

World Humanism(s), the Divine Comedy, Lao She's "???????" ("Literature of the Soul and Buddhism"), and Gao's Soul Mountain

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Letizia Fusini,
"World Humanism(s), the *Divine Comedy*,
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Abstract: In her article "World Humanism(s), the *Divine Comedy*, Lao She's '灵的文学与佛教' ('Literature of the Soul and Buddhism'), and Gao's *Soul Mountain*" Letizia Fusini analyzes Lao She's and Xingjian Gao's conceptions of literature as an activity concerning the realm of the spirit. Fusini utilizes Dante's *Divine Comedy* for comparison between the literary ideals pursued by the two Chinese writers and regards Lao She's and Gao's humanist and non-political approach underlying their respective notions. Considering Lao She's call for the emergence of a "Chinese Dante" (1941), Fusini contends that China might have found its own "Dante" in Gao who seems to have shared the same destiny of the exiled Florentine poet. Although Lao She ascribed to the Buddhist clergy the task of creating a Chinese literature of the soul modeled on the *Divine Comedy*, Fusini argues that Gao might have fulfilled this task without resorting to any religious frameworks, but to a personal, intense, and profoundly Chinese spirituality.

Letizia FUSINI

**World Humanism(s), the *Divine Comedy*,
Lao She's "灵的文学与佛教" ("Literature of the Soul and Buddhism"), and Gao's *Soul Mountain***

Alain de Botton commented on Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* that "In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have experienced himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self what the book says is the proof of its veracity" (25). While stressing the fact that the relationship between author and the reader is essentially a spiritual communication, Botton's observation is thought-provoking in that it connects and encapsulates notions and ideas on world literature spanning from Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* to David Damrosch's theory of elliptical refractions of national literatures (7, 283). Similarly, when in an interview on 13 December 2000 with the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, Nobel Laureate Xingjian Gao was asked to express his views about the significance of true literature, he stated his belief in the universal quality of the written work defined in terms of its ability to engage people beyond the limitations of time and space and owing to the fact that "at the heart of everything, there is one single human nature" for "if one touches the essential depths of our human existence, we are all exactly alike" (Gao qtd. in Engdahl and Gao <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-interview.html>).

This idea of literature as something capable of rising above the national boundaries and standing the test of time was apparently shared by Engdahl who in response talked about a kind of "power of transcendence" as an essential ingredient of literature and art, going so far as to say that this is, in fact, a miracle. Such a "miraculous" quality of the written language was equally emphasized by Gao when he explained the "eternal spiritual value" of literature through the written word's "magic" capability of allowing communication between separate individuals "from different races and times" ("The Case" 35-36). Further, Gao said that "literature is a universal observation on the dilemmas of human existence," meaning that it is possible for a writer to transform "into one's own feelings" and express in an individualized style of poetry what she/he experienced through the reading of the works of earlier authors, simply because literature, and particularly the literary language, has the power to connect and universalize a whole gamut of emotional and intellectual experiences, all of which concur to shape the mystery of human existence ("The Case" 36). Interestingly enough, Gao's thoughts so far seem to harmonize with Goethe's ideal of *Weltliteratur* conceived as "a common world literature transcending national limits" (Prendergast, "The World" 2). Gao's emphasis on what could be described as the "self-refractive transferability" of human experiences through literature is equally compatible with Goethe's view of poetry as "the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men" (Goethe qtd. in Damrosch 132).

Relying on his past memories, Gao drew also on his lifelong experience as an avid reader in order to exemplify what he meant by "the universal quality of literature": "When I was quite small I would read Dostoyevsky, for example ... or Dante or Goethe. I did not feel they were foreigners. When I read them, I understood very well — I sensed the content. You cannot imagine them in your head as foreigners, if you really touched on the *soul* — or rather, on that life, on living beings ... you see film for a moment" (Gao qtd. in Engdahl and Gao <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/gao-interview.html>). Again, Gao's account of the emotional response following his reading of works of Western writers of different epochs and languages proves analogous to Goethe's experience of reading Chinese literature which he found similar to his own *Hermann and Dorothea*, as well as to Samuel Richardson's novels. This convinced him of the universality of the human nature: "the Chinese think, act and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them" (Goethe qtd. in Damrosch 11) and of literature's ability to communicate this important truth of the human being in a way that can be grasped and appreciated beyond the limitations of national cultures. In this sense, it is as if Gao had confirmed what Goethe had said of the Chinese almost two centuries earlier.

The idea of the existence of a profound connection between writer and reader through the literary medium — that is, a kind of mirrored image of the relationship between them — was reiterated by Gao in his conversation with Engdahl and was a kind of *Leitmotiv* informing Gao's conception of literature as something which "allows a person to perceive a human consciousness" (Fong, "Introduction: Freedom" xx). Such faculty of conveying ideas and expressing the self, which Gao ascribed to, among others, Dante as a "great Western writer of ancient times," had also been acknowledged and praised by another influential figure of China's literary history, the Manchu novelist and playwright Lao She (pseudonym of Qingchun Shu 1899-1966), the humorist who died at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Lao She's own fascination with Dante's *La Divina Commedia* was derived from his admiration for the latter's deep concern with the question of liberty and free will in association with the problem of self-salvation and the meaning of literary writing in a perspective of self-reflexivity. Throughout his life, Lao She's reading of Dante led him to develop a literary ideal of his own which he sought to fulfill in his novels and which he termed 灵的文学 ("literature of the soul"). Lao She's literary vocation constituted the basic premise of a lifelong career as a novelist, starting in 1926 with his very first work of fiction 老张的哲学 (The Philosophy of Old Zhang). Interestingly, as Lao She would recollect years later in one of his essays ("红楼梦" 3), his need for writing had its actual origins in a deep feeling of loneliness which he experienced while he was a teacher at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London together with a sense of nostalgia for his beloved homeland. He tried to relieve this loneliness by seeking refuge in the realm of creative literature and developed a tendency towards introspection which, apart from being mirrored in his books as further evidence of his individualism, enabled him to view them with a self-reflexive eye (see, e.g., Bady).

In this sense, 老牛破车 (The Ox-rickety Cart), a book of fourteen essays revolving around the meaning of literature and the role of humor as an ingredient of fiction, can be said to represent Lao She's attempt to define a kind of literary aesthetics in keeping with his independent mind. He was convinced that literature should convey the truth of human life as seen from the perspective of the writer's own emotional and intellectual experience of himself/herself and the outside world, thus attaching importance to the sentiment as a major source of inspiration for his writings: "Let us suppose that A is the writer's own subjectivity/sensibility, B the outside world, C the result of the interplay between A and B, and D the way this interaction could be expressed through words. The latter cannot simply be deemed as the quintessence of B. Rather, it first becomes C after going through A, and finally becomes D, that is, the work of literature. In fact, without the contribution given by A, the whole process described above would not be possible at all" ("文学的创造" [57]; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). By stressing the connection between literature and life, Lao She also argues that the former be unrelated to both philosophy and ethics, each of which have a different *raison d'être*. Lao She wrote that "literature is an independent art, and, as such, it has nothing to do with science" ("文学的特质" 38) and that the purpose of literature is a totally artistic one, a combination of beauty and truth, devoid of any moral or philosophic connotation: "The reason why we read a work of literature is to acquire some knowledge; but what kind of knowledge? Of course, it is not the same as science. Literature, as all art, consists in deciphering the mystery of human life. The writers, like Dufu or Wordsworth, may write about their own experiences or even fantasize about far-away utopian dreams: however, what really matters is not the content dealt with but to shed light on the truth of life in a mesmerizing way" ("文学的特质" [43-44]). As for Gao, this observation highlights Lao She's tendency to evaluate literature on the basis of the ability to convey universal truths beyond native culture and this testifies to Gao's world oriented view of literature: "the great worth of the *Divina Commedia* does not reside in its encyclopedic content but in its immortal, breathtaking ability to touch the soul and stir the imagination" ("文学的特质" [41]). By using the term 心灵 ("soul") — which means "heart/mind" and "spirit" and implies the substantial unity of the individual's corporeal and spiritual dimension — Lao She intended to cover everything that can be related to the emotional and spiritual world of both the readers and the characters of his novels, including the author himself.

Consequently, by escaping the terror of ideology and science, Lao She wrote literature imbued with impartiality and sympathy, realistic but with a slight tendency to symbolism and whose only -ism seems to be the writer's confirmed individualism (see Bady). The core of the message conveyed by

Lao She throughout his work can be summarized in his definition of the main characteristics of fiction, namely truth (真理/真实), beauty (美), imagination (想象), and emotion (感情), which form the basis of his notion of "灵的文学" ("文学的特质" [38]). The elaboration of this type of human-centered literature went hand-in-hand with Lao She's reading of both Eastern and Western authors. His distinctive humoristic vein was enhanced by his love for Dickens's novels, whose melodramatic and humanistic narratives shaped Lao She's intellectual concern for the human soul (see Huang 41-42). His literary thinking was also influenced by the Chinese May Fourth and New Culture movements of the mid 1910s and 1920s, which gave him "a new spirit and a new literary language" (Vohra 19) and which promoted a literature imbued with humanitarian intents in order to introduce Western intellectual paradigms into Chinese culture in order to "save" the country from its long-lasting cultural backwardness.

Still, it was Dante's work that exerted the greatest influence upon Lao She: "The oeuvre from which I benefited most was the *Divina Commedia* by Dante. I read all his works in the English translation, including a number of critical essays, and I have subsequently become a great admirer of him. Moreover, after reading the *Divina Commedia* I immediately realized its remarkable literary and artistic worth. ... Every scene is intensely alive and life-building, that which made me understand that the most proper way to produce a great masterpiece consists in the process of creating images from observation. Finally, the *Divina Commedia* helped me clarify the relation between matter and spirit, as well as the profound meaning of literature and art" ("写与读" 543). However, his initial attitude toward the work of Dante was a contradictory one, since on the one hand he expressed his desire to write a kind of "Chinese" *Divina Commedia* while on the other he asserted the need to be free from any particular restrictions and to write exactly what he felt in his mind (544). Not surprisingly, the original emphasis on the individual, as well as a strong conviction that every masterpiece is a mirrored image of its author, made Lao She realize that rather than resorting to a sterile imitation of the formal aspects of Dante's text he should commit himself to grasping the truth of its spirit. More precisely, Dante's influence on Lao She proved to be of capital importance for the latter's reflection on the meaning of the term "soul" which he used to qualify his literary ideal. For him, the main focus of the *Divina Commedia* is located in concern for the spiritual life of the individual and he analyzed this outside any specific religious framework from a secular perspective, but paying particular attention to the question of liberty and free will (which, in turn, Dante borrowed from St. Augustine). In the *Divina Commedia* the concern with liberty is exemplified in the figure of Cato (the Younger), a virtuous politician and statesman in the late Roman Republic, remembered for his moral integrity and his distaste for corruption. Despite of his pagan background, Cato is presented by Dante as a saved soul serving as the guardian of the mount of purgatory: the reasons for his salvation are to be found in his defense of his personal liberty, which eventually drove him to commit suicide as a protest against Julius Caesar's despotism and in his tender love for Marcia, his wife. In Virgil's speech to Cato, Dante's own aspiration to attain freedom from sin is likened to the former's strong assertion of self-independence: "He ... goes in search of freedom / and how dear that is / the man [Cato] who gives up life for it well knows" (70-77).

Therefore, it is not surprising that in an article entitled "灵的文学与佛教" ("Literature of the Soul and Buddhism") published in 1941 in the middle of the second Sino-Japanese war, Lao She expressed the need for China to produce its own Dante who could remind the people of the importance of nurturing spiritual conscience through the promotion of a type of literature capable of touching the truth of the human soul (3). His encouragement to resist Japanese occupation reflected a deep anxiety for the moral corruption which had soon transformed the whole of China into great suffering which he would depict three years later in a novel entitled *四氏同堂* (*Yellow Storm*, also titled *Four Generations under the Same Roof*) and that most literary critics have deemed as his best attempt to create a kind of Chinese *Divina Commedia*, as well as the ultimate realization of his lifelong literary ideal (see Shen 90). Thus, Lao She's notion of 灵的文学 (Literature of the Soul) is grounded on a set of humanistic values which epitomize both his respect for the dignity of the human being and his moral necessity to be free. It was probably to safeguard his individual liberty that he committed suicide by drowning himself in a Beijing lake in 1966 after being repeatedly humiliated both mentally and physically by the Red Guards who had attacked him as a counter-revolutionary.

