

## Gao Xingjian and the Venerable Elders: A Reading of *Soul Mountain*

by Neil Wright

Though awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (in year 2000), the first Chinese author to have been thus recognized, Gao Xingjian has been a relatively unattended figure among Western literati. While it is true that he is respected in Europe for his contribution to post-modern theater, and also for his Chinese style ink paintings, it is unlikely that he would have been honored as a Nobel recipient without his two novels, *Soul Mountain* (1990) and *One Man's Bible* (1999). We might suppose that Gao would be a hero among Chinese officialdom, but the case is just the opposite; as an exile living in France, whose work is essentially critical of the Communist Chinese regime for its repressive history as well as its more recent brazen materialism, Gao is officially *persona non grata*. He cannot even return to China, and at seventy there is little likelihood that he will outlive his official eclipse. Despite these circumstances, there is hardly any contemporary author and certainly not any one book that speaks to the world of Chinese identity and Chinese culture as eloquently and demonstrably as *Soul Mountain*. It will be my thesis that in *Soul Mountain*, Gao Xingjian attempts to redefine Chinese identity by journeying to the depths of Chinese consciousness and that his encounters with venerable elders, who appear as the keepers of Chinese wisdom, are central to this quest. Some of them are Taoists; some are Buddhists; some are male and a few are female; some are of folk origin that precedes formal Taoism or Buddhism; but all of them carry a part of authentic Chinese culture that, from Gao's point of view, has been distorted, suppressed, or simply lost in the modern era.<sup>1</sup>

It is common knowledge among Gao's serious readers that *Soul Mountain* is a story of self-discovery and self-exploration. Kwok-kan Tam, editor and contributor in the study *Soul of Chaos* (2001), which reviews Gao's entire *oeuvre*, characterizes the novel thus:

*Soul Mountain* is organized on the principle of a dual structure, with a spiritual journey alongside a physical one. While the physical journey takes the protagonist to different places in the hope of finding Soul Mountain, a physical and a spiritual site, his displacement also denotes a journey of the self, trying to seek the meaning of life through an encounter with nature, to come to an understanding of his true selves through various relationships, and ultimately to transcend them. The journey thus brings the protagonist to his discoursing with his selves, for all other characters in his encounters are projections or reflections of these true selves (Tam, 13).

Tam, following Gao's own lead and that of other commentators, places emphasis upon Gao's quest of the authentic self; I do not take issue with this view, but I also think that in the course of the protagonist's travels through rural China, especially in the southern provinces of the Yangtze River Valley, where he looks for ancient folk songs and artifacts, his confrontations with venerable elders constitute a series of moments in which the protagonist meets the ancestral Other, lost in the progressive historical model and relegated to quaintness, and gains a personal insight into the chthonic depths of Chinese identity, an identity which is not by any means implicitly or exclusively his own and which may even be denied him.

Of course, the "venerable elder" has become for the West, as well as the East, an Asian cliché. Venerable elders, notably Confucius (Kung Fut-tzu), Lao-tzu, and Chuang-tzu and the legendary Buddhist master Bodhidharma are the essential archetypes; they and countless other wise men like them appear in numerous literary works of neo-Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist origins. They and their like appear over the centuries in Chinese and Japanese art and in Chinese romance novels such as *The Journey to the West*. The modern West inherited them in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist texts and ideas found their way into German philosophy courtesy of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel and lesser lights; lately, they have appeared on TV and in cinema (both Asian and American) in the form of pop martial arts masters and Zen heroes such as the notable Yoda and Obiwan Kenobi of *Star Wars*. Surely Gao Xingjian was and is aware of the international migration and popularization of Chinese venerable elders. It seems curious that he should resort to such apparently overwrought figures in a sophisticated novel that tells of a journey taking place in the backwoods of modern south central China—yet, he does so unashamedly and even presents them in the context of the most nominal reality, either as persons he meets or as subjects in the lore of the region, which he is collecting. Several of them, I believe, are central to the Chinese character and culture that Gao aims to reveal: they are, as I choose to refer to them, the Legendary Grandpa Stone, the Old Calligrapher, the Master of the Palace of Supreme Purity, the Evil Old Taoist, and the Venerable Elder of Directions. All of these figures are variations of the ancestral Other that Gao seeks, or senses, in the recesses of the south Chinese wilderness.

