountain* 54)

In *Soul Mountain*, the existential self of the protagonist is constantly tormented by the basic question of human existence such as meaning of life and its goal, authentic self and the accompanying existential emotions such as despair and anxiety. The search for true life in *Soul Mountain* becomes an attempt to return to the authentic life, which the protagonist finds in the folk songs of the ethnic tribes such as the Qiang and the Miao. He collects these songs because he is searching for lives and life is shown more clearly in these old songs than in the more modern one-minded songs of his era. Some chapters are made up of folk legends or tales, and the style of different types of oral literature or classical fiction is adopted. Chapter 41 describes the ox sacrificial ceremony of the Miao community. In Chapter 49, the narrator meets a Daoist folk singer in an old county town

who was hesitant to perform Daoist rituals as “the government doesn’t allow the performance of superstitious practices” (287). Instead he sings a mountain love song:

Young girl on the mountain picking tea
Your young man is down cutting brushwood,
In both places startled mandarin ducks fly up,
Young girl quickly marry your young man (*Soul Mountain* 288)

Soul Mountain thus presents a series of field researches, enriched with philosophical, historical, and literary meditations. This formal heterogeneity coincides with the multiplicity of southern cultures, which the author seeks to rehabilitate in the face of an orchestrated amnesia. At a time when his contemporaries are preoccupied with glorifying the national heritage that was significantly destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian takes it upon himself to challenge Han supremacy, which is far from favourable to peripheral cultures. Behind this inquisitorial account lies a historical distinction. As the author reminds us, there is a traditional dichotomy between the cultures of the North and of the South, respectively symbolised by the Yellow River and the Blue River (The Yangtze). The culture of the North gained influence over the centuries, due to an imperial system backed up by Confucian orthodoxy. This official culture gradually overshadowed the sometimes older cultural heritage of the South, traces of which can be seen among the ethnic minorities such as the Miao, the Yi, the Qiang, etc.

Gao shows a prelinguistic state in which the self is presented in a state of primordial non-distinction. The philosophy of Daoism stresses unity with nature and with the self and the spiritual as well as physical journey of the narrator in *Soul Mountain* is an attempt to achieve such a unity. The narrator is on a great search of what he assumes is meaning in his life, yet throughout the book he battles with his reason for leaving modern civilization and travelling on his own to the mountains. In *Soul Mountain*, the self is presented as both the perceiving subject as well as the perceived object by adopting the method of “self transcendent observation” (Tam 218), which he took from Chan Buddhism. Gao believes that the true self lies in the pre-linguistic state of human consciousness which is very much in line with the Daoist concept of intuition that emphasizes the non-linguistic and non-intellectual state of being. In the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, however the self remains a perceiving subject that tries to go beyond the intellectual boundaries set by language. Gao Xingjian claims, “I doubt that I would be able to attain this realm of purity where there is an absence of self and lust” (403). He further states, “I need to live my life unburdened. I want to find happiness but I don’t want to take on responsibilities” (400). The allegorical meaning behind the protagonist’s futile search for soul mountain reveals the theme of elusive meaning of life that permeates the novel in various metaphoric and symbolic forms. In Chapter 76 in *Soul Mountain* “he” asks the way to Soul Mountain from a wise old man who tells him that Soul Mountain is always on the other side of the river, no matter which shore one is on. It can be inferred that the narrator in *Soul Mountain* expresses the contrasting aspects and relationships of everything that exists in the universe. Soul Mountain has no fixed definition, which makes it virtually untranslatable. It is in tune with the nature of Dao, that everything is constantly transforming itself and that opposites in the world are complementary. A possible second reading is to relate it to the Buddhist concept of “the Other Shore” (Yeung 94). It is a metaphor for Nirvana a state of spiritual enlightenment when the consciousness transcends the mundane world. In this state, the subject achieves ultimate union with the universe and meaning becomes irrelevant. In that state when meaning is irrelevant every kind of quest will be futile. Gao perhaps finds redemption only in nature, in its beauty and serenity. In his consideration of man and the natural world, Gao Xingjian emphasizes the ideal of the freedom of all beings to pursue their natural fulfillment. This freedom is not chaotic but self organizing. Neither human society nor the natural world needs order imposed on it; indeed attempts at the imposition of order results in disorder. At the end of the narrative, the narrator proclaims, “I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing” (*Soul Mountain* 506). As Ming JIAN comments “the protagonist never finds Soul Mountain in the novel; but it is the act of searching rather than its outcome that really matters to him” (JIAN 109).

A number of worldwide environmental problems, such as land degradation, biodiversity loss, and global climate change occupy the trend of their destructive power of anthropogenic activities that accelerates the ecological alterations of landscapes in the novel. In Chapter 8 a botanist discovers a giant metasequoia, a living fern fossil more than forty metres high. The botanist has come to collect specimens of cold arrow bamboo, the food of the giant panda. He says it takes a full sixty years for the cold arrow bamboo to go through the cycle of flowering, seeding, dying and for the seeds to sprout, grow and flower. The large scale destruction of these bamboos is responsible for the loss of habitat of the giant pandas. He is pointing to the fact that the indiscriminate wiping of the species is going to create ecological imbalance which indirectly is going to lead to

the catastrophe of the biosphere. The botanist mentions clear cutting of forests, siltation of rivers, and the environment threat posed by the planned Three Gorges dam, and offers an explicit warning. *Soul Mountain* delineates the degraded natural environment caused by ignorance, greed and politics and describes conservation efforts by scientists. According to Gao Xingjian *Soul Mountain* deals with a world that, was much destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and also by the Three Gorges Dam in the Yangtze. Also revealing in this context is Gao's description of the few remaining pandas wandering through southwest China's ever shrinking forests wearing electronic transmitters. As Thomas Moran states:

Destruction of ecosystems and the large scale extinction of wildlife, threats posing by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam are some of the major environmental concerns affecting modern China. The narrator witnesses how rivers are polluted and lakes are silted across the whole range of the Yangtze valley, from Caohai at the upper reach, to Dongting Lake in the middle and to Huangpu River in Shanghai near the sea coast. He also reconstructs conversations with all sorts of characters, on topics ranging from Chinese politics to the mythical Wild Man. He captures all he sees and hears in a mesmerizing manner: sometimes with unambiguous clarity and other times with a dreamlike quality. (Moran 214)

The loss of biodiversity loss in the Yangtze valley is a matter of concern, not only because of the aesthetic, ethical, or cultural values attached to biodiversity, but also because it could have numerous far-reaching consequences for the ecosphere as a whole. This idea is explored in Chapter 59 while describing the ecology of Shennongjia. It is located in the Hubei Province which is situated in the lower course of the Yangtze River. Before 1960 it was a vast expanse of virgin forest that even the sun was not visible and could only hear the sound of water. During the 1960s the Government made plans for logging the trees and in 1966 the road was put through. At present 900,000 cubic metres of timber is supplied to the state. People came in to illegally cut trees and to hunt. There are also those who come to look for the Wild Man. The narrator emphasized the dangers of ignoring the non-human portion of the environment and man's relationship to it. Furthermore his concern for the protection of the ecosystem of Shennongjia finds expression here:

I can only say that protecting the environment is important work and has implications for later generations of our children and grandchildren. The Yangtze has already become a brown river bringing down mud and silt, and yet a big dam is to be built on the Three Gorges! (*Soul Mountain* 363-64)

Gao Xingjian integrated his study of nature and the environment into his fiction and embodied his ecological observations in his characters and settings. By incorporating his theories of holistic thought and the environment into his writings, Xingjian created his own ecofiction- the fiction with an environmental subtext-urban, built in environment as well as natural environment. The themes of violence, decay and degradation, cruelty in human nature and Nature form the crux of the novel. The novel shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. The novels focus on the behavioral and experiential aspects of ecological inter relationships and serve as quasi autobiographical odysseys from the egocentric to the ecocentric. In an interview with Fiona Sze Lorrain, "Gao Xingjian credited nature for his physical and emotional survival: 'I think the fact that I am still existing is by the grace of nature.' He further explained, "My novel *Soul Mountain* is a testimony of my survival after having lived next to nature and nothing else for five months"(JIAN 110).

An important theme of *Soul Mountain* is that landscape is presented here not just as a thing but as a way of understanding the meaning of self. Gao considers his state of loneliness as an essential requirement for the examination of both the external and the internal worlds. He firmly believed that "Loneliness is a prerequisite for freedom. Freedom depends on the ability to reflect and reflection can only begin when one is alone" ("The Necessity of Loneliness" 165). Gao Xingjian has repeatedly emphasized the importance of fleeing for the revelation of one's true selves. Only by fleeing from culture, politics, history, society and even the limitations of one's own self, can a person be totally free and detached to examine his true identity. Landscape in *Soul Mountain* refers both to "geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness" (Buell 83). They are defined by unique locations, landscape and communities as well as by the focusing of experiences and intentions into particular settings. They are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. Terrain here is always read like a text with cultural and literary meaning embedded by the narrator in his search for cultural memories. Like other biological organisms, humans live and act on landscapes, and thus have influenced, and been influenced by landscapes. According to Moran, the integration of landscape and humanscape is one of the

major characteristics of the Chinese literary heritage. By carrying this literary feature, *Soul Mountain* locates itself solidly within the Chinese literary tradition and connects to a wider Chinese literary discourse. The importance of a sense of place and landscape, as a living physical location, geographical as well as biological grounded in an awareness of nature-human relationships including one's own relationship to the local environment forms the crux of this novel. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* presents an "intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman" (Mellor 132). The ethnography and landscape of the Yangtze valley thus presented calls us to examine the very nature of the human place in the natural world. *Soul Mountain* thus articulates the symbiotic relationship between land and landscape, text and ethnography, and recognizes that man is not separate from the world of nature. The ecosystem thus presented calls us to examine the very nature of the human place in the natural world.

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