In the text of his Nobel Lecture where Gao's personal views on the meaning of literature and their *raison d'être* are synthesized he commented on the existence of the literary medium in a way similar to that of Lao She's: "Literature is intrinsically man's affirmation of the value of his own self, that which is confirmed during the writing ... literature exists because humankind seeks an entirely spiritual activity beyond the gratification of material desires" ("The Case" 35-38). This vision of literature as a means of expressing and also reclaiming the writer's own interiority constitutes the most important premise of Gao's argument that literature can only be humanist in intent and that as such it should focus on the depiction of authentic human feelings: "To subvert is not the aim of literature; its value lies in discovering and revealing what is rarely known, little known or thought to be known, but in fact not very well known of the truth of the human world. It would seem that truth is the most basic and unassailable quality of literature" ("The Case" 42). Gao identifies truth as the minimum requirement for a type of literature that by transcending practical utilitarianism and refusing to be subservient to politics enables the writer to scrutinize the world of human experience through his/her own eyes from an independent and thus most authentic perspective. Judging by his assertions, it appears that Gao's understanding of truth as "disclosedness" bears close resemblance to the pre-Socratic notion of ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*), whose literal meaning is "truth as un-covering" (Wisniewski 98). To Gao, the link between literature and truth is an ethical principle, the only command the writer has to obey in order to fulfill the spiritual function of literature. This also accentuates Gao's concern for the social aspect of literary creation and thus refuses to advocate literature as an end in itself: "This is not at all to say that what I advocate is pure literature ... Quite the contrary: I regard literary creation as the individual's challenge to society for the right to exist, and although this challenge is insignificant, it is nevertheless a gesture. Pure literature is absolutely not what I advocate. Quite the opposite: I regard literary creation as the individual's challenge to society for the right to exist, and although this challenge is of no consequence, it is nevertheless a standpoint" ("Without -isms" 66). Thus, depending on his belief that literary creation is based on the writer's spiritual freedom, Gao takes the individual's perception as a starting point for an aesthetic rooted in human emotions founded on a combination of memories and imagination. Interestingly, in one of his theoretical essays from the collection entitled 沒有主義 (*Without -isms*) Gao declared that he derived most of his literary insights from Western writers such as Proust and Joyce and he went so far as to say that Western literature has stimulated him more than Chinese literature. Such a point seems to tighten further my argument about the link between Gao and Lao She, whose fascination with Western authors bordered on obsession (see Bady). Of course, this does not mean that the Lao She and Gao did not recognize the great literary achievements of their homeland: Gao, for instance, defined the authors of China's great novels comparable to Shakespeare because they were written from the depths of their soul ("The Case" 35).

Gao termed his own literary ideal as 冷的文学 ("cold literature") to highlight its complete independence from any political, moral, ideological, and religious obligations. It is a type of literature "without -isms," the product of the distanced gaze of the writer who by scrutinizing his own self manages to scrutinize others as well: "Literature basically has nothing to do with politics, but it is purely a matter of the individual. It is the gratification of the intellect, together with an observation, a review of experiences, reminiscences and feelings, or the portrayal of a state of mind ... this sort of literature, which has recovered its innate character of giving vent to the writer's feelings and telling of his ambitions, can be called 'cold literature,' to differentiate it from literature that promotes a creed, attacks contemporary politics or tries to change society" ("Cold" 78-79). Gao's brand of "cold literature" also appears to be informed by a kind of individualism which, far from being egotism, is humanism: it advocates and protects the liberty of the human being, investigates the basic questions of the life of the individual, and in so doing enables the writer to affirm his own existence. As Gao put it, paraphrasing Descartes, "Je m'exprime donc je suis" (Gao qtd. in Li 102), that is "literature is a refuge for the free spirit and the last bastion of human dignity" ("論文學" 53 ["On literary Writing"]). More accurately, the deeply humanist stance informing Gao's literary ideal situates itself at the crossroads of both Western influences and his Chinese cultural roots. For instance, in his 1987 essay "遲到的現代主義與當代中國文學" (see in Gao, 沒有主義沒有主義 [*Without -isms*]) Gao illustrated contemporary Chinese literature's modernistic tendencies (including himself) as the result of a

rediscovery of the old Western humanism which placed a great emphasis on the self of the individual without severing its ties with human society and the outside world as such (see Davies; Yan xx). On the other hand, the attitude of "coldness" he professes with reference to the writer's individualism contains an important element of Chineseness, which Gilbert C.F. Fong has related to the concept of 静观 ("quiet observation") ("Introduction" xviii): the term designates a state of spiritual detachment which enables the artist to inspect reality from the neutral viewpoint of a "quiet observer," thus preserving his emotional and intellectual freedom.

Soul Mountain, the novel for which Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, is a complex and experimental book. It is a fictionalized narrative of a series of journeys that results in a number of interesting encounters with all sorts of people: minorities, shamans, Daoist monks, old folksingers, and so on, each the last custodians of an ancestral non-Han cultural heritage that the communist government sought to eliminate during the Cultural Revolution. The book resembles a travel diary where the narrator's own impressions of the locations and the people he sees and hears are combined with a set of descriptive passages in which the mode and style frequently shifts from the accuracy typical of ethnographic records to the vagueness of a more dreamlike dimension. Thus, the peculiar diversity of the ingredients characterizing *Soul Mountain* was probably the rationale behind the enthusiastic reception of the book by the Swedish Academy that deemed it as "one of those singular literary creations that seem impossible to compare with anything but themselves" (Lee, "Nobel" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1075>>; see also Lee, "Aesthetics" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2056>>). However, I would argue that Gao's novel, albeit *sui generis*, can afford a comparison with Dante's *Divina Commedia*, especially if we consider some aspects which testify to their shared universal validity and humanist insights: both texts are about the universal journey of life and this theme appears to have a double connotation owing to the constant interplay between reality and imagination. In Gao's novel the journey theme unfolds on a double story-line which is represented by the real travel made by the narrator along the Yangzi river and recounted in the first person, and the spiritual journey toward an imaginary site called 灵山 (Soul Mountain) made by a second narrator, a "you" (a deliberate creation of the lonely "I"). My hypothesis about a possible linkage between the two works seems to be confirmed by the Chinese critic Young-Gu Li who observes that "the expressive structure of the spiritual journey is influenced by Dante's *La Divina Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust*" (106). Additionally, in the letter to Cangrande della Scala (Dante's protector in Verona to whom the *Divina Commedia* is dedicated), Dante makes critical comments on the content, form, and purpose of his text in a way which is deemed to be unique for the time. It provides us with the theoretical framework for recognizing the existence of a double layer of meaning within Dante's poem: "You must know that the sense of this work is not simple; rather, it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical" (Dante <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/cangrande.english.html>>). The journeys of Dante and Gao, albeit quite different in many respects, can be likened for their twofold meaning, that is, their metaphorical quality. Gao's I-narrator states that "while you are searching for the path that leads to Lingshan, I, while walking up to the Yangzi river, search for the truth" (Li 106). Dante remarks that "the subject of the whole work, taken only from a literal standpoint, is simply the status of the soul after death, taken simply ... If the work is taken allegorically, however, the subject is man, either gaining or losing merit through his freedom of will, subject to the justice of being rewarded or punished" (Dante <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/cangrande.english.html>>).