### Grandpa Stone and the Apocalyptic Earthquake

In the *Tao-te-Ching*, ostensibly written by Lao-tzu in the 6th century BC, there are exactly eighty-one poems that expound the Taoist perspective. *Soul Mountain*, correspondingly, has eighty-one chapters, and the novel may almost be regarded as the prose equivalent of the *Tao-te-Ching*. Lao-tzu wrote his poems as a farewell, at the request of a gate-keeper, upon leaving his city to retire permanently to the mountains; Gao Xingjian wrote *Soul Mountain*, I think, as a means of passage out of the Chinese official world to which he had belonged and which he would in fact negate as he left it behind him. Part of that modern Chinese construct-to-be-negated is the historicized and long ossified Taoist establishment which is tolerated today, as for many centuries, because it is no longer real but is only a mere simulacrum of original Taoism. Grandpa Stone, however, is the real thing, albeit he is but a story and a dream.

The legend of Grandpa Stone is broached in Chapter 2 of the novel, as a reminiscence, when Gao is about to arrive in the city of Wuyizhen, supposedly the gateway to the mysterious Lingshan (Soul Mountain). Gao recalls an artifact that had once piqued his curiosity:

I once saw a four-inch length of wood which had been collected in the Qiang region by an anthropologist during the 1930s. It was a carved statue of a person doing a handstand. The head

had ink markings for the eyes, nose and mouth, and the word “longevity” had been written on the body. It was called “Wuchang Upside Down” and there was something oddly mischievous about it. I ask the Qiang retired village head whether such talismans are still around. He tells me these are called “old root.” This wooden idol has to accompany the newborn from birth to death. At death it accompanies the corpse from the house and after the burial it is placed in the wilderness to allow the spirit to return to nature. I ask him if he can get me one so that I can carry it on me. He laughs and says these are what hunters tuck into their shirts to ward off evil spirits, they wouldn’t be of any use to someone like me. (*SM*, 13)<sup>2</sup>

When Gao asks the village head where he can find a real hunter, the old man refers him to Grandpa Stone, who lives in a hut some distance into the country at the end of a creek bed. However, he adds that though Grandpa Stone is still there, in repose in his hut, he is dead: “he lay down on his bed and died in his sleep. He was too old, he lived to well over ninety, some even say well over a hundred. In any case, nobody’s sure about his age” (*SM*, 13). We learn further that Grandpa Stone had no wife and was “a great hunter, a hunter who was an expert in the magical arts. There are no hunters like that these days. Everyone knows that his rifle is hanging in the hut, that it never misses its target, but nobody dares to go and take it” (*SM*, 14). Gao tries to get the villager to take him to Grandpa Stone’s hut, but to no avail—the hut must have collapsed by now, the road there is lost, and furthermore there is a curse protecting Grandpa Stone: “He knew blackmagic. It’s not just that people don’t dare go there to steal his rifle, even animals don’t dare to go near” (*SM*, 15).<sup>3</sup>

“The hunter,” concludes Gao, “is already a myth” (*SM*, 15). But myths are not lies; they are crystallized truths, and Grandpa Stone is in fact the spirit of the mountain man, the very soul that Gao is seeking, a man who is completely before and beyond the crippling veil of modern civilization and the socialist state. When man is no longer a hunter, what need has he of a rifle that never misses? And who in this pale age would dare to remove it from his hut, even if it were still there? Original Taoism did not speak itself or act itself; it simply lived instinctively, in accord with nature, just like Grandpa Stone.

Later, in Chapter 68, when he is near exhaustion from mountain climbing, Gao has a waking dream, in which he visits Grandpa Stone: “You say you see a cave at the bottom of the limestone cliffs. The entrance is almost completely sealed off by a pile of stone slabs. You think it is the home of Grandpa Stone and that living inside is the legendary figure talked about by the Qiang mountain folk” (*SM*, 435). Indeed, Grandpa Stone is there, sitting on a rotted wooden platform: “His eyes have sunken deep into their sockets and he is emaciated like a piece of firewood. His rifle hangs above his head on a branch wedged into a crack and is within his reach. Oiled with bear fat which has turned to black grease, there is no rust on it” (*SM*, 435-436).

