



Soul Mountain

Gao Xingjian , Mabel Lee (Translator)

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In 1983, Chinese playwright, critic, fiction writer, and painter Gao Xingjian was diagnosed with lung cancer and faced imminent death. But six weeks later, a second examination revealed there was no cancer -- he had won "a reprieve from death." Faced with a repressive cultural environment and the threat of a spell in a prison farm, Gao fled Beijing and began a journey of 15,000 kilometers into the remote mountains and ancient forests of Sichuan in southwest China. The result of this epic voyage of discovery is *Soul Mountain*.

Bold, lyrical, and prodigious, *Soul Mountain* probes the human soul with an uncommon directness and candor and delights in the freedom of the imagination to expand the notion of the individual self.

Soul Mountain Details

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Author : Gao Xingjian , Mabel Lee (Translator)

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From Reader Review Soul Mountain for online ebook

Sara says

I feel decidedly guilty and 'unliterary' giving a negative review of this book, but it just was not for me. It's a meditation on identity, and his writing is certainly innovative and probably the best way to explore the subject, but it made the book a long slog for me. The fact that someone talks about a woman being raped nearly every chapter (of which there are 80) was also something that made this read a difficult one for me. Glad I read it, glad it's over.

Corinne says

A powerful spiritual experience, coming from an author still alive!!

I was pleasantly surprised to find out that the author took refuge in France, was living in an inner city project housing at the time he got the Nobel Prize.

A deeply enriching story of his journey, which is at the same time entertaining. A powerful combination of depth and lightness. I haven't come across a chronicle of journey like this for a long time. It fits so well with his Nobel Prize speech, in wisdom and modesty.

Dana says

This book won a Nobel for literature but, I have to admit it was a struggle for me to get through. It is over 500 pages and I have NEVER been so glad to be done with a book.

The author frequently refers to China's many Dynastys and The Culturol Revolution (a very sad time for the people of China and their culture.) Perhaps if I was more familiar with the history of China and the culture I may have enjoyed the book. Perhaps something was lost in translation ? Much of it was very metaphysical, phylosophical and at times digresed into uninteligable nonesense. There is no continuous story line and what little story there is seems to be scattered through the book in no aparent order of sequence. Maybe I'm an idiot (and that is quit possible) the book made absolutly no sense. If you even think about reading it I would sugest that you read chapter 74, a short little chapter. If you like that chapter and it makes sense to you, by all means read the book.

That being said there were some chapters that were enjoyable and very beautifuly written.

Dane Huckelbridge says

This book is admittedly a bit challenging—its structure is unconventional, folk tales mingle with personal history, and it isn't bound so much by a plot as by a pervading spirit of search. But what a beautiful search it is. In seeking out a mountain that may or may not exist, Xingjian takes the reader on a journey of self-discovery that isn't marked so much by what it reveals, as by what remains hidden and perfectly unknown. The last page is perhaps my favorite in literature—a perfect silence, enshrouded in snow, in which the divine can appear everywhere and in everything . . . even as something as seemingly unimportant as a frog. Really a

lovely book, but not an easy one.

David says

I was both excited by the proposition of a Chinese Nobel laureate and fascinated by Xingjian's personal trials when I chose to read his semi-autobiographical novel. As a pretext, I knew that Xingjian had dealt with being misdiagnosed with terminal cancer and gone soul searching through provincial China before publishing this work for which he was exiled from China and for which the Chinese government banned the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Despite my initial excitement, I'll admit to having been disappointed by the book. I don't think I struggled with concepts in it, but the truth is that *Soul Mountain* is loose and devoid of plot or a central subject matter - most chapters unattached to any others, and often lacking a closed idea in itself. The author himself points to issues in the text in Chapter 72 in a discussion with a critic, whom I admit to agreeing with on many points: the characters are void of description, and compiled of "fragments without sequence". Of course, the author retorts, saying that he writes for his self-amusement (which does not give a case for other people to read it) and questions what fiction itself is. I think this is reflective of the novel as a whole. It is full of pertinent questions with valid points for introspective thought, but those thoughts are not organised into a fluid motion for the reader to properly enjoy. Sections did grab me, but they only ever exist for a chapter before the constant juxtaposition used to start the next chapter. It was most certainly culturally rewarding as an uninhibited display of Chinese traditional culture, modern counter-culture, and (as a quite rare quality in Chinese texts) honesty about politics and revolution in China. Nevertheless, Xingjian ends his book disappointingly with the somewhat self-representative lines, "The fact of the matter is that I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing./This is how it is."