Based on above, it becomes clear that for both authors the journey (either physical or imaginary) is above all a journey of the soul and that it implies the quest for something that goes beyond travel *per se*. For Gao, *Soul Mountain* is "a personal quest for the true meaning of life (*soul*)" (Fong, "Introduction: Freedom" xxvi) resembling a kind of pilgrimage, while for Dante, as Valeria Capelli points out, the *Divina Commedia* "is the metaphor, the allegory of man's existential journey, whose purpose is to attain eternal happiness: this becomes possible only when one manages to resume the truthful image of his own self" (22). The similarities between the two narrators seem to be profuse, for both are either morally (Dante) or physically (Gao) troubled, both look for something that actually

transcends them, both encounter people to whom they ask questions due to their thirst for truth and who are actually projections of their own self: Virgil could be deemed as Dante's "you."

However, what is most striking is that the two works end with the vision of god. Although these are two different experiences — for Dante was a fervent Catholic while Gao is an atheist — they share a mystical quality which renders each virtually ineffable. As we read in the last Canto of the Paradise, the *Divina Commedia* ends with Dante trying to understand the rationale behind the mystery of the Divine Trinity in three different, albeit substantially the same, *personae* but "that was not a flight for my wings" (*Divine* 139). However, Dante ultimately sees this in a flash of understanding that he cannot express through words but just identify with "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars" (*Divine* 145). Gao, meanwhile, sees god in a "small green frog, one eye blinking and the other wide open, unmoving, looking at me" (*Soul* 505) and declares that god speaks a language incomprehensible to humans. In the end, he finds himself plunged in a state of silence and tranquility, which surprises him and makes him state that, even though he pretends to understand, he actually does not know anything and comprehends nothing. Whether the frog is to be associated with an immanent god or with the ineffability of human life and nature, both Gao's novel and Dante's poem are concerned with the human soul and they each shed light on the individual's personal quest for a self-salvation be it religious, metaphysical, or spiritual.

In conclusion, Gao's and Lao She's humanist approaches to the art of writing and the ways in which their relationship to Dante (whether they acknowledged it or not) informed their literary pursuits. Thus, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's definition of world literature in terms of "constellations" of works enables us to construct a model for representing the relationship between the two Chinese authors and Dante: "The idea of constellation is not to find an almost complete coherence among works, but to connect central attributes that can also be said to define the work, in contrast to other, less canonical works from the same authors or the same literatures" (139). In this sense, the central attribute Lao She's and Gao's literary ideals appear to share and partake in the rhetorical purpose Dante outlined in his letter to Cangrande and that translates into what I call the "*Divine Comedy* Paradigm," namely an archetypal, quasi-mystical preoccupation with the soul as the most truthful expression of the human nature, and encapsulates the essence of the two Chinese writers' shared humanism. Still, a brief distinction needs to be made, since in Gao's case the literary ideal goes beyond what Lao She wished for in 1941: rather than a "Chinese," namely Sinophone Dante, he dreamt of a Dante of China who could write specifically for the Chinese people to support them morally and ethically in their efforts to resist the foreign enemy and boost their patriotic consciousness. Gao, instead, refuses the idea of "representing the People, representing the motherland, saving the nation" (Gao qtd. in Lee and Dutrait 744) because his Chineseness is only a matter of his native language and cultural background. Yet, with *Soul Mountain* he managed to combine both regional and universalist depictions of the human soul as the characters with whom the protagonist comes across in his journey are not only real figures, but also projections of his own being. Last, I would rethink Torbjörn Lodén's definition of *Soul Mountain* as a piece of "World Literature with Chinese Characteristics" since although Gao has drawn on the cultural traditions of China to write his masterpiece, "the journey and the exploration of the main character being a search for true life, the focus is on the human being, not on China" (269). Conversely, in light of Gao's literary ideal and how this fits within Dante's ideals, I characterize *Soul Mountain* as a work of "Chinese literature with a world resonance" in that this definition not only proves more adequate to reflect the internal dynamics of the novel — particularly the coexistence of the regional and the universalist elements — but also links with Damrosch's idea of works entering the realm of world literatures whilst maintaining "the marks of their national roots" (283). This perspective seems more suitable for highlighting the novel's affinities with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as its peculiar way of fulfilling, in a sense, Lao She's ideal of China's (not just Chinese) Dante.

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