“Why have you come here?” asks Grandpa Stone (436). Gao Xingjian, in the second person “you”, finds himself in bad faith before this original and true Taoist. He realizes he is guilty of mere curiosity, that he cannot answer Grandpa Stone’s question honestly or even accurately. He is conscious of himself as an observer, an intruder, and finally as a would-be scientific thief, and when he attempts to grab Grandpa Stone’s magic rifle (a precious artifact for his collection) the gun disintegrates and a divine earthquake ensues, demolishing the moment of consummation when he might have either appropriated Grandpa Stone for history or, just maybe, taken this legendary soul into himself, becoming the authentic hunter, the primal Chinese woodsman who went before all civilization, even before the Yellow Emperor: “Nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine white bats shriek and fly about the cliff cave. The mountain divinities have all awoken, huge boulders roll from the mountain top in an avalanche and the cliff completely collapses. It is as if a thousand mounted soldiers are galloping up from the

earth and the whole mountain turns to smoke and dust” (*SM*, 437). At the end of this devastation comes the disintegration of self: “Your soul flees through the orifices of your body and you see countless toads with their big mouths gaping at the sky. They are like a flock of headless tiny people with arms outstretched to the hoary sky, calling out in despair: Give my head back! Give my head back! Give my head back!” (*SM*, 438). This is the experience which Gao Xingjian repeats periodically in *Soul Mountain*; when he is on the verge of finding the Chinese Holy Grail, he is suddenly inadequate, and his quest dissolves into hysteria.

### The Rites and Wisdom of the Old Calligrapher

In Chapter 49 Gao Xingjian enters a nameless country village and meets an old man with a calligraphy stall on the street, selling “lucky couplets written on red glossy paper” (*SM*, 286).<sup>4</sup> Sensing from the style of the Chinese characters that this old man may be a Taoist, Gao asks him to write the character for “good fortune”; but the old man demurs because he suspects Gao is a cadre, an official of the Communist government. Gao denies this charge and asks the old man whether he is a Taoist priest:

“I gave it up a long time ago.”

“Of course,” I say. “Venerable elder, I’m asking if you know how to perform Daoist rituals.”

“Yes. But the government doesn’t allow the performance of superstitious practices.” (*SM*, 287)

Despite the old man’s reservations, a crowd gathers and people beg him to sing the old songs, and soon he gives in:

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. (*SM*, 288)

The crowd breaks up, though, when a policeman is spotted; then Gao invites the old man for tea and they talk further. That night the old man takes Gao out to a smaller mountain hamlet where he does perform Taoist folk rituals: “he is wearing a tattered old purple Daoist robe adorned with the insignia of the Yin-Yang fish and Eight Trigrams, and is carrying the command tablet, the sword of office and an ox horn. He looks totally different, majestic, and walks with slow measured steps. He lights a stick of incense and bows with it to the altar in the hall. Men, women and children from the village, startled by the drums and gongs, crowd at the doorway. Immediately, a bustling Daoist ritual commences” (*SM*, 292). This celebration goes on far into the night, and the old man reaches an ecstatic state; as he sings, dances, and performs the rituals he almost becomes a young man again: “His words become incomprehensible and his movements wilder as he circles the table and demonstrates a whole range of martial arts sword techniques. Following the pitch of his singing and the movements of his dance the six sons beat the gongs and drums with increasing gusto and produce endless variations. This is especially so with the young man on the drums. He throws off his jacket, exposing his dark skin and the rippling muscles on his shoulders and ribs” (*SM*, 294). Gao tapes much of this ceremony on his recorder, but it will not be the same when he replays it. He has experienced what he wanted to find, the soul of the true and now forbidden Taoist culture living in the flesh. He could not, it is clear, participate in it, live it, join it; but at least

he has seen and heard it. “This,” he remarks at the chapter’s end, “is usually called the ineffability of life” (*SM*, 299).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Master of the Palace of Supreme Purity**

