

REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE ECOLOGY IN GAO XINGJIAN'S *SOUL MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT

Soul Mountain (2000) traces a five month journey of the protagonist from Beijing to Sichuan province and from there followed the Yangtze River to the coast. The description of the trip is supposed to be based on the author's journey along the catchment areas of the Yangtze River in 1983. In *Soul Mountain* the depiction of the varied biodiversity witnessed in the natural forests has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed authentic relation of humanity and the earth. On his wanderings into the nature reserves Gao witnesses how people are shooting bears and even pandas; tress are being cut down a hundred times faster than before. Stones inscribed with historical inscriptions have been dynamited to yield materials for bridges that were never built. The novels focus on literature's potential to sensitize readers to the environmental or ecological aspects of a place.

Ecology can be viewed as "the study of the structure and function of nature"-it is understood that mankind is a part of nature. The paper seeks to interpret *Soul Mountain* through natural sciences and shows that the novels derive their vital truth from laws of nature. It further examines the representation of ecology and degraded landscapes in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and also interrogates the biotic and abiotic components of an ecosystem, all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. The concept of disharmony in the relationship between humankind and nature and the possibility of finding a solution in traditional knowledge system is part of the discourse in the novel.

KEYWORDS: Nature, Ecology, Landscape, Yangtze River, Ecosphere

INTRODUCTION

Soul Mountain (2000) traces a five month journey of the protagonist from Beijing to Sichuan province and from there followed the Yangtze River to the coast. The description of the trip is supposed to be based on the author's journey along the catchment areas of the Yangtze River in 1983. In *Soul Mountain* the depiction of the varied biodiversity witnessed in the natural forests has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed authentic relation of humanity and the earth. On his wanderings into the nature reserves Gao witnesses how people are shooting bears and even pandas; tress are being cut down a hundred times faster than before. Stones inscribed with historical inscriptions have been dynamited to yield materials for bridges that were never built. The novels focus on literature's potential to sensitize readers to the environmental or ecological aspects of a place.

Soul Mountain takes an ecological orientation towards nature. Chinese 2000 Nobel Laureate in literature Gao Xingjian demonstrates his strong concern with the ecosystem in modern China, and presents a concrete and detailed discourse on nature. *Soul Mountain* finds China's environment out of joint and sets its narrator off on a journey to find something original, primitive and unspoiled that may still survive in the forested mountains of the south west China. The concept of disharmony in the relationship between humankind and nature and the possibility of finding a solution in

traditional knowledge system is part of the discourse in the novel.

Ecology explains the interdependence of environment, animals, plants and human beings in such a way that the changes in or elimination of one component will disturb the others. The term ecology is derived from the Greek root “oikos”, meaning “house”, combined with the root “logy”, meaning “the science of” or “the study of”. Thus, literally ecology is the study of the earth’s “households” including the plants, animals, microorganisms, and the people that live together as interdependent components. Ecology can be viewed as “the study of the structure and function of nature”-it is understood that mankind is a part of nature. The paper seeks to interpret *Soul Mountain* through natural sciences and shows that the novels derive their vital truth from laws of nature. It further examines the representation of ecology and degraded landscapes in Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain* and also interrogates the biotic and abiotic components of an ecosystem, all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. For the purpose of the study conceptual tools of ecocriticism has been applied because of the latter’s close relationship with the science of ecology. Garrard opines in his book *Ecocriticism* that “environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms” (14). He says “ecocriticism makes it possible to analyse critically the tropes brought into play in environmental debate” (14). It further aims at analyzing the advocacy of eco-consciousness which can be conspicuously marked in his writings, as well as observing the ecological issues and ethics. In a way, his literary treasure shows us a better way of living life, where transcending self-centered values and anthropocentrism and following biocentrism and an ethical life is his primary motto. The novel presents some important environmental threats faced by China today and seeks to raise the problem with the serious motto of restoration of a green planet.

The author, on his long journey as a political refugee from Beijing, 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. In *Soul Mountain* the authorial self is dissected into “I”, “you”, “she” and “he”, who together make up the protagonist. Through the characters are projections of his self, the author engages in intimate conversations with anonymous others to tell the stories of many different types of people who populate China, but yet who in the final analysis can be found in all societies and cultures. Reporting the life cycles of the peasants, mystics and wanderers of south west China and steeping himself in the growth processes out of a close interest in the biology of human affairs; a perspective which dwell mostly on the animal nature of human life questioning the reconciliation of people as people.