Jonfaith says

Context is important. I was newly married and jumping through all sorts of bureaucratic hoops. I found a stack of copies of this novel remaindered. I bought them all. I mailed one to my wife and gave the others away. I then read this in tandem with a friend who was being chucked out of his house. Oh, it wasn't a foreclosure. He was leaving his wife, though sooner than he expected, obviously. I then began dogpaddling through this morass of a novel rife with nature and strange sex. It didn't reach me. I don't think my friend was touched either.

A month later while on the tube in London I saw someone reading it. I wanted to warm him. Maybe my reluctance to do so stemmed from an awareness of context.

Karl says

1. I read it in Chinese and sort of understand where is Gao coming from. After had suffered personally the catastrophes of ten years Cultural Revolution and witnessed the destruction of traditional values, especially the metaphysical dimension of the Chinese culture under the Communist Regime, Gao wishes to paint again or recapture the original beauty of the tradition, which is inseparable from the mystical and even whimsical layers of the reality perceived by the local people who possess rather a less sophisticated mindset and sentiment before the intrusion of the ideological materialism of the government.

2. Hence, it would be difficult to appreciate the book without acknowledging the author's attempt to reconstruct the notion of transcendence in his spiritual journey. Notice the transcendence in the book is unlike the platonic or medieval nonphysical realm as a Western would have understood; neither is a purely fictional and magical thing that has no basis in human existence. As a Chinese myself, if I understand Gao correctly, the notion of the transcendence is much like this a mixture of Taoism and Buddhism with the primitive experiences of the local people in relation to the world, the supernatural phenomena and legends in particular, a mixture that has not been largely emasculated and contaminated by the ugliness, monotony, and boredom of a naturalistic mentality, which according to the character himself, is utter unlivable and destructive to human spirit.

3. Then, what is exactly the definition of this mixed notion of transcendence or "soul mountain" he searches for? Even throughout the book, there is no explicit answer given because there is none. Any effort or attempt to access or describe "the mystery of being" is determined to fail, since transcendence, by essence, is uncontrollable and ineffable. Furthermore, it is precisely because human beings are intrinsically oriented toward such mystery, we are forever under the unquenchable longing for being in unity with it, we are forever on the journey of climbing the mountain that may redeem the soul.

5. In other words, the main character of the story does not know what is exactly he is seeking but he knows he is seeking something that goes beyond him simultaneously and irrepressibly resides within his most inner being. It is precisely because the things he is seeking are beyond him, his seeking becomes both possible and meaningful. In other words, if they are to be found like whatever can be identified, manufactured, and manipulated, as what materialism and political power of the Communist government have done with the nation, then he would not have begun his seeking for meaning in the first place. As it has been said, this does not mean he is seeking something that does not exist. In fact, the things he seeks exist precisely in the process of seeking and cannot be captivated and hence ceased in the process. Consequently, seeking can go on and perpetually strikes and surprise him and us.

4. This is why in his attempts to restore the notion of transcendence in the novel, he spends huge portions to rediscover the lost and oblivious legends and mysteries of the native cultures in the southeast of China after the Cultural Revolution, and these stories and fables (some of them are fascinating and some of them are dreadful), kept in the memories of old generations, open up a world that is ultimately immune to any cognitive and sentimental categories that are meant to eradicate mysteries and wonders of the world....