As if to underscore his own ineligibility to enter into the true Taoist state, Gao recalls in Chapter 63 his meeting with another old Taoist, the head of a temple called the Palace of Supreme Purity. This interlude occurs shortly after he has despaired of his ability ever to love a woman or to succeed in carrying through on a marriage or even to lead a settled life alone (*SM*, 400). He is staying briefly at the Palace of Supreme Purity, a remote mountain retreat of the permitted variety; but as usual he admits that his motives are tainted, as he finds the nun who is his host very attractive: “I am not a recluse and still want to eat from the stoves of human society. I can’t say that I am staying because of the charming spontaneity of her movements and her unaffected gracefulness, I am simply saying that I like the tranquility here” (*SM*, 401). The head priest, who is over eighty, gives him a sermon on the Way: “The Way is both the source and the law of the myriad things . . . This source gives birth to existence from non-existence, and to non-existence from existence. The union of the two is innate and with the union of heaven and man there is the attainment of unity in one’s view of the cosmos and of human life. For Taoists, purity is the principle, non-action the essence and spontaneity the application; it is a life of truth and a life requiring absence of self” (*SM*, 403). But for Gao Xingjian, there can be no absence of self. The self, in his case, is the eternal fugitive. It can disintegrate, due to his fundamental impurity of ends and means, but it will reconstitute itself and continue in its vain quest for love, freedom, identity, the past, whatever. It is the reason why, in the preceding chapter (Chapter 62) he could not find the key to his apartment, an obvious symbol of the key to his own soul, and why in the following chapter (64) he finds himself virtual prisoner to a lapsed Taoist nun who compels him to make love three times in a row, to keep him from leaving.

### **The Evil Old Taoist of Wudong Mountain**

Again on the move in Chapter 65, Gao finds and photographs a majestic but sinister pine tree on Huanggong Mountain: “At sunset, the valley is plunged into shadows and above a sea of fine gentle bamboos burnished green and orange by the setting sun, this ancient tree suddenly looms up, its decaying black branches willfully outstretched like a malevolent demon” (*SM*, 413). Not long after, on Wudong Mountain nearby, he encounters “possibly the last Daoist of the Pure Unity Sect” (*SM*, 414),<sup>6</sup> whom he thinks is the “embodiment of this sort of evil” (*SM*, 414)—that is, of natural evil, the ruthless, carnal, predatory, aspect of nature (William Blake’s Tyger, perhaps). This old Taoist is a totally hostile and suspicious fellow who lives in a mountain-top retreat with his no doubt equally hostile and suspicious family. Here there is no warm welcome for the traveler, as there was at the Palace of Supreme Purity. Gao’s greeting is met with strict denial:

“May I ask if you are the custodian of the Gold Top?” The tone of my voice is very polite.

“There is no custodian here!”

“I know the Daoist temple here hasn’t yet resumed activities, but would you be the former head Daoist?”

“There is no head Daoist here!”

“Then may I ask if you, venerable elder, are a Daoist?”

“What if I am a Daoist?” His black eyebrows which have a sprinkling of white hairs also bristle.

"May I ask if you are a member of the Pure Unity Sect? I heard that it is only at the Gold Top that there is still—"

"I don't belong to any sect!"

Without letting me finish he opens the door and chases me out. (*SM*, 414-415)

The old Taoist's hostility is an innate strategy of survival against the encroaching modern world, which he no doubt believes will come some day to take over the mountain where he lives and reduce it to a wasteland bereft of trees, minerals, animals, and people like himself. He thinks Gao Xingjian is a state journalist, and he is not far from the truth. As he retreats from the temple, Gao confronts a peasant woman who is probably a local member of the old Taoist's group; the wind is howling and this woman is praying; but as he approaches and passes her on the narrow stone path, she suddenly turns toward him: "I look around. She is right behind me in the martial arts iron post stance, her eyes narrowed to slits and devoid of expression. They have their own closed world which I will never be able to enter. They have their own methods of survival and self-protection and roam beyond the fringes of what is known as society. However, I can only return to pass my existence in what people are accustomed to calling a normal life, there is no alternative for me, and probably this is my tragedy" (*SM*, 415).

### The Venerable Elder of Directions

Gao Xingjian himself has written that Chapter 72, in which he takes up directly the post-modern literary issues inherent in this novel and in his life as a writer, is the "key to the whole book" (*The Case for Literature*, 96). For me, however, the key to the novel, though not perhaps to the novelist, is the shortest chapter in the book, Chapter 76. This chapter, barely more than one page, marks the traveler's last encounter with a venerable elder, to whom he addresses the vital question, "Venerable elder, can you tell me the location of Lingshan"? (*SM*, 478). The conversation that ensues is much like a classic exchange between a Taoist wise man or a Buddhist master and his pupil. Gao is now the "he" of the dialogue:

"Where have you come from?" the old man asks instead.

He says from Wuyizhen.

"Wuyizhen?" The old man ruminates for a while. "It's on the other side of the river."

He says he has just come from that side of the river. Can he have taken the wrong road? The old man cocks an eyebrow and says, "The road is not wrong, it is the traveler who is wrong." (*SM*, 478)

There follows a confused exchange in which it is obvious that "he," Gao Xingjian, is talking about the physical location of the river, the city, and the mountain, while the elder is really talking about Gao Xingjian himself. The elder concludes by asking, "Aren't you asking the way?"

He says he is.

"Then I've already told you." The old man raises his staff, dismisses him, and walks along the river-bank into the distance. (*SM*, 479)

Gao Xingjian does not succeed in finding Soul Mountain or in resolving the issues that surround and even define his existence as a writer, a lover, and a fugitive from the Chinese official society that he cannot tolerate. His journey allowed him to escape from that oppressive world and to assert against it the nature and persistence of a primal China that both exists and non-exists. If it is his tragedy that he cannot enter it, but can only use

it to stand against the China that he rejects, then he is still a heroic figure in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Cervantes, and Dante, who mapped a human cosmos by traveling in the worlds they were born to, and who in the end either transformed or transcended those worlds or vacated them in order to bequeath them to us. It may be that Gao Xingjian completed his journey after all, relinquishing the self to which he desperately clings throughout the novel, moving on to France, to other ends, and to the inevitable future that constantly displaces the past. For as he observes, perhaps repeating the advice of the Venerable Elder of Directions: "Existence is returning, non-existence is returning, so don't stay by the river getting blown about by the cold wind" (*SM*, 479).

## Endnotes

1. Gao Xingjian undertook three journeys in 1987 through the southern Chinese wilderness, partly to avoid the Chinese authorities and partly because he had been diagnosed with cancer (incorrectly, as it turned out). *Soul Mountain* is the story of these journeys. Gao declares: "My preference was to go on a spiritual journey to reveal aspects of Chinese culture that had been concealed by bureaucratic orthodox culture" (*The Case for Literature*, 99).

2. I have it upon good authority, from Ms. Li Li, who is Chinese and a graduate student at Indiana University in comparative literature, that a "Wuchang" is a ghostly demon, black (evil) or white (good) that will either wreak havoc with our lives or protect us against just such havoc. It would seem that Gao's small wooden token is a beneficent Wuchang who protects the hunter.

3. Grandpa Stone resembles the heroic and now legendary American frontiersmen, I think, such as Daniel Boone, whose memory looms large in modern consciousness. Boone was a hunter feared, no doubt, by animals and also Indians; his statue adorns the ECU campus where he stands in front of the Keen Johnson Building cradling his long rifle and staring fixedly ahead, perhaps looking for game or Indian students. Black magic he did not have, but today students touch his bronze toe for success on exams, which in many cases would require some kind of magic.

4. That ancient wisdom and tradition should lie in possession of an old calligrapher is significant, even symbolic, for it is in the pictograms, the Chinese characters, that the world of things merges with the world of language and thought. Today calligraphy, once a practical or applied art essential for written communication, has become a fine art; the person who actually learns the techniques of Chinese writing in the old styles is appropriating the past in a genuine way not possible via print or other machine forms of writing.

5. The experience of Gao Xingjian here is similar to that of the biblical Job, who declares, after his encounter with the divine Whirlwind, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Gao has, like Job, witnessed the inner sanctum of ultimate wisdom and truth and acknowledges that it cannot be described, even that he cannot enter into it. There are, however, dream chapters in *Soul Mountain* in which this wisdom may enter into him. These chapters are ripe for study as stream of consciousness explorations of the supposed ineffable.

6. The Pure Unity Sect is or was a fundamentalist religious group or movement perhaps similar to the Old Believers who both fascinated and inspired Doestoevsky and Tolstoy and found a place in their novels as representatives of ancient and uncorrupted faith. Such traditions are dead set against the modern world and refuse to be tempted, coddled, or bamboozled into any kind of complicity with it, as is this old Taoist.

## Works Cited

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