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* :

You’ve never seen the place mentioned in travel accounts and it’s not listed in the most up-to-date travel guides. Of course, it isn’t hard to find places like Lingtai, Lingqiu, Lingyan and even Lingshan on provincial maps and you know very well that in the histories and classics, Lingshan appears in works dating back to the ancient shamanistic work *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* and the old geographical gazetteer *Annotated Water Classic*. It was also at Lingshan that Buddha enlightened the Venerable Mahakashyapa. You’re not stupid, so just use your brains, first find this place

Wuyizhen on the cigarette box, for this is how you'll get to Lingshan. (*Soul Mountain* 5)

In Chapter 2 of *Soul Mountain* the scene shifts to the Qiang region from which the Yangtze River originated, situated at an elevation of 16,000 feet up in the Qionglai Mountain in the border areas of the Qinghai- Tibetan highlands and the Sichuan basin and finally arrives in Wuyizhen. Sichuan province is located in the upper Yangtze River valley in the south western part of China. Sichuan is bordered by the provinces of Gansu and Shaanxi to the north, the territory of Chongqing municipality to the east, the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan to the south, the Tibet Autonomous Region to the west, and the province of Qinghai to the northwest.

So you arrive in Wuyizhen, on a long and narrow street inlaid with black cobblestones, and walking along this cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut, you suddenly enter your childhood in an old mountain town like this. (*Soul Mountain* 16)

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 China. The botanist in Chapter 8 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:

Don't commit actions which go against the basic character of nature, don't commit acts which should not be committed. (*Soul Mountain* 48)

In Chapter 10 the narrative takes us through the linden and maple groves at an altitude of two thousand eight hundred metres and arrive at a conifer belt, where "patches of scattered light gradually appear and giant black hemlocks soar up, their branches arched like open umbrellas" (59). The experience is one of pristine ethereal purity:

I take deep breaths of the pure air of the forest, inhaling and exhaling is effortless and I feel the very depths of my soul being cleansed. The air penetrates to the soles of my feet, and my body and mind seem to enter nature's grand cycle. I achieve a sense of joyful freedom such as I have never before experienced. (*Soul Mountain* 61)

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)

The novel refers to the human interference with the non-human world which is rapidly worsening the habitat of different species. It refers to an incident of killing of a giant panda named Hanhan by poachers. Undoubtedly Gao has a very sound knowledge of botanical taxonomy as is apparent in his description of the physical characteristics of the qichun snake:

The scientific name is the beaked Pallas pit viper. Both are more than two metres long, not as thick as a small wrist but with a small tail section which is thinner. The body is a nondescript grey-brown with a grey-white triangular pattern, so it also has the common name of chessboard snake. They don't appear dangerous, and coiled on a rock would just look like a clump of soil. (*Soul Mountain* 171)

In Chapter 33, "he" meets a ranger in the "densely forested mountains" (186). The ranger is a tall middle aged man who is dark and thin, he has a crew cut and a dark lean face with stubble. He was first in the army and then a cadre. He has travelled to many places but he says he doesn't want to go anywhere now. He just watches over the mountain on his own and has been captivated by the mountain. This nature reserve at Heiwan River has a thick growth of forest is quiet and lonely devoid of human sounds. Thus the topography changes as he reaches the Hebei Province at the lower course of the Yangtze River.

Going upstream on the Taiping River, the source of the Jingjiang, the mountain formations on the both sides becomes more and more bizzare. Here the thickly forested mountain begins to close in and the Heiwan River becomes narrow and deep. (*Soul Mountain* 186)

In chapter 39 the narrator arrives in Central China which comprises of Guizhou, Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan provinces. The topography here is more rugged. The Wuling Range separates Guizhou from Hunan. The Wuling Range is also the home to many ethnic groups like the Tujia, Han, Miao and others. The Miao live in the southern mountains, near Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. The majority of the non-Han ethnic groups are fiercely independent and have maintained their traditional way of life.

The main peak of the Wuling Range, at the borders of the provinces of Guizhou, Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan, is 3200 metres above sea level. The annual rainfall is more than 3400 points and in one year there are barely one or two days of fine weather. When the wild winds start howling they often reach velocities of more than three hundred kilometres per hour. This is a cold, damp and evil place. (*Soul Mountain* 222)

It is in Chapter 53 that the narrator arrives in the ancient city in Jiangling. Twenty kilometres from here is the ancient capital of the Chu Kingdom, where he visits the archaeological station where excavation is in progress. Often the change in the course of the river leads to the change in the topography of the land. The narrator witnesses that the lake of the earlier times has now become a small pond. Similarly water has receded in the lower reaches of the Yangtze and is now a heavily silted-up sandbar and even the city of Jingzhou is now below the riverbed. He feels a sense of profound and apparently disproportionate anguish when a loved landscape is altered out of recognition. In the words of the narrator:

On the east, this hill right underfoot was a lake extending to the Yangtze River. The Yangtze at the time was in the vicinity of Jingzhou city but now it has moved south almost two kilometres. (*Soul Mountain* 318)

The dynamic ecosystem of the Miluo River is constantly adjusting to changing environmental conditions or disturbance. The change in the natural environment because of the destruction of forest and ecology leading to the

shrinking of the Dongting Lake is referred to here.

