


Aesthetics in Gao's Soul Mountain

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**Abstract:** In her article "Aesthetics in Gao's *Soul Mountain*" Mabel Lee analyses Nobel Laureate 2000 Xingjian Gao's aesthetics. Transnational conglomerates today control the book industry from publishing house to bookshop and through aggressive market strategies they exert considerable influence on readers. Nonetheless, there are writers who refuse to capitulate to market demands and seek only to actualize their aesthetic ideas in the creation of literary texts. One such writer is Gao, author of the novel *Soul Mountain*. Lee posits that Gao's aesthetics is founded on the close interrogation of both Chinese and European models and practices and explores specific aspects of Gao's aesthetics and how these are embedded in his novel *Soul Mountain*. In an Appendix the article includes lists of Gao's works in Chinese and English, as well as a list of studies on his oeuvre.

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**Mabel LEE****Aesthetics in Gao's *Soul Mountain***

Xingjian Gao (born 1940 in Ganzhou) established his credentials as a writer in China and internationally during the early 1980s through his controversial plays, short stories, and writings on literary creation. Also a painter, he held his first solo exhibitions in Beijing, Berlin, and Vienna in 1985. During 1979 and 1980 he made two short visits to Europe and in 1985 he made a third visit lasting almost a year and travelled to other places. Fluent in French having graduated with a five-year major in French literature in 1962 from the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing, he communicated with relative ease amongst European intellectuals who were eager to learn first hand about developments in China following the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In late 1987 he travelled again to Europe and decided to stay in Paris so that he could spend time writing without the need for self-censorship and without political interference. What had been intended as a temporary stay turned out to be a permanent relocation, and in 1997 he became a French citizen.

During the 1980s, when Gao was still living in China, the excesses of the Cultural Revolution had ended, but the custodians of cultural production remained in positions of authority. His writings were considered problematical, as threatening the literary traditions formulated by Mao Zedong in Yan'an in 1942, and enshrined in the guidelines for cultural production after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. He refers to powerful leaders within the literary and propaganda establishments he had embarrassed because at public forums organized to criticise him, veteran writers had come out in his support. As a result he was subjected to various insidious forms of harassment he documents in "Wilted Chrysanthemums." In 1989 when students were slaughtered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, he decided that he would not return to his ancestral land while it remained under the rule of a brutal authoritarian government. Since relocating to Paris he has published two autobiographical novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*, a collection of short stories *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*, plus a corpus of seventeen works for the theatre, including a grand opera *Snow in August* (for Gao's publications in Chinese and English and studies about his oeuvre, see Appendix). The latter is among several works he has personally directed on stage. At the same time, his plays were being performed on the stages of Asia, Europe, the U.S., Australia, and Africa, and his writings were being published in French, Swedish, and English editions. In 2000 he received the Nobel Prize in Literature (see [Nobelprize.org](http://www.nobelprize.org) <<http://www.nobelprize.org>>), the first time the Prize had been awarded for a body of works originally created in the Chinese language.

Between 1985 and 2012 he has held over fifty solo exhibitions of his black-and-white ink paintings in Europe, Asia, and the U.S. and substantial volumes of his artworks have been produced to accompany his major exhibitions, notably *Between Figurative and Abstract: Paintings by Gao Xingjian*, *La Fin du monde*, and *Depois du dilúvio*. To date he has also made two films, *La Silhouette sinon l'ombre* and *Après le deluge*, and he is currently working on a third film, *Le Deuil de la beauté* scheduled to premiere in late 2013. His films may to a large extent be considered art in motion, and as in the case of all of his creations, each work is intent on exploring different types of innovation which command his attention. This track record in literary and art creation indicates that writer, painter, and film maker are embodied in the person of Gao.