5. For Gao, at least from my reading of the novel, history is not objective knowledge based on evidence and documents, but it is a collective living memory of a group of people. In a sense, this collecting living memory is much real and richer than than the former because people often tend remember things much intriguing and enchanting, alluring their imagination, and inspiring the will for adventure.....we are not beings live on material necessities, we are dreamers, thinkers, and hoppers.....the world is not composed of matter, but orchestrated by mysteries and for mysteries.....

Charity says

Beautiful writing, but I never could get very involved in the stories, perhaps due to the constant change in perspective in the narration.

Owlseyes says

25th of February 2013.

I cannot help, but to refer these news: "Chinese Officials Admit 'Cancer Villages' Due To Pollution Exist"*.

<http://www.ibtimes.com/chinese-offici...>

(Buddha Sakyamuni and Mahakayapa)

Preamble

Lingshaw means Soul Mountain.

In this book there's an enlightening preface by Noël Dutrait referring that, in China, "in the end of the 1970's there was a timid political liberalization", therefore allowing writers not to serve the (communist) party.

Gao Xingjian is a writer and painter born in 1940; in 1997 he was granted French citizenship. In several interviews I've watched, he said (in good French): "in my natal country, my name and books are censored".

About the Olympic Games, Gao commented, that "everybody is aware about censorship in China"[Anti-spiritual Pollution Campaign]. I read also that his present book "is a literary response to the devastation of the self".

(by painter Bada Shanren; 1625-1705)

Gao said that "painting starts where words cannot go"; but while reading this book I had this great feeling I was viewing terrifically beautiful landscapes....of forests and mountains and ...of soul's....

It's a different style of writing: Gao's quite good enabling images through words. Gao affirmed that: "the artist can express himself...has a voice of his own...he's a conscience".

The Chinese writer thinks that a single writer cannot change the world...it's "utopic". And yet his words will endure. Gao asks: who reads the political speeches?...only Historians; but Shakespeare, and the Greek Tragedies ...and Don Quijote: everybody reads them.

(by painter Gong Xian; 1660-1700)

The book's story is auto-biographical especially in what concerns the "*diagnosed terminal cancer*" and, in general, the China hinterland tour (5 months).

The Story

The main character of the story is a matured man called Li. He lived a lot of time in the city. We found him with a back pack on a 12 hours bus ride...on his way to visit his natal land...in South China. Li muses that "everybody returns here due to advanced age":... who can escape nostalgia?

He watches the people: they hug tightly, they have their own vocabulary, quite different from the Northern people (these are rustic).

...

Here, while reading, we get introduced to a new style of narration: an omnipresent narrator addresses Li constantly telling him things, like: "you, yourself, don't know why you came here".

On the train Li heard that there was a place called Lingshaw: Soul Mountain. How can you get there?

Li took a bus to little Wuyi village; old books speak about Lingshaw; like *Classic of the Seas and the Mountains*; they say that the Buddha awakened there the venerable Mahakayapa.

Li's trip is a voyage to return to Nature, to have an authentic life; he should have abandoned pollution a long time ago. He had been diagnosed lung cancer.

(by painter Gong Xian; 1660-1700)

On his trip he recalls old traditions that the Cultural Revolution prohibited; like the dance around the fire till dawn; the old songs and lyrics were replaced by Mao's quotes! Li says that some of his country men declared to be of QIANG ethnicity to be allowed to have more children, hence escaping birth control policies. Li comments: "I came here to study the popular chants". The Qiang ("race") live between the high Tibetan plateau and the Sichuan basin...and they adore the fire.

Li wanted to escape the literary world and the "smoke" of his room.

It's Springtime and Li says "I let my spirit wander"; he's back to a place of childhood and youth.

In Wuyi he meets a woman, who was staring at the mountains; but then she disappeared. Li watches a young couple laughing, joyfully. The Omnipresent narrator's voice tells him: "you've passed that age, you don't feel the same joy as they do".

The woman wasn't as happy as the couple,... she doesn't look like them. Li feels the need to communicate...when he sees the woman buying grapefruit. But she doesn't answer.