However, I do not go to the shores of Dongting Lake to retrace his footsteps because several ecologists I saw told me that of this eight-hundred-*li* stretch of water, only a third of what is on the maps now remains. They also predict with clinical coldness that at the present rate of silt accumulation and land reclamation, within twenty years the biggest freshwater lake in the country will vanish despite how it is drawn on maps. (*Soul Mountain* 319)

Soul Mountain delineates the degraded natural environment caused by ignorance, greed and politics and describes conservation efforts by scientists. It deals with a world that, was much destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and will be even more so in the near future, by, for example, the Three Gorges Dam in the Yangtze and by the ever-growing presence of the Han Chinese who today are to be found everywhere “there is money to be made” (*Soul Mountain* 242-3). 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.

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)

In Chapter 57 “he” enters Shennongjia through Fangxian in the north. He has come here to see whether the primitive forests still exists. He has come down all the way from the high plateau and the huge mountains of the upper reaches of the Yangtze and it would be a pity to miss out seeing this mountain region of the middle reaches. The ecology of this forest gets affected with the increase in the number of human inhabitants resulting in the decline in the habitats of the other species.

The annual timber export was less than 150 cubic metres. From here all the way to Shennongjia there were only three households. Right up to 1960 the forest hadn’t been damaged but after that the highway went through and everything changed – today every year 50,000 cubic metres of timber have to be delivered. As production developed the population increased. In earlier times, every year at the first clap of spring thunder the fish would emerge from the mountain caverns and if we blocked the mouths of the caves with large bamboo trays we would haul in a basketful. Nowadays we can’t eat fish. (*Soul Mountain* 343-44)

The loss of biodiversity loss 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)

Soul Mountain 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. In Chapter 6, the scientist's efforts to save the vanishing animal species- the giant panda is recorded in detail: "In the 2500-metre giant panda observation compound at Haiba scientists are trying to preserve the ecosystem for the restoration of the pandas" (38). The co-existence between man and animals is depicted here through an episode of creating a habitat artificially for the baby panda called Beibei:

It's the baby panda they saved when it came fossicking for food, sick and starving! They have been waiting for it to come, they were certain it would come. It had already been ten days and they had been counting the days. They said it would definitely come before the new bamboo shoots started to sprout. (*Soul Mountain* 38)

But the poachers are still engaged in killing these animals and only through the neckband that transmits signals they could be traced. These are signals transmitted from giant pandas which have been captured, tagged with wireless neckbands and then returned to the forest. The enclosing darkness hides 'anxiety and restlessness' becomes 'more perilous' (*Soul Mountain* 38) because of human intervention. This makes a botanist observe: "This world belongs to wild animals but human beings persist in interfering with it" (*Soul Mountain* 38).

Later on in Chapter 8 the irony is pointed out by an old botanist that while people are saving a species with no capacity for survival, people have no awareness of saving the environment, referring to the threat posed by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Deforestation in Shennongjia is chronicled in detail in Chapter 59. Even though environmental concerns have been raised and a nature reserve has been built up, the original ecosystem could hardly be restored. The 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 Wusong River in Shanghai near the sea coast:

The black Wusong River which goes through the city gives off a perpetual stench. Fish and turtles are extinct but the inhabitants of the city somehow manage to survive. Even the treated tap water used for everyday consumption is brackish and worse still always smells of chlorine. It would seem that people are hardier than fish and prawns. (*Soul Mountain* 471)

William Cronon in *The Trouble with Wilderness* states that "wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (quoted in Garrard 69). Gao Xingjian is echoing Cronon in his powerful rejection of the urban world and going to the forests to establish his ecocentricism by dramatizing the ideas that natural system and their individual parts possesses intrinsic value, independent of human utility, and the humankind is an element within natural systems. In *Soul Mountain* he wanders along the Yangtze River to experience life in the wilderness in order to realize the idea of self.

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 stresses on the unification of nature and with the self, and the depiction of spiritual as well as physical journey of the narrator in *Soul Mountain* is an attempt to achieve such a unity. The narrator of *Soul Mountain* is on a great search of what he assumes is meaning in his life, yet throughout the book he battles with his reasons for leaving modern civilization and traveling on his own to the mountains.

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 can be changed to a discussion of what is most authentic and at times can constitute what is known as debate. But let others discuss or debate such matters; they are of no consequence for I who am engrossed in my journey or you who are on your spiritual journey. (*Soul Mountain* 313)

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