



Research Paper

## In Search of Myth in the Yangtze Valley: A Deep Ecological Approach to Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*

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**ABSTRACT:** Born in 1940 soon after the Japanese invasion of China, 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 reconstructs his personal past as well 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 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. In *Gao Xingjian*, we are concerned with Chinese aesthetics and Daoism as Deep Ecology which assumes that the world of phenomena manifests the Dao, the Way of nature. The human ideal is to understand the Dao and act in harmony with it. *Soul Mountain* contains numerous references to Chinese myths and symbols. The novel makes 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:** Deep Ecology, Yangtze valley, Landscape, Daoism, Myths, Ecology

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### I. INTRODUCTION

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. 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 is a total of eighty-one chapters, each one a self-contained episode. 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).

*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*. 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. Gao Xingjian superimposes fiction on eyewitness accounts, a viewpoint that is both critical and self-reflective, pondering both orchestrated amnesia and personal forgetfulness. The author’s ethnological propensity, as shown in *Soul Mountain*, proves transgressive in several ways: defending buried minority cultures, which are destroyed by the ravages of dominant culture, protecting individual memory buried from established historiography, and finally, examining the dark areas of one’s personal past in order to find the true meaning of existence. *Soul Mountain* thus presents a series of field researches, enriched with philosophical, historical, and literary meditations. Visits to remote temples and villages, collecting local songs and customs, the adaptation of stories and legends, all confer a deliberately composite construction to this ethno text. This formal heterogeneity coincides with the multiplicity of southern cultures, which the author seeks to rehabilitate in the face of an orchestrated amnesia. As the author reminds us, there is a traditional dichotomy between the cultures of the North and of the South, respectively symbolized by the Yellow River and the Blue River (The Yangtze).

## II. DEEP ECOLOGY MOVEMENT

The long range Deep Ecology movement emerged more or less spontaneously and informally as a philosophical and scientific socio-political movement during the so-called Ecological Revolution of the 1960s. Its main concern has been to bring about a major paradigm shift—a shift in perception, values, and lifestyles—as a basis for redirecting the ecologically destructive path of modern industrial growth societies. “Since the 1960s, the long-range Deep Ecology movement has been characterized philosophically by a move from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, and by environmental activism” (Sessions ix). The phrase “Deep Ecology” was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, and gives it a theoretical foundation. In the essay “Politics and the Ecological Crisis”, Naess states:

The main driving force of the Deep Ecology movement, as compared with the rest of the ecological movement, is that of identification and solidarity with all life. (Sessions 452)

The shift from a human centred to a nature-centred system of values is the core of the radicalism attributed to Deep Ecology, bringing it into opposition with almost the entirety of Western philosophy and religion:

Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere, but even toward all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. Thus, this attitude is intended to extend, for example, to such entities (or forms) as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social systems considered in their own right. (Sessions 270)

The philosophical root of the Deep Ecology movement is found in the ecocentrism and social criticism of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and D. H. Lawrence. Further inspiration for contemporary ecological consciousness and the Deep Ecology movement can be traced to the ecocentric religions and ways of life of primal peoples around the world, and to Daoism, Saint Francis of Assisi, and the Romantic nature-oriented countercultural movement of the nineteenth century with its roots in Spinoza, and the Zen Buddhism of Alan Watts and Gary Snyder. Deep ecologists have drawn a distinction between their “deep” approach to the natural world and the “shallow” human-centred perspective of those who are merely concerned with the effect on human communities of specific environmental problems.

Arne Naess and the many other deep ecologists assert the fundamental equality and inherent value of all beings and then draw inferences for human action from their original anti-anthropomorphism. Deep ecologists see the first point as distinguishing their position from environmentalism; whereas ‘shallow’ approaches take an instrumental approach to nature, arguing for preservation of natural resources only for the sake of humans. Deep Ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. Deep ecology is best represented, perhaps, as a set of practical environmental policies underpinned by a set of normative principles which in turn are supported by a scientifically informed, but ultimately philosophical, view of reality

and humankind. Among the policies advocated by Naess is radical reduction of the world's population, abandonment of the goal of economic growth in the developed world, conservation of biotic diversity, living in small, simple and self-reliant communities, and less specifically a commitment "to touch the Earth lightly" (Palmer 213).

In Gao Xingjian, we are concerned with Chinese aesthetics and Daoism as Deep Ecology which assumes that the world of phenomena manifests the *Dao*, the Way of nature. The Dao is not a separate reality but rather the patterned processes of the natural world, or perhaps the disposition of the universe to act in a patterned, harmonious interactive way. The human ideal is to understand the Dao and act in harmony with it. This view of nature can appropriately be called "organic" (Miller 65) for various reasons.

### III. ROOT SEEKING LITERATURE

Gao Xingjian is often considered as an exponent of Root-seeking Literature; a literary movement that began in the early 1980s, and often considered as the most pervasive and influential literary trend in post-Mao Chinese literature. The primary locus of root-seeking literature is the Chinese countryside, where the political winds that swept China during the Cultural Revolution had only limited success. Agrarian society is thought to be the heart of Chinese culture, uncorrupted by Western influences and therefore retaining the primordial energies of humanity. Influenced from the West and particularly by Latin American magic realism, they identified ancient Chinese traditions as a source of a new literature that addressed profound, universal issues while expressing a subjective vision of art and life. Although the ancient roots that inspired the root-seekers were most often found in remote rural China, they also existed in the cities and were uncovered by the urban root-seekers.

In *Soul Mountain* Gao Xingjian sets out to discover the nation's past buried deep in the ancient lands and to examine its implications for the literary imagination. In the view of Han Shaogong who has initiated this movement states:

There was a gap between the ancient past and the present, and in the twentieth century, China had experienced a period of amnesia, in which the nation's rich past was erased from the collective memory of the Chinese. The responsibility of a writer was to help the nation reconnect to its past, to "sort out", the cultural roots. Only by doing so, they argued, would Chinese literature be able to "dialogue" with the rest of the world. The goal of the root-seekers, therefore, was to search for authentic Chinese. (Ying 159)

In Chapter 24 there is a long description of an ancient mask. 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).

### IV. DAOISM AND THE BIOCENTRIC PRINCIPLE

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 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. This ritual is associated with some songs. Before the sacrifice a decorated pillar had to be erected on the ground. All members of the family changed into new clothing and there is a fanfare of pipes and the

beating of gongs and drums. A rope is tied to the ox's nose, wrapped its horn in bamboo wreaths and brought it out. The male head of the family sang loudly a eulogy took up a spear and stabbed the ox:

Ox oh ox,  
Born in still waters,  
Growing up on sandy banks,  
You cross rivers with your mother,  
You climb mountains with your father,  
Fight the locusts for the sacrificial drum,  
Fight the praying mantis for the sacrificial pipes (*Soul Mountain* 239)

Gao Xingjian's writings appropriate Daoist concepts, according to which one pursues pure wisdom by exploring the paradoxes of truth. The contrast of truth and wisdom appears often in the book, especially when Xingjian discusses the earlier disillusionment upon discovering that his immersion in books did not endow him with wisdom, but rather prevented him from truly living. From the perspective of Deep Ecology the world in *Soul Mountain* is not seen as divided into mutually independent parts and mutually exclusive attributes: everything is seen as implicating, and being implicated in, the identities of other things, reality being a relational system of shared, interpenetrating essences. From this kind of cosmological perspective, the interpenetrating bodies of individuals, society, the natural world, and the infernal and celestial spheres truly constitute a cosmic landscape pulsating with life.

Deep Ecology fully acknowledges the biocentric principle embedded in Daoism that stresses the fact that man is only one part in a huge and complex life net in nature in which everything has a certain value. That is why man is not allowed and entitled to reduce the richness and variety of the living world except for the satisfaction of his basic needs. Daoism generates the notion that there is a way, logic or a rationale that governs the interrelationships between humans, the earth and the heavens. This is the Way, the evolving cosmic process in which these three dimensions of life are interrelated, and mutually constituted. This idea has been reflected in Chapter 8 in *Soul Mountain* when the Botanist expresses his concern for the declining ecology of the Yangtze valley:

Man follows earth, earth follows sky, sky follows the way, the way follows nature...Don't commit actions which go against the basic character of nature, don't commit acts which should not be committed. ... putting up a dam will destroy the entire ecology of the Yangtze River basin but if it leads to earthquakes the population of hundreds of millions living in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze will become fish and turtles!...when people assault nature like this nature inevitably takes revenge. (*Soul Mountain* 48)

Although these principles sound appealing to Gao Xingjian, he 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). From this statement, it can be inferred that Gao Xingjian will be unable to commit fully to Daoism and therefore, continue his search for true happiness. 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. Like Wordsworth, Gao perhaps finds redemption only in nature, in its beauty and serenity. Hence the quest for *Soul Mountain*, of whose existence no one is certain. But unlike Wordsworth, who found meaning in nature and salvation in God, Gao renounces both the Buddhist and Daoist sects while failing to reach his destination. At the end of the narrative, he proclaims, "I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing" (*Soul Mountain* 506)

Gao believes that the true self lies in the prelinguistic 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. 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 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 Chinese aesthetics the viewer is not separated from the territory he surveys. The perceiver is as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on. Human identity is linked with all the elements in the surrounding landscape—the mountains, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds and sky. In the Daoist tradition, the artist or poet must go through meditative practices that consist fundamentally of two things: removing the delusion of a separate self and the desires it produces, and concentrating upon the subject until there is a direct apprehension of the image. Like other biological organisms, humans live and act on landscapes, and thus have influenced, and been influenced by landscapes. In Chapter 18 promotes a close relationship between the self and the landscape:

On the lonely lake, even the aquatic birds have gone. The dazzling surface of the water imperceptibly grows hazy, twilight emanates from the reeds and the cold rises from underfoot. I am chilled all over, there are no cicadas chirping, no frogs croaking. Can this possibly be the primitive loneliness devoid of all meaning that I seek? (*Soul Mountain* 112)

What Gao appreciates in nature, finds parallel with Emerson's impressions of the natural world. The ideas of Plato and Emerson, dating back with some of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Persian thinkers, saw the origin of Transcendentalism in 1836, who adopted the whole connection of the spiritual doctrine in nature. Emerson finds nature to be the situation which dwarfs every other circumstance, and all men come to her for solace:

The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, it is stimulating and heroic...The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them...These enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us. These are plain pleasures, kind and native to us. (Emerson 4)

## V. CONCLUSION

Deep Ecology fully acknowledges the biocentric principle embedded in Daoism that stresses the fact that man is only one part in a huge and complex life net in nature in which everything has a certain value. That is why man is not allowed and entitled to reduce the richness and variety of the living world except for the satisfaction of his basic needs. Daoism generates the notion that there is a way, logic or a rationale that governs the interrelationships between humans, the earth and the heavens. This is the Way, the evolving cosmic process in which these three dimensions of life are interrelated, and mutually constituted. This idea has been clearly illustrated in the writings of Gao Xingjian. The novel under discussion see the world as a vast interrelated network in which the universe and all creatures in it are acting in natural response and mutual interdependence. This is the basic idea contained in the Daoist universe that seeks to examine the very nature of the human place in the natural world. 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. The ecosystem thus presented calls us to examine the very nature of the human place in the natural world.

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