It is not unknown for persons who have been endowed with creativity to express their talents across genres, but what distinguishes Gao's creations is the ease with which they also transcend cultural barriers successfully (see Lee re various aspects of Gao's work). His fiction has now been translated into more than thirty languages and his plays have been staged in almost as many languages. Painting and film of course are visual art. He in fact rejects the use of linguistic signs in his painting and his films too are not language dependent, resorting instead to the universal language of music or to sounds which are not culture specific but are capable of inducing, sensations, emotions, and feelings. His paintings have been exhibited worldwide and collected by public institutions, as well as private individuals. Over the past few years, his films have had a presence at international literary festivals and have also accompanied his art exhibitions. At Italy's celebrated international arts festival La Milaneseana 2008, Gao was presented with a citation acknowledging his singular creative achievements which both cross genres and transcend cultural boundaries. Referring to him as "an omnipotent artist," the citation expresses the hope "that his

tenacity and creativity in the production of art will endure and continue to inspire the world," because this is "the grand purpose of art" (*Gao Xingjian* 14-15).

Reference is made above to Gao's explorations in art and film because elements of these genres are present in his fiction. Few novelists, playwrights, directors, artists, or film makers write extensively about the genres in which they create, but Gao is an exception. A voracious reader since childhood, he had read his way through the family library that also contained books on Western literature and art, some in Chinese translation. Then, as an undergraduate at the Foreign Languages Institute, he read French writings in the original, as well as French translations of writings in other languages, regularly borrowing a shelf of books each week from the library. By this time his impulse to write had been ignited and his reading focused, but he knew what he was writing did not conform to the guidelines for literary production at the time, so he wrote in secret. On graduating, he was assigned work as editor and translator at the Beijing Foreign Languages Press. Four years later, when the Cultural Revolution was unleashed he burned a suitcase of unpublished manuscripts of plays, poems, essays, and a novella rather than have them found by Red Guards and used as evidence against him.

It was an innate intellectual curiosity that led Gao to investigate the rationale for the techniques, strategies, and linguistic devices employed in various literary genres. His reading across cultures and his interrogation of genres informed and nurtured in him a unique aesthetics which he applied to his creative explorations. He is uncompromising in his stance regarding the indiscriminate denigration of cultural antecedents by "modernity" and its subsequent reincarnations, viewing this as a political dynamic driven by ideology that has infiltrated national and global cultural infrastructures. Instead, he acknowledges that he is informed by the achievements of his predecessors, although he is resolute in his search for new paths for his own creative explorations. His creations represent the actualization of an aesthetics aimed primarily at his own aesthetic fulfillment as a multi-talented individual and he demands the freedom to create without political influence: thus Gao and his texts are against the dictum of *littérature engagée*. At the same time, while respecting the freedom of readers or viewers to choose whether or not to engage with his texts, their responses play no role in his creations. In other words, he refuses to pander to the dictates of any authority, that of politics or the market. He creates for his own personal aesthetic fulfillment, while scrutinizing the entire process of creation with an objective "third eye" as described in his essays such as "Cold Literature" (78) and his Nobel lecture "The Case for Literature" (*The Case* 32-48). In effect, by transcending the narcissism of his subjective self and using a "third eye" to evaluate his work, he acts as his own critic.

Gao began writing his novel *Soul Mountain* in Beijing during the summer of 1982, knowing that it had no prospect of publication in China: he wrote it purely for his own personal aesthetic gratification. When he left China at the end of 1987, he took with him the handwritten manuscript of the novel and in September 1989 sent it to his publisher in Taiwan. It was published in the following year as *Lingshan (Soul Mountain)*. The 563 pages of this autobiographical novel provided him with ample space to exercise the full range of his creative talents while also actualizing his unique and innovative fiction aesthetics. During the Cultural Revolution, he was acutely aware that the perceptions of his self were being annihilated and he intuited that his only defense was to articulate himself in language, that is, by writing. In "The Case for Literature" he states that it was only when any articulations of the self was absolutely prohibited that he fully realized the eternal value of literature (32-48). In *Soul Mountain* written in China there are only a few veiled references to the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. He began his second autobiographical novel *One Man's Bible* in 1997 in France around the time he became a French citizen. By this time he no longer exercised self-censorship, but he found that to write about his personal experiences and what he had witnessed during the Cultural Revolution excruciatingly painful. The experience of spiritual repression undoubtedly heightened Gao's impulse for autobiography and the writing of *Soul Mountain* to some extent satisfied that impulse while allowing him to implement his ingenious innovation of using pronouns to explore different levels of his own psychology, a form of narration he also employed in *One Man's Bible* and in which it is of critical importance. The fictional narrator "you" examines his own psychology and behavior during the Cultural Revolution by distancing himself from "he" of those times. In the following I explore how he formulated his unique fiction aesthetics.

In "Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*" Gao demonstrates how he developed his aesthetics in fiction through closely interrogating the fiction of China and the West. His approach is scholarly: thorough, analytical, and precise. He acknowledges writings which had provided him

with inspiration and insights, but asserts that what he seeks to explore in *Soul Mountain* are his own perceptions as a writer living in modern times. Describing himself as "a product of Han Chinese culture" (103) and as a person who uses the Chinese language for his writing, he sees his physical journey along the Yangtze, that forms the contextual background of the novel, both as a quest to understand the many cultures that constitute China, and as a psychological journey to understand himself. He saw his first hurdle as the modern Chinese language itself. As a writer with a strong sense of poetry and music, he wanted to discover a form of the language with audio appeal. For him modern Chinese writings lacked audio appeal, because it had become riddled with "undiluted Western morphology and syntax" (84). He attributed this to poor translations and to theorists advancing these poor translations as a "modern" literary style and to linguists who had standardized the modern Chinese language by explaining it in terms of morphological and syntactical concepts borrowed from Western languages. To write his novel required finding an "uncontaminated" form of the modern Chinese language and to do this he investigated oral folk literary traditions and practices, as well as various local dialects. His search also took him to the writings of Menglong Feng (1574-1645) and Shengtan Jin (1608-1661), both of whom he declared to be "masters of language": Feng used the living language in his writings, while Jin made the dead literary language of books come to life.

It startled him to find that read aloud Jin's narrative language "resonated" and was "infused with movement and flowing rhythms" (87). This led him to the realization that sound is "the soul of language," so it was incumbent upon him to restore the musicality of the sounds and rhythms inherent in the tonal nature of the Chinese language. To this end, he implemented the strategy of drafting his chapters on a tape recorder while listening intently to the language, and only then transposing the words and sentences into handwritten text. He maintains that language is the "quintessence of human culture," mightier than politics, political authority or ideology, and argues that language is not hostage to philosophical or ethical rules or to social customs. Language allows a person to transcend oneself, to establish one's own controls and rules, and "this is why the art of language — literature — will broach no interference and continues to have an independent existence" (89). The specific problem of the Chinese language resolved, Gao proceeds to define a unique fiction aesthetics based on his analysis of the inherent nature of language. Noting that stream of consciousness in Western literature begins with a subject and that as the writer captures the psychological processes of the subject there is a resulting flow of language, he posits that the language of literature is best regarded as a "flow of language" (90). He further notes that by changing the pronoun, language is given greater expressive power, that is, by changing the pronoun to "you" and "he" the subject is endowed with different angles of perception. He states that this changing of pronouns constitutes the linguistic structure of *Soul Mountain*. The third-person pronoun "she" is the male subject's experiences and thoughts regarding the other sex. For him *Soul Mountain* is a "long soliloquy" in which the pronouns keep changing in a "flow of language" (90).

Gao argues that language is inherently unrelated to logic, but as an expression of human psychological activities it follows a linear process as it seeks actualization. Language does not obey the objective concepts of time and space of the physical world, so by not indicating tense the Chinese language in fact better reflects the basic nature of language. Actualized in the Chinese language present, past, and future are indistinguishable. Time is not emphasized by verbal inflections and only the psychological processes of the narrator and the listener or reader are involved. So reality, imagination, memory, and thought have no strict demarcations, but are integrated in the process of the narration and narration acknowledges only what is actualized in language and has nothing to do with reality. He maintains that while the Chinese language often lacks the precision needed for scientific explanations, it is able to depict psychological states better than the more logical and analytical languages of the West. Moreover, he asserts that literary narration has nothing to do with the verification of reality. Other advantages for narration in the Chinese language are that the subject is commonly omitted and the verb is not inflected according to the pronoun, so that the narrative angle can change with ease.

For Gao the purest spirit of Chinese culture is embodied in Daoism and Chan Buddhism and this is manifested in their clever play with language he acknowledges that *Zhuangzi* (*The Book of Chuang Tzu*) and the Chinese translation of *The Diamond Sutra* had provided him with great insights and helped him to avoid static psychological analysis in his writing. He asserts that while his perceptions are those of someone living in modern times, it is this spirit of Chinese culture that he seeks to recapture in the modern Chinese language. While intent on writing something fresh

and innovative, he rejects the modernist stance of trampling on literary antecedents and the negation of tradition: for him tradition exists, and it is a matter of how one understands and makes use of it. He also acknowledges gaining insights from Songling Pu (1640-1715), Nai'an Shi (ca. 1296-1371), Xueqin Cao (ca. 1715-1763), and E Liu (1857-1909), as well as from the work of Chekov, Joyce, Kafka, Proust, and Tolstoy and some French *nouveau roman* writings, but this does not preclude him from searching for his own mode of narration. He rejects theories of fiction, saying he does not know of any writers who have benefited from theorists, and he dismisses them as doing nothing more than formulating rigid models and creating fashions. For him even plot and characterization are generally agreed-upon concepts, and he argues that the form of fiction is spontaneous, the creation of the author. *Soul Mountain* incorporates Chinese Indigenous narrative traditions into a modern novel that is informed by modern Western literary models in its concern for tracking the psychological activities of the protagonist, namely himself. Gao's discoveries about the Chinese language and language in general have allowed for his sustained use of pronouns in this autobiographical novel, and has no antecedents in the fictional narratives of either Chinese or Western writings ("Literature and Metaphysics" 93-95).

Gao draws attention to Chapter 72 of *Soul Mountain* that is written to preempt adverse reactions to the novel. The critic exclaims, "This isn't a novel!" (*Soul Mountain* 496), adding that a novel must have a complete story, and it is common knowledge that there must be foreshadowing, building up to a climax, and then a conclusion. Adopting a stance of mock humility, the protagonist responds by asking if fiction can be written without conforming to what is "common knowledge." The critic states: "No matter how you tell a story, there must be a protagonist. In a long work of fiction there must be several important characters, but this work of yours ...?" The protagonist argues: "But surely the I, you, she and he in the book are characters?" The critic's derisive rebuke is that these are just different pronouns to change the narrative angle, and cannot replace portraying characters: "These pronouns of yours, even if they are characters, don't have clear images, they are hardly described." The protagonist says he is not painting portraits, to which the critic responds: "Right, fiction isn't painting, it is art in language. Do you really think the petulant exchanges between these pronouns can replace the personalities of characters?" To the protagonist's comment that he does not want to create the personalities of the characters, the critic asks: "Why are you writing fiction if you don't even understand what fiction is?" (*Soul Mountain* 496-97).

When the protagonist responds by asking for a definition of fiction, the critic snarls: "This is modernist, it's imitating the West but falling short." The intrepid protagonist suggests: "then it is Eastern." The critic is flabbergasted: "You've slapped together travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, un-theoretical discussions, un-fable-like fables, copied out some folk songs, added some legend-like nonsense of your own invention, and are calling it fiction!" The protagonist is unfazed, and gives a long list of traditional Chinese writings dating back to the Warring States period that are acknowledged as fiction, and says that none of these were created according to fixed models. When the critic asks the protagonist if he is from the "seeking-for-roots" school, he promptly rejects this, as he does any label. He says he writes because "he can't bear the loneliness, he writes to amuse himself ... fiction for him is a luxury beyond earning money and making a livelihood." The frustrated critic departs, leaving the protagonist to ponder innumerable questions about fiction, narration and the existential problems of life (*Soul Mountain* 496-98). The suggestion is that the protagonist is perplexed, but it is clear that the author already has firm answers to all of the questions raised in this chapter of *Soul Mountain*.

Gao's three trips along the Yangtze in 1983 and 1984 provide the contextual background for *Soul Mountain* during which time he also worked out the primary structure of the novel. The characters would be pronouns, and this structure would allow him to observe different psychological levels of language. The bedrock of his bold innovation is his understanding that human awareness of language begins with the emergence of pronouns. Whereas the modern novel normally employs a single narrative mode, *Soul Mountain* employs diverse ancient Chinese modes of narration: records of scenery and geography, records of people and the supernatural, *chuanqi* romances, historical tales, episodic novels, *biji* jottings, and miscellaneous records. His use of diverse modes of narration is made possible by his strategy of changing the pronoun. Based on his understanding that literary narration is a flow of language, changes in narrative mode are possible as long as the flow of language is not interrupted.

In "The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation" — summarized in the following paragraphs — Gao discusses the importance of music in his writings, while further elaborating on

his fiction aesthetics. He sees writing first as a search for the music of language, and secondly as a search for content, characters, structure, and thought. In preparing to write he chooses music that he wants to hear. It is music that allows him to enter a psychological state for writing. When the right language has been found "the sentences to be recorded or written become audible, like musical phrases, and are no longer an arrangement of concepts and views dependent upon thought" ("The Modern" 110). Having experienced the musicality of the language of Proust and Brecht in their articulation of psychological perceptions, it is musicality in the Chinese language that he seeks to achieve in writing about his own psychological perceptions. He observes that, as in the case of music, any language involving sound must be actualized in a flow of linear time, but while music and drama can be polyphonic, this is not possible for fiction. Nonetheless, he maintains that in certain linguistic contexts it is possible for the writer to create meanings beyond words, that is, to create a tension that can induce a feeling, a mood or a psychological space ("The Modern" 112).

The measures Gao implemented to purify the Chinese language for his writing in fact brings the written language closer to the spoken language. He states that he strives for succinctness and clarity by eliminating adjectives and other attributives where possible, and separating into short sentences any components that clutter up the principal clause. In compound sentences he tries to do away with conjunctions so that the relationship between clauses is hidden. He also discards non-essential elements in sentences such as adverbial and verbal suffixes, and strives to make every Chinese character function to its fullest potential: if a monosyllabic verb can replace a disyllabic verb with the same meaning, he will use the monosyllabic verb ("The Modern" 113). Further, on the premise that writing, reading, and the actualization of language are psychological activities and that to observe or comment on an object are not passive acts, Gao argues that a person is not like a camera that does nothing more than mechanically release a shutter or lens. The eyes of the person behind the camera constantly choose images, and adjust the focus, so the line of vision and focus are always shifting. If one uses language to describe an image in front of one's eyes it a process, even if it is an "objective" description. In the eyes of a living person there are no purely objective images: even if the person purports to be detached, there are feelings, and an image will evoke certain responses. To capture an image in language is complex, and because the process relies on language, the writing includes naming, and making judgments and associations. He notes that seventy-seven of the eighty-one chapters of *Soul Mountain* are devoted to such observations, and that it was his intention to find a form of Chinese language that could express the psychological processes involved. For him mental images are more ephemeral than anything observable in the external world, and are difficult and virtually impossible to capture in language. For this reason he does not describe dream states, and only deals with "impressions left by dream" that he arranges into a flow of language ("The Modern" 114). Citing Chapter 23 of the *Soul Mountain* (157-59) he writes that he has arranged these impressions "so that they keep appearing, keep changing, and like music are endowed with rhythm" ("The Modern" 115). He further states that he does not directly describe mental images, hallucinations, memory or imagination: what interests him is tracking psychological perceptions ("The Modern" 115).