The Voice is back on Li: "you don't know how to love, you lost your virility, so weak you are".

Li recalls mountains' walk. It's cold in the mountains, despite being springtime. Li spent two nights at the Panda's Observation field.

Li tells the story of the Dragon Feast; and the tragedy stories (suicides) of the Passage of Yu, a village mentioned in the *Historical Memories of Sima Quan* (145-86 B.C.).

Forests. The Chinese writer loves nature and describes the one-million years old Beeches; 40-meters tall.

Li explains the concept of Kalpa: the succession of existences and rebirths of man, in Buddhist religion; and the parallels between Kalpa and the Bambu tree 60-years cycle.

(by painter Hsü Wei; 1529-1593)

The guide tells Li that once there were tigers, but now: no more tigers in South China. "Nature doesn't scare you, but man does", concludes Li.

Li is worried; is there (still) a primitive forest, yet untouched by man?; yes, at point 11M12M. Li knows about the Blue Bird, that seeks food for Mother Queen of the West. It's in Tang's poetry.

Remembered: the pollution of river Minjiang; not to speak of the Yangzi's; the Three Gorges will destroy the equilibrium of the Yangzi Basin.

And then there are references to the metallic black of the Tsugas trees; firs trees of dark grey....and the rare white azalea. The cuckoo singing like "Big Brother wait for me".

Li is "breathless...in a state of serenity never known before". But Li will say "Nature fooled me... a man with no beliefs, who's afraid of nothing and thinks he's important". Li is lost in the forest. "I yell... fog falls upon me...";and all Li has got is "seven candies" in his pocket. For all his life he's been expecting a miracle.

Li is back on the dialogues with the "different" woman. She told him: she wanted to die. "It should be good to die in purity".Nobody can recognize her, nobody knows her name; those names she gave at the hotel were false. She tells her story to Li. She met a man, loved him...but vomited,despite not being pregnant; they had plans, but no kids included.And then, hysterically, she insulted him, due to her grief...and love ended. She worked in a hospital,but hated work and family, even her father: a drunken man, a weak man, subjugated by her stepmother.

Li asks hurt-woman if she wants to cross the river, to the other side: there, it's Lingshaw-the Soul Mountain.A place where you can see marvels, that will help you forgetting...and get liberation. Li says she's truly cunning. She says she's not stupid.

(by painter Hua Yen; 1682 – 1756)

Li speaks about himself; about the time when lung cancer was diagnosed; had he experienced repentance?... he went through a period of time remembering "his own errors": was he ungrateful to others, or the other way around?. At that time a friend told him about respiratory practices (Qi Qong)that could help him. Li started walking in parks, where people took cages with birds for a stroll.The city was polluted. Also, Li started reading the Book of Mutations, the YiJing and its hexagrams. His friend had studied genetic engineering; he thought "life is admirable-a chance phenomenon". Li acknowledges his mother really loved him but she passed away. And he really hated his wife, whom he separated from. Li thought life was an inextricable knot...of rage?

What?? the "fibroscopy" revealed there was nothing!! May the Buddha be praised! He had promised if he had another chance he would change course in his life. And miracle happened. Li the one who thought about young people praying: what a foolishness!!! Li the one who felt pity for those praying. Now: he felt he was reciting the name of the Buddha Amithaba, with "all his heart", before receiving the "fibroscopy" result. Man is nothing in the face of adversities.

One day Li consults a psychic woman; she's having convulsions and tells about his destiny; "you are surrounded by great difficulties and the little men";Li knows them: "the Sanshi...the little men living in the body of men, hiding in the throat, feeding on saliva". The psychic woman tells him too: you've found the white tiger. Li knows what that means.

The Great Emperor Tang was a Li too; Li is the descendant of a family of generals and ministers, not only of tomb robbers.Li ancestors are recalled.

The psychic woman had told Li: "I think you won't get pardon...there's an evil man who wants to punish

you...you'll hardly escape". *Nine white tigers*.

The story goes on. What will Li find in Soul Mountain? Will he ever get pardