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Cross-Cultural Intertextuality in Gao Xingjian's Novel *Lingshair*. A Chinese Perspective

Gao Xingjian's novel *Ungshar?* (1990) has been identified by leading Western critics (the Nobel Prize Committee in particular) as one of the great works of twentieth-century Chinese literature, which has opened new paths for Chinese fiction with regard to form, structure and psychological foundation. In addition to the innovative complexity of narrative technique and linguistic ingenuity, Gao Xingjian has also been hailed a creator of distinct images of contemporary humanity and one of the few male authors artistically preoccupied with the "truth of women." While the claim concerning women is at best problematic, Gao's narrative technique as highlighted in *Lingshan* represents without doubt a highly artistic integration of traditional Chinese literary practice and some of the key features of Western (European) narrative technique associated by Ihab Hassan, Douwe Fokkema, Fredric Jameson, Umberto Eco, and Linda Hutcheon, among others, with postmodernist fictional discourse. As Gao left China for France in 1987, he was still present at the early debate on modernism and postmodernism among Chinese scholars and writers such as Yuan Kejia, Chen Kun, Liu Mingjiu, Wang Meng, Xu Chi, and Li Tuo, to mention only the more important ones, in the early 1980s (Wang 500-01). Due to his longstanding interest in Western literature, philosophy, and literary theory, which he studied at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute as a French major, it is even likely that he attended Eco's, Jameson's or Fokkema's lectures at Peking University in the mid 1980s, or that

1 *Lingshan* has been translated into English as *Soul Mountain* by Mabel Lee (2000a). All citations of the novel in this paper refer to this translation indicated as *SM*.

he was at least acquainted with their theoretical understanding of modernity and postmodernity and its practical relevance concerning his own artistic expression as novelist and playwright. Significantly, Gao Xingjian published his views on modernism as early as 1981 in *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction), which reflect an intimate and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of twentieth-century Western literature and key theoretical aspects of modern fictional discourse, which Gao applied in his own novels in the subsequent years. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Gao's theoretical views and the success of his dramatic *oeuvre* — above all his play *Chezhan* (*Bus Stop*), which was banned by the authorities in 1983 — led to open conflict with the government and his decision to leave China. His novel *Lingshan*, which he began to write in Beijing in 1982, was completed in Paris in September 1989 and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

In the light of Gao Xingjian's departure from China in 1987, some two years after the time Wang Ning identifies as the point when Western postmodernism began to impact overtly on Chinese fiction (508), the postmodernist features of *Lingshan* ought to be looked at outside the specific context of the Chinese literary scene. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the majority of the six criteria listed by Wang as "characteristics of the postmodern tendencies in present-day Chinese literature" as well as the more general characteristics of Western postmodernism such as fragmentation of plot, self-reflexivity, metafictionality, thematic indeterminacy, preoccupation with language, decentered meaning, among others, constitute an integral, but by no means exclusive part of Gao's narrative strategy. Their identification, structural relevance, and cross-cultural significance in the overall narrative design of *Lingshan* will be the main objective of following observations. This paper does not focus on source tracing, but on the artistic integration of intertextual materials in an essentially postmodern literary text, in which the interfacing between Chinese and Western fictional discourse constitutes a key element of narrative strategy. However, the argument advanced here in favour of Gao's postmodernism is by no means shared by all critics. Jeffrey Kinkley, for example, underpins Gao's role as "partisan of Western modernism" in a recent study and identifies his "masterpiece" *Lingshan* as "the capstone of Chinese modernism as a twentieth-century movement" (Kinkley 144, 156). Although the relationship between postmodernism, modernism, and the avant-garde requires further clarification with regard to conceptual demarcation (Fokkema 1987, 238), the problem will not be addressed here

directly, but explored in the context of Umberto Eco's discussion of this matter in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1984, 66-68). With regard to terminology, Linda Hutcheon's understanding of postmodernism in fiction as "historiographic metafiction" constitutes the guiding theoretical reference point:

The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "historiographic metafiction." (Hutcheon 3)

Equally important in this context is Umberto Eco's identification of postmodernism as an aesthetic category ("Kunstwollen") based on the critical ("ironic"/"parodic") "rethinking" and representation of the past and the "already said" and the rejection of the notion of ultimate meaning and unquestionable truth (Eco 1984, 66-68). Eco's emphasis on intertextual inclusiveness and heterogeneity as a hallmark of postmodern artistic endeavour is highlighted together with the role of cross-cultural awareness in creative production in Gao Xingjian's speech made at the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000 and reflected in the rich and complex texture of his novel *Lingshan*:

Because of where I was born and the language I use, the cultural traditions of China naturally reside within me. Culture and language are always closely related and thus characteristic and relatively stable modes of perception, thought and articulation are formed. However, a writer's creativity begins precisely with what has already been articulated in his language and addresses what has not been adequately articulated in that language. As the creator of linguistic art there is no need to stick on oneself a stock national label that can be easily recognised. Literature transcends national boundaries — through translations it transcends languages and then specific social customs and inter-human relationships created by geographical location and history — to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature. (Gao 2000a, 8)

Gao Xingjian's artistic manifesto of allegiance to Chinese history and culture and creative openness is backed up by his comprehensive theoretical reflections on literature, aesthetics, history, and art in general, with particular reference to painting, and by their artistic textual incorporation in *Lingshan* and

other literary productions as sensitive and liberated representations of China's cultural past.

Narrative Perspectives of *Lingshan*

While the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gao Xingjian has been criticised by critics and scholars for various reasons, including the insufficient artistic merit of *Lingshan* (Lovell 1-50), the "Chineseness" of the novel based on the author's creative immersion in Chinese culture and tradition with numerous overt and oblique textual reference points is well documented in its narrative strategy and thematic deep-structure. In terms of genre, the novel is related to traditional Chinese travel literature with its origin dating back well before its Western counterparts. The travel-motif as determining structural and thematic feature appears in numerous variations in traditional Chinese literature, ranging from flying shamans, journeys in search of paradise and immortality, dangerous sea-journeys as for example Tang Ao's miraculous adventures reminiscent of *Gulliver's Travels*, the life of vagrant monks and robbers in popular literature, the journey of scholars to India in search of Buddhist scriptures, Kang Youwei's Utopian journey to heaven (Li 2001,247-60), and a wide range of reality-oriented travelogues with which Gao's novel is, associated by some reviewers. Although *Lingshan* features numerous narrative elements of traditional Chinese travel literature explicitly and obliquely (e.g., journey, quest, search of paradise and immortality), its overall narrative strategy is more closely related to what is commonly known in classical Chinese literature as the *jouji* genre, in which, as Leo Ou-fan Lee suggested, descriptive attention is focused above all on nature and only secondarily on the journey, and least of all on the traveller.

The textual affinity between "typical *jouji*?" literature and Gao's novel is obvious. Essentially different, however, is the narrational focus on the narrator/traveller in Gao's text. Particularly interesting textual echoes can be found to Liu E's (1857-1909) partly autobiographical novel *Uzo Canjouji* (*The Travels of Lao Can*, 1907/1937). No doubt, Gao Xingjian was familiar with the story of the wandering physician Lao Can, his travels in China's north, his dreams, the repressive political system, the corruption of politicians and officials in the Qing Dynasty, the victimisation and exploitation of women, the protagonist's interest in ethnic minorities, his ecological concerns, his scientific approach to nature, the visit to a recluse, and his journey to the sacred mountain Taishan, which also figures in Gao's *Lingshan*. The narrator's

(autobiographical) journey to Mount Taishan in search of emotional and spiritual catharsis is also thematised in Li Ping's novella *Wanxia xiaoshi de shihou* (*When Sunset Clouds Disappear*) published in 1981, which was an instant success, particularly among university students. However, in 1982 the novella was singled out for special criticism in the "anti-spiritual pollution campaign," at exactly the same time when a ban was placed on the performance of Gao's play *Bus Stop* (Li 2002, 225-46). Gao Xingjian's overt focus on the narrator's fragmented subjectivity during his external and internal journey in search of the elusive sacred mountain, soul mountain (*Lingshan*), underpins not only the formal elasticity, heterogeneity, and openness of the literary text, but also its interconnectedness with alternative fictional strategies within and beyond Chinese travel literature, past and present, and (travel) literature in general.

Of particular significance in this context is the elaborate network of literary and historical texts, both essentially acknowledged as "fiction" (SM 453), which function as major reference points on the narrator's journey in search of *Lingshan* (*Soul Mountain*) and essential building blocks in the construction of subjectivity and self-awareness. The texts referred to include, among others, the myths and legends in *Shanhaijing* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*; SM 55, 449), Sima Qian's *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*; SM 449), *Shubenji* (*Records of the State of Shu*; SM449), *Feihu waizhuan* (*the Unofficial Records of the Flying Fox*; SM 19), *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*; SM 307), *biji xiaoshuo* (*biji fiction*; SM 145,282), *xian^{hi}* (*county gazette*; SM 309), *Shuijingzhu* (*Annotated Water Classic*, SM 19), *Songren huaben* (*Short Stories of the Song Dynasty*; SM 21), *Yi songs* (SM 117,118), myths (SM 162, 307), shamanistic legends (JM311, 448), folk songs (SM241K., 261,317,347), writings on temple walls (SM92), Daoist *taiji* charts (SM 307), ritual songs (SM 239), ditties (SM 18-19), inscriptions on temple walls (SM21,146,402), ancient scrolls (SM444), folktales (SM64,167, 178, 200, 215ff., 284) and thematically related allusions to Chinese authors such as Lu Xun (SM 447), Xu Wei (SM 448), Qiu Jin (SM 447), Gu Cheng (SM217), and Thomas Huxley (SM366) as one of the few overt intrusions of Western thought in the narrator's consciousness. The double discourse of literature and history is complemented by a quasi-historical "autobiographical dimension" which is generally taken literally by critics and scholars (Lee 2000b, ix). However, like postmodernism in general, Gao's novel reflects a self-conscious preoccupation with the act of writing *per se* and the narrational (not representational or mimetic) nature of both literature and historiography, that is, the textualisation of human experience, past and present. There are frequent authorial reflections in the novel on this matter with regard to

Literature. Occasionally, the narrator's comments are ironically charged and reminiscent of Max Frisch's fictional strategy (*Mein Name sei Gantenbeiri*) of telling variations of stories (SM144,215-17). The understanding of the act of writing history as narrativisation, including fictionalisation, of the past is also highlighted in *Lingshan* on several occasions, when, for example, the narrator ("I") proposes fictional variations of the historical records (SM 145) or in the narrator's ironic comments on the problem of historical veracity in "history as a riddle" which ends in: "Oh history oh history oh history oh history/Actually history can be read any way and this is a major discovery!" (SM 450-51). Significantly, the narrator's search for remnants of China's past grandeur is part of his search of *Lingshan* and culminates in the disappointing realisation of the finiteness of history:

I search for some relic of those times but only turn up the corner of a broken stone tablet. Could it be that within the space of five hundred years even the iron tiles have completely rusted away? (SM 214)

The identification of both literature and history as human constructs and illusions underline postmodernist intertextuality as a major structural reference point of Gao Xingjian's fictional strategy.

Gao Xingjian and Samuel Beckett

The most conspicuous formal feature of *Lingshan* is the complex manipulation of narrative perspective and the narrator's fragmented consciousness in terms of pronouns. The author has commented widely on this matter in interviews, in his theoretical writings on modern fiction (Gao 1981, 13-26) and in his literary manifesto *The Case for Literature*, his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (Gao 2000a). The use of personal pronouns in lieu of conventional fictional characters also constitutes a major point of disagreement in the imaginary dialogue between the author/narrator ("you"/"I") and a convention-oriented critic ("he") on the nature of fiction in Chapter 72 of *Lingshan*. In dismissing what he calls "petulant exchanges between pronouns" (SM 453), the critic accuses the narrator/author of unsuccessfully copying the West: "This is modernist, it's imitating the West but falling short" (SM 453). Finally, he dismisses the novel altogether:

Yours is much worse than Eastern! You've slapped together travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, untheoretical discussions, unfable-

like fables, copied out of some folk songs, added some legend like nonsense of your own invention, and are calling it fiction! (SM 453)

Upon hearing the narrator's brief explanation of his position on this question — "It's just like in the book where you is the reflection of I and the he is the back of you, the shadow of a shadow. Although there's no face it still counts as a pronoun" (JM454), the critic exits, leaving the narrator behind him, alone and "confused and uncertain about what it is that is critical in fiction" (SM 454). No doubt, this chapter of *Lingshan* is an ironic send-up of Gao's own critics, anticipating critical responses to his novel (Lovell 1-50). Nevertheless, the reduction of conventional fictional characters to personal pronouns has generated particular interest among literary scholars and critics, most of them echoing or expanding on Gao's or Mabel Lee's views on this matter (Lee 2000b, ix). Studies like that of Carlos Rojas, among others, are especially useful as they assist in unravelling the overall complexity of Gao's narrative strategy:

Although the initial portion of *Soul Mountain* alternates fairly systematically between chapters written from the perspective of "you" and "I," by the end of the work this systematic alternation has largely degenerated into a complex cacophony of different narrative voices (either running parallel with each other or even speaking directly to each other), each articulating rather subtle distinctions within the narrator's own consciousness. (Rojas 189)

Aspects of the fragmented and deconstructed self and the reduction of the self (subjectivity) to one or several voices as highlighted above, constitute a dominant structural element and a central thematic concern of Gao Xingjian's fiction and some of his dramatic texts (Quah 51-98). In the light of Samuel Beckett's preoccupation with what he calls the "self so-called" or "etre manque" in his last narrative *Stirring Still* (1986, xiv-xv) and the experimentations with pronominal versions of the self in his late autobiographical narratives *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), *Company* (1981), *Westward Ho* (1983), it is very likely that Gao Xingjian, whose intimate knowledge of Beckett's literary *oeuvre* (and French and Western literature in general) is well documented (Li 2002, 225-46), became attracted to Beckett's fictional exploration of subjectivity and self-consciousness and his experimentations with multiple versions of the self in such plays as *Krapp's Last Tape* (which is "parodically" integrated into chapter 80 of *Lingshan* that ends: "In the darkness, in the corner of the room, the line of bright red lights on your tape recorder is flashing.") and the autobiographical play *That Time*

(1976) which is a dramatised precursor of the autobiographical narrative *Company* (1981). Alfred Hornung outlines the configuration of "voices" as follows:

The authorial and hence autobiographical self consists here of dialogues between the voice, the person on his back, and the deviser of the fiction. The three persons figure as the grammatical pronouns I, you, and he in the text. While the voice creates company between itself and the listener and thus dispels the loneliness by recollecting glimpses of the past, the actual protagonist is displaced or decentered. Rarely does the first person "I" appear in the text. Yet in the same sense in which the person on the back listens to the voice, Beckett reads events of his past life. (Hornung 184-85)

Although it is difficult to compare Beckett's version with that of Gao, there are, nevertheless, distant similarities even between the previously quoted comment by the author/narrator in Gao's novel (*SM* 454) and comments in the opening section of Beckett's *Company*:

To the one on his back in the dark a voice tells of the past. . . . Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that [cankorous] other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. You cannot. You shall not. (Beckett 2)

Even more striking is the narrator's ("I"'s) desire in the enigmatic snow scene "to become the back of someone":

An inconsequential snow scene like this creates images in my mind, induces in me the desire to enter it. By entering the snow scene I would become the back of someone. This back of course would not have any particular meaning if I were not at this window looking at it. (*SM* 483)

Beckett's image of the narrator's pronominal fragmentation and reconstruction is echoed in the narrator's ("I") description of the quest as a "spiritual journey" in *Lingshan*:

Like me, you wander wherever you like. As the distance increases there is a converging of the two until unavoidably you and I merge and are inseparable. At this point there is a need to step back and to create space. That space is he. He is the back of you after you have turned around and left me. Neither I nor my image can see his face, it is enough to know that he is someone's back. (*SM* 312-13)

The complexity and ambiguity of the interplay of pronominal "voices" increases with the development of the story together with the linguistic playfulness as highlighted in the following quote:

If the voice is not speaking to him it must be speaking to another. So with what reason remains he reasons. To another of the other. Or him. Or of an other still. To one on his back in the dark in any case. Of one on his back in the dark whether the same or another. So with what reason remains he reasons and reasons ill. For were the voice speaking not to him but to another then it must be of that other it is speaking and not of him or of another still. Since it speaks in the second person. Were it not of him to whom it is speaking but of another it would not speak in the second person but in the third. For example, He [first] saw the light on such and such a day and now he is on his back in the dark. It is clear therefore that if it is not to him the voice is speaking but to another it is not of him either but of that other and none other to that other. (Beckett 6)

It is interesting to note that most of Beckett's late autobiographical ("womb to tomb") narratives are thematically focused on the difficult relationship with his mother. Significantly, the short story in which Gao experiments for the first time with shifting pronouns is also called *Mother* (Rojas 189f.) While the aspects of intertextuality with regard to *Lingshan* are restricted primarily to selected formal elements of narrative strategy and specific thematic concerns (e.g., language, text, and reality), his play *Chezhan* (*Bus Stop*) contains a much wider and conspicuous overlap with Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Gao's claim to have written his play without reference to Beckett's play and the theatre of the absurd was called into question almost instantly by critics in China and in the West. Moreover, it is not supported by the text itself. Of course, Gao's play clearly shows his dramatic signature and a uniqueness of its own despite his sophisticated use of Beckett's ingeniously explored theme of voluntary and/or involuntary waiting (in Gao's case, for a bus that never arrives) and an existential situation almost as absurd as that of Vladimir and Estragon between the immobile tree and the road passing by that tree. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Gao was accused by the authorities of following "the mode of writing" of the theatre of the absurd and above all Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, an assertion promptly rejected on aesthetic and philosophical grounds. Also, Gao's play contains numerous references, which echo Martin Esslin's interpretative comments on *Waiting for Godot* (Li 2002, 225-46).

However, what matters in this context is not the identification of sources or potential textual appropriations, but the affinity of Gao Xingjian's

Weltanschauung with that reflected in Beckett's postmodernist *oeuvre* and the shared artistic desire to overcome both cultural borders and ideological constraints in the interest of creative independence and freedom, which is also the aspired cathartic purpose of the protagonist's journey in search of Lingshan (Soul Mountain).

***Lingshan* and the Stream of Consciousness Technique**

In the light of Gao's longstanding interest in Western literature, it is safe to assume that he was conversant with the stream of consciousness technique employed in Western fiction for some considerable time, although it was unknown in China until 1980 when Wang Meng published three stories, in which he uses non-linear time sequences and interior monologue (or stream of consciousness technique). Wang Meng's innovative fictional style triggered off heated discussions in Beijing on narrative techniques in 1980-1981. Gao Xingjian comments briefly on the controversy in his *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutar?* (*A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*) as follows:

Some of the short stories recently published by Wang Meng have already attracted the interest of the readers. Evidence indicates that the expressiveness of this modern literary language is not limited because of the difference in national languages. It also has a potent life force. (Gao 1981, 32)

In the chapter earmarked for a more detailed discussion of the stream of consciousness technique, Gao lists Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Hemingway, and Fellini as the leading Western practitioners of this innovative style and underpins narrative flexibility and access to the inner layers (sub-conscious) of human experience:

... the language of stream of consciousness has no time for chronological order. It can mix recollections with reality and mingle past and future. At the same time, it also breaks the bondage of the fixed space. In the same chapter, even in the same paragraph, one may weave fantasy, dream and reality together. (Gao 1981,32)

Although Gao Xingjian's theoretical insights in this particular aspect of writing fiction are well founded, and perceptive and appreciative of its artistic

potential, his own practical application in *Lingshan* does not realise its potential, as the following passage indicates:

Do the trees, birds and cart of this scene also think of their own meaning? And what associations does the grey sky have with the reflections on the water, the trees, the birds and the cart? Grey ... sky ... water ... leaves all shed ... not a trace of green ... mounds of earth ... all black ... cart... birds ... straining to push ... don't disturb ... billowing waves ... sparrows noisily chirping ... transparent... treetops... hungry and thirsty skin ... anything will do ... rain ... tail feathers of golden pheasant... feathers are light ... rose colour ... endless night... not bad ... there's a bit of wind ... good ... I'm very grateful to you ... a vacuous formlessness ... some ribbons ... curling ... cold ... warm ... wind ... tottering ... spiraling ... sounds now intermingled ... huge ... insects ... no skeletons ... in an abyss ... a button ... black wings ... night unfurling ... everywhere are ... panic ... fire illuminates ... finely painted designs ... joined to black silk gauze ... insects in a straw sandal ... nuclei swirling in cytoplasm ... eyes form first... he decides the style ... innate potential exists ... an earring ... nameless imprints ... I didn't notice that it had snowed but there is a thin layer of pure white which has not had time to pile up on the branches. (*SM482*)

While the use of inner monologues, based primarily on associative patterns, might be considered rudimentary, considering the context of longstanding literary conventions and strict ideological constraints, Gao's application of the stream of consciousness technique is an important step towards cross-cultural openness and accessibility.

***Lingshan* and Wittgenstein**

In contrast to the numerous echoes, quotations and allusions to Wittgenstein's philosophical writings as thematically relevant and structurally supportive elements of Umberto Eco's fictional strategy in *The Name of the Rose*, the references to Wittgenstein in Gao Xingjian's *Lingshan* are generally more oblique with regard to their authenticity (or their parodistic counterfeit function) and as a result of their formal concentration in essentially one single chapter, functionally less integrated in the novel's narrative structure. Nevertheless, their aphoristic quality and gnomic style echoes, at least in a formal sense, Wittgenstein, although they sometimes fall short in logical rigour and coherence. Wittgenstein's reliance on simple, everyday language in his philosophical reflections is successfully imitated by Gao in the following

quotation which contains an ironically tinged allusion to Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" (*Sprachspiele*):

You create out of nothingness, playing with words like a child playing with blocks. But blocks can only construct fixed patterns, the possibilities of structures are inherent in the blocks and no matter how they are moved you will not be able to make anything new. (*SM* 351)

In other instances, Gao uses such key lexical items of Wittgenstein's philosophical vocabulary as "proposition" as referential markers, as for example, in the following Wittgenstein-type proposition, which is at least partly based on a Chinese couplet:

Xu Wei's couplet, "the world is a false illusion created by others, what is original and authentic is what I propose," seems to be more penetrating. However, if it is a false illusion why is it created by others? And whether or not it is false is irrelevant, but is it necessary to allow others to create it? Also, as for what is original and authentic, at issue is not its authenticity but whether or not it can be proposed. (*SM* 448)

Of the thirteen "propositions" listed in Chapter 58 of *Lingshan* (*SM* 350-52), the majority are related to language. The rest of them address problems of a more general (quasi-philosophical) nature, but related to the theme of self and self-reflexivity (*SM* 308) such as the following one:

The self within you is merely a mirror image, the reflection of flowers in water. You can neither enter the mirror nor can you scoop up anything, but looking at the image and becoming enamoured of it, you no longer pity yourself. (*SM* 350)

The propositions related to language cover a fairly wide range of issues. However, it is not always clear how they are connected with the overall structure of the novel and the narrator's quest for the magic mountain. Below is a selection of the more significant ones:

To lose images is to lose space and to lose sound is to lose language. When moving the lips can't produce sounds, what is being expressed is incomprehensible, although at the core of consciousness the fragment of the desire to express will remain. If this fragment of desire cannot be retained there will be a return to silence. (*SM* 351)

Dragging weighty thoughts you crawl about in language, trying all the time to grab a thread to pull yourself up, becoming more and more weary, entangled in floating strands of language, like a silkworm spitting out silk, weaving a net for yourself, wrapping yourself in thicker and thicker darkness, the faint glimmer of light in your heart becoming weaker and weaker until finally the net is a totality of chaos. (*SM* 351)

It is only when people refuse to accept that they shout out, even while not comprehending what they are shouting. Humans are simply such creatures, fettered by perplexities and inflicting anxiety upon themselves. (*SM* 350)

How is it possible to find a clear pure language with an indestructible sound which is larger than melody, transcends limitations of phrases and sentences, does not distinguish between subject and object, transcends pronouns, discards logic, simply sprawls, and is not bound by images, metaphors, associations or symbols? Will it be able to give expression to the sufferings of life and fear of death, distress and joy, loneliness and consolation, perplexity and expectation, hesitation and resolve, weakness and courage, jealousy and remorse, calm and impatience ... never comprehending, failing to comprehend, as well as just allowing whatever will happen to happen. (*SM* 351-52)

Gao Xingjian's critical preoccupation with the relationship between language and reality as highlighted in the chapter referred to above and more importantly in the narrator's fragmented consciousness, probably has its roots in Beckett's pessimistic view of language in the context of his relationship with Joyce and the views articulated on this matter above all by Wittgenstein (and Kafka, Hofmannsthal, and Rilke). Beckett gives an emotional account of this experience in a letter to Axel Kaun in 1937, which opens as follows:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. (Connor 17)

Wittgenstein arrives essentially at a similar conclusion in his philosophical writings when he compares language at the end of the *Tractates* with a "ladder," which is no longer useful after the climber has reached the goal. Language ("propositions") must be abandoned if one wants to understand the world correctly. Interestingly, Eugene Eoyang draws attention to the

possibility that Wittgenstein might have been familiar with the Chinese (Daoist) philosopher Zhuangzi who had a similar insight, when he compares language to a fishtrap, which is no longer useful after the fish is caught or a rabbit trap for that matter:

Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (qtd. in Eoyang 113)

Gao Xingjian and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*

While there is no documentary evidence in support of Gao's knowledge of Thomas Mann's landmark novel *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924), striking textual parallels in Gao's *Soul Mountain*, not to mention the perceptive artistic representation of the two respective cultures, warrant a detailed analysis with reference to aspects of intertextuality. Among the more conspicuous thematic similarities associated with the protagonists of the two novels are the theme of tuberculosis, the magic spell of a chimerical mountain and the protagonist's attempted escape from (urban) society (Beijing, Hamburg) in search of freedom and enlightenment in remote forest and mountain regions as an existential refuge. In contrast to Mann's narrative strategy of the protagonist's magic confinement in the TB sanatorium "Berghof," a microcosm of pre-war bourgeois Germany and powerful background of the protagonist's spiritual development, Gao's fragmented self embarks, like the protagonist of the traditional Chinese *jouji* literature or the (German) "Bildungsroman" for that matter, on a cathartic journey with memorable archetypal encounters en route which shape the central character's life and world view.

The following reflections, however, are not focused on the journey of the two protagonists as such, but on specific aspects of intertextuality in the "Snow" Chapter of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (Mann 469-98), identified by critics as "the spiritual climax of the whole novel" (Weigand 23), and Chapter 80 of Gao's novel *Soul Mountain* and the thematically related and complementary Chapters 78 and 79. Significantly, the protagonists of both novels are lost in a blinding snowstorm towards the end of their journey and confronted with death as a cosmic power. Herman Weigand's characterisation of Hans Castorp's sensation of "hovering there between life and death" (23) is echoed in the experience of Gao's fragmented self and his instinctive struggle for survival: "You spiral upwards. And while spiralling up between life

and death, you are still struggling" (*SM* 502). While textual similarities are particularly striking in the powerful description of the protagonists' traumatic awareness of existential vulnerability vis-a-vis death, they also constitute an integral part of their vision of nature and the prevailing atmosphere as a projection of their inner self. The landscape conjured up in both novels is a "world of ice and snow" (*SM* 501) which is directly and indirectly associated with death, as in the powerful (Kafkaesque) image of a deserted village in Gao's *Soul Mountain*: "A dead village, sealed by heavy snowfall. The large silent mountain behind is blanketed in thick snow" (*SM* 484). The same applies to the exclusive TB sanatorium and its illustrious patients and the menacing grandeur of nature beyond the Schatzalp where Hans Castorp, the "child of civilisation" has his epiphanic confrontation with death (Mann 476). Attempts to escape the mundane life of the "fiatlands" for the higher regions of existence demand in both novels unconditional physical and mental determination and commitment: "You gasp for breath, taking a step and then resting as you walk towards the mountain of ice. It is a struggle. The green river of ice is dark but transparent. Huge mineral veins, inky green like jade, lie beneath it" (*SM* 501). Mann's narrator views Hans Castorp's approach to the mountain in a similar way; even the colours of the ice are almost identical: "On he pressed; higher and higher toward the sky. Walking, he thrust the end of his stick in the snow and watched the blue light follow it out of the hole it made.... It was a strange, a subtle colour, this greenish-blue; colour of the heights and deeps, ice-clear, yet holding the shadow in its depths, mysteriously exquisite" (Mann 478-79). The physical struggle involved in aiming for uncharted heights is in both novels complemented by psychological and emotional pressures such as loneliness (*SM* 501), fear (*SM* 489), silence (*SM* 501), pain (*SM* 502-503) and blindness (JTM501). The centrepiece of Mann's "Snow" Chapter is Hans Castorp's highly disturbing "lovely horrible dream" vision (Mann 495), which raises in three complementary parts the question of good and evil. With regard to Thomas Mann's complex dream sequence, only the first part, the "Sun People" (Mann 490-93), an idyllic vision of female beauty and purity in a sun-drenched Mediterranean landscape with girls, shepherds, music and horses, is of relevance to Gao's *Soul Mountain* where female beauty is celebrated in the "Woman from Chang'an" (*SM* 502), an attractive temptress on horseback, half memory, half hallucinatory vision, very much like Hans Castorp's reveries: "These are all memories, this tinkling with sticks in your mind seems to be the sound in your brain. There is an agonising, searing pain in your lungs and stomach, your heart pulsates wildly, chaotically,

and your brain is about to explode" (*SM* 502-03). Although the passing references to an "eagle" (JM502; Mann 502) and a "rainbow" (IM503; Mann 490) are thematically of minor importance, their counterparts in Mann's *The Magic Mountain* constitute nevertheless an interesting facet of textual similarity. Thematically significant in both novels, however, is the complex imagery strand of impaired vision and blindness (*SM* 501) as a preliminary stepping-stone to existential enlightenment in facing the elemental power of nature and imminent death. While Hans Castorp's experience of facing death in the snowstorm is to a large extent determined by the perspective of an omniscient narrator (Mann 483-97), the account of Gao's "you" narrator is clearly more immediate and poetically powerful in the depiction of the emotional turmoil triggered off by the incident, as highlighted in the following passage:

A dark blue sun circles within an even darker moon, you hold your breath enraptured, stop breathing, reach the extremity of life. But the force of pulsating sounds becomes stronger and stronger, lifts you up, pushes you towards a high tide, a high tide of pure spirituality. Before your eyes, in your heart, in your body oblivious to time and space, in the continual surge of sustained noise, of reflected images in the dark sun within the dark moon, is a blast exploding exploding exploding exploding -then again absolute silence. (*SM* 504)

With regard to the above reference to narrative perspective, attention should be drawn to the fact that Gao's widely discussed narrative feature of plurality of the self ("I", "You" and "She") (Fokkema 2003, 32, 36) is also extensively used in the "Snow" Chapter of *The Magic Mountain* as for example in Hans Castorp's self-reflective dialogue with himself concerning the futility of his past life:

You went in a circle, gave yourself endless trouble under the delusion that you were accomplishing something, and all the time you were simply describing some great silly arc that would turn back to where it had its beginning, like the riddling year itself. You wandered about, without getting home. (Mann 487)

Among the various facets of Hans Castorp's traumatic snowstorm experience, the perception of "nothingness" is most closely associated with existential vulnerability and death. Since Mann's novel is permeated with imagery pertaining to "nothingness," "emptiness," and the "void" (Mann 478), a brief quotation must suffice to illustrate the point:

... the dazzling effect of all that whiteness, and the veiling of his field of vision so that his sense of sight was almost put out of action. It was nothingness, white whirling nothingness, into which he looked when he forced himself to do so

Only at intervals did ghostly-seeming forms from the world of reality loom up before him. (Mann 483)

The confrontation with death and the final questions of human existence necessitates a journey into "uncharted, perilous regions" well beyond the "world of reality," high up in the "icy void" and "alone with its question and its riddle" (Mann 477 f). This is, of course, also the journey of Gao's fragmented self to "the edge of darkness" (JM503) in search of the chimerical "Soul Mountain" and climaxing in a "world of ice and snow":

Like this world of ice and snow there are only some indefinite blurred images created by shadows — they don't tell anything, have no meaning, are a stretch of deathly loneliness (*SM* 501)

The narrator's existential uncertainty is thematically reinforced in the cryptic reference to the "bright red light" of a (Krapp's ?) tape recorder (*SM* 504) and the ironic final admission of (Socratic?) ignorance in the gaze of the "mysterious eye" of a "small green frog" (*SM* 506). In contrast to Hans Castorp's "act of awakening" (Weigand 34), Gao's fragmented narrator-self ends his journey in the nihilism of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy (Fokkema 2003, 30).³ Nevertheless, the artistic fusion of China's rich and complex history and culture with landmark Western literary expression and thought is a valid attempt to close the regrettably still existing cultural gap between China and the West by using formal narrative features of modern Western fictional

For the thematic significance of "nothingness" (void) in the Chinese classic *The Journey to the West*, see Anthony C. Yu's "Introduction" to his translation: "Although the name Wu-Kung that Monkey was given had a historical precedent in another Tang Buddhist pilgrim . . . the explanation of its meaning by the Patriarch clearly followed Taoist emphasis: 'Laughing,' the Patriarch said, 'Though your features are not the most attractive, you do resemble a monkey (Hu-sun) that feeds on pine seeds . . . You will hence be given the religious name 'Awake-to-Vacuity.' This name Wu-Kung (Awake-to-Vacuity), which the Patriarch gives the Monkey, brings quickly to mind such concepts as sunya, and maya in Buddhism, which point to the emptiness, the vacuity, and the unreality of all things and all physical phenomena" (Yu 38f.). See also Li 2001, 253.

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strategy in the artistic presentation of the self's experience of China's rich and complex past and present, through a sometimes partly Western psychological perspective as the basis for a dialogue across national and cultural borders (Gao2000c, 15).

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