Based on his understanding that modern Chinese writings lack musicality because of the proliferation of polysyllabic words that has caused people to neglect the four tones and tonal patterns inherent in the language, he finds that by using monosyllabic verbs whenever possible, the musicality of the language can be reinforced. Asserting that he writes in the living language, he has no compunctions about borrowing from dialects, but read aloud it must be comprehensible to those who do not know those dialects. For him the Chinese language is more concise and more versatile than Western languages, but contemporary Chinese writings often contain huge sentences with structures that do not exist in the language. Such sentences he says are modeled on poor translations of modern Western writings: complex sentences that are hard to break up in the original work are simply translated into lifeless sentences, or else sentences that are not sentences, because equivalent expressions cannot be found in Chinese. The fact that these translations are published is bad enough, but worse still is that some writers who cannot read the originals read these irresponsible translations and wrongly assume that the great modern writers of the West write like this. Imitating these bad translations has become trendy, and this has led to the terrible corruption of the modern Chinese language ("The Modern" 117-18).

Because Gao wanted to use the Chinese language in his writing, he turned to the great prose writings of the past to discover mechanisms within the structure of the language that he could develop. He discovered that China's traditional lyrical poetry and songs, the folksongs of the Wu

dialect region south of the Yangtze, and the storytelling and sung ballads of Suzhou were repositories of colorful and dynamic Chinese language. Literature for him was a way of describing human existence, so it is associated with human feelings. If the language of literature is not sustained by human feelings, and is only form for the sake of form or language for the sake of language, it will be "an empty shell of language that over time will turn into a heap of linguistic garbage ("The Modern" 119)." On the other hand, while ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Goethe's *Faust*, Kafka and Joyce all employ different linguistic forms, they remain as testimonies of human existence and the writings of Bai Li (701-762) and Xueqin Cao continue to evoke feelings in the people of today (119). Gao's conviction is that literature will always continue to exist and this is because truth can never be exhausted. He argues that truth is not universal, but is defined by the perceptions of the individual, and this explains the wealth and vibrancy of literature, and also why waves of isms and theories proclaiming the death of literary antecedents have failed to destroy literature. Writers search for a unique language to express their feelings, so while bound by the same grammatical rules there will be differences in the literary language of writers using the same language. He further notes how language can come to life and be "endowed with a poetic quality or a soul ("The Modern" 121)" and it is this that he sets out to achieve in his writings.

In "The Art of Fiction" discussed below Gao focuses on the issue of narration and the narrative aesthetics which inform *Soul Mountain*. He preempts rebuttals by critics by positing that while a story and characters are regarded as prerequisites for traditional fiction, "fiction can be written other than by telling a story" ("The Art" 118). Surveying the evolution of fiction in China and the West, he focuses on the emergence in the twentieth century of what is called "modernist fiction," a term he rejects in favor of the more inclusive term of "modern fiction." For him the distinguishing feature of "modern fiction" is its concern with how the narrator narrates, and this had resulted in dispensing with plot, character as well as the omnipotent narrator. He sees himself as a writer of "modern fiction," and locates his fiction aesthetics within the framework of modern world fiction. It is this "modern" fiction aesthetics that is actualized in his novel *Soul Mountain*.

Gao's analysis of the art of fiction across cultures demonstrates the extent of his knowledge and his intellectual acumen. He notes that writings such as *Journey to the West* and *Water Margin* to *One Thousand and One Nights* to Rabelais's *Gargantua and Panagruel*, and even to Dickens, Gogol, and Hugo all came under the rubric of telling a story: while containing some vivid character portrayals it was the plot that was of primary importance. Then a shift away from the plot to the portrayal of characters made the plot secondary, while the creation of characters with striking personalities became pivotal in the art of fiction. Fiction from Cao's *Dream of Red Mansions* in Asia, and from Balzac to Tolstoy sought to reproduce the many people populating society, and this realist fiction provided broad vistas of social life as well as vivid images of characters with unique personalities. The depiction of social life became less important in Dostoevsky's writings where the personalities of characters became more complex, schizophrenic and depressive, and in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* where the characters' inner worlds fraught with their secret contradictions were reflected through a multi-angled lens. There had been a shift of emphasis from the plot to the creation and portrayal of characters, but because these works failed to discard the plot, they remained traditional fiction ("The Art" 119).

Gao sees the advent of modern literature as the result of writers probing the issue of "how the narrator narrated" ("The Art" 120). In traditional fiction the author was an omnipotent narrator, a person who although hidden knew everything about the external world and the inner mind of the characters, and who spoke in the measured and leisurely manner of a storyteller. Fiction writers of the twentieth century raised the question: who is the narrator? And then another question: From which angle does the narration occur? Gao notes that fiction writers abandoned the widely used practice of the omnipotent narrator and instead chose a specific narrative angle. The narrator would be a certain character, and the narration would be through the eyes of that character. The author was further concealed, not allowed to make random comments or criticisms, and thus completely withdrew from the work. Only the characters were allowed to speak for themselves, and this was a major change. Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner each used different methods, but they shared the common characteristic of adopting a particular subjective narrative angle, usually the narrative angle of a character, and, observing through the eyes of that character, experiences the character's feelings. So the creation of fiction first required choosing a narrator. What eventually emerged was a narrative language, and "the art of fiction lay in how an appropriate narrative language could be found, thereby relegating conventional plot and character to secondary



positions. Nonetheless, there had to be at least one character, and it was how this character spoke that was the key to fiction creation" ("The Art" 120). Further, Gao notes that the *nouveau roman* was labeled "postmodernist," but that some later generation writers went further and turned fiction into intellectual discussions. They discarded story, plot, and characters, deconstructed the narrator and narrative language, and turned fiction into an intellectual game. He acknowledges that Roland Barthes's "death of the author" (120) was popular for a time, and his method of explaining literary texts became a blueprint for writing fiction but he refutes point blank this sort of meta-fiction and argues that it in fact subverts fiction. It meant that any text could be fiction, and that the art of fiction was relegated to being the conceptual analysis of fiction. That fiction had been reduced to this, in his view was because of the ideology behind so-called modernity. The introduction of social revolution and historical evolutionary theory with its continuing revolution and perpetual overturning into the domain of the creative arts did not result in creation, but on the contrary to the withering and annihilation of art and literature. For him a baseline exists for innovations in the art of fiction: the narrative language. If the narrative language is removed, and fiction becomes an intellectual game or the actualization of concepts that are devoid of living human feelings, then the impulse to create fiction, as well as interest in reading it are lost, and this can only signal the end of fiction.

Nonetheless, Gao argues that fiction can evolve and that the possibilities for artistic expression can always be explored: at issue is who is narrating. Whether it is the traditional omnipotent narrator or a specific character, once the narrative language is activated, there must be a subject. In any language there are three basic pronouns "I," "you" and "he." So, is the narrator "I" or "you" or "he"? While plural forms for these pronouns exist, he rejects these as "public words" or a form of political speech within a collective. His unshakeable stance is that the fiction writer does not assume the role of spokesperson, and does not speak on behalf of any collective, political party, class, race, or nation. For him the writer of fiction must be the voice of the individual, and this means that plural pronouns are impossible, and because an unspecified person cannot undertake narration the absence of pronouns too is impossible. In fiction a choice must be made between the pronouns "I," "you," or "he," even if the narration is from the perspective of a specific character. While the use of the first person pronoun "I" is common in narration, fiction is not autobiography, even though autobiographical fiction is growing in popularity, and generally the first person pronoun in fiction is not the author himself speaking, but a fictional character. In "The Art of Fiction" Gao demonstrates the depth of his probing into the impact of using different pronouns in his narration. He refers to *nouveau roman* writer Michel Butor who wrote a pioneering novel using the second-person pronoun "you," and that the second person pronoun "you" could be either the protagonist or the reader. By placing the reader in the situation of the character, the reader perceives from the angle of the character during the process of reading: it will be as if the reader is the character. This, for Gao, is "the magic of the second-person pronoun" ("The Art" 121). Furthermore, the second person pronoun can also be the external projection of the narrator's ego, in other words act as adversary when the narrator engages in interior monologue. The second-person pronoun facilitates this sort of interior monologue that is common in plays, and also is beginning to appear as a narrative method in fiction. The third-person narrating subject "he" can also become the viewpoint of the protagonist, but this involves a change in which the subjective narration changes to the third person. However this change requires a definite reference, in other words, that a base be established. If initially the subject "I" is used as the narrator, when the narration changes to the third person "he", while still referring to the same character, "he" then becomes the object of focus of "I," or becomes the projection of "I." Thus the "I," as well as the "he" represent the same character, yet can engage in dialogue: "he" becomes the object of the considerations of "I", and the thoughts of the character do not require the intervention of an omnipotent narrator.

By establishing the subject as "I," the adversarial projection of "I" becomes "you," and the externalized projection of "I" becomes "he," so the narrative language of fiction introduces three different pronouns to designate the one character, and leads to a new and multi-faceted understanding of man's self. What is interesting is that these three levels of cognition are present in all human languages, indicating that these three pronouns transcend ethnicity and language group and reflect a deep structure of human consciousness. If the three different pronouns are introduced into the narration of the one character, the character fragments into the different pronouns "I," "you" and "he" that form the structure of the novel, replacing the usual story and plot. This allows for the introduction of the character's thoughts, so discussion, reflection,

contemplation, memory, dream and hallucination can all intermingle, and the literary form, too, can change freely because the flexibility of the structure allows the blending of prose and poetry into the narration:

My novel *Soul Mountain* was such an experiment. It broke through conventional patterns and molds for fiction yet tenaciously defended the narration and retained a firm control on the narrative viewpoint of the characters simply by fragmenting the protagonist into three different pronouns. However the different females in the book are all denoted as "she," thereby constructing a composite female image, or what may be called multiple variations of the female. And this too is derived from the viewpoint of the male protagonist in the book. It is difficult for a man to fathom women or a woman's inner world, so this multiple-identity, "she," intermingled with the male imagination, fluctuates between reality and non-reality and becomes even more indefinite. Man's cognition of the external world and other people can never be divorced from a subjective viewpoint. The world and human events inherently lack meaning: meaning is conferred by human cognition. The difference between the narration of the novelist and the commentaries of the philosopher lies in the latter's direct reliance on thought, whereas the novelist's cognition of persons and events cannot bypass the characters that have been created: it is through their eyes that the characters' real perceptions are brought forth. The thoughts embedded in the novel must be revealed through the experiences of the characters, otherwise they will be nothing more than propaganda or preaching. And what is even more interesting is that the thoughts articulated in the novel must, through a character's experiences, transform feelings into a thought process that is tinged with the protagonist's sentiments, and it is in this way that the novelist presents the thinking of living people and not abstract theories. ("The Art" 123)

Gao was recovering from a brush-with-death illness when he wrote "The Art of Fiction" and the essay may be considered as both an explication and an assessment of his innovations in the art of narration. He locates his *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* within the history of the evolution of modern world fiction. His aesthetics of fiction as outlined in his earlier essays "Literature and Metaphysics: About *Soul Mountain*" and "The Modern Chinese Language and Literary Creation" are to some extent recapitulated in "The Art of Fiction," but the focus is narration. Whereas his *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* are lengthy novels and allow him to actualize the full scope of his fiction aesthetics, his short stories such as "Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather" and "In an Instant" are highly concentrated expositions of specific aspects of his aesthetics. Both of these short stories were originally written as film scripts, and the visual impact is powerful and compelling. The former is an intriguing exploration of memory, and the latter is an exploration of the extent to which the full gamut of human sensual perceptions can be articulated in the written language.

In conclusion, the three essays discussed above have focused on salient aspects of Gao's deliberations on fiction as a genre. He demonstrates that he is equally erudite in Eastern and Western narrative practices and that he has interrogated these to their foundations in order to establish his own distinctive style of narration. His intense intellectual curiosity in aesthetics has directed the actualization of his creations across genres. Importantly, he has published numerous detailed essays on his approach, strategies, and rationale for his creations. He has collected what he regards as the most important of these essays in two English-language volumes: *The Case for Literature* and *Aesthetics and Creation*.

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## Appendix

### Publications by Xingjian Gao and Studies about Gao's Work

#### 1) Xingjian Gao's Chinese-language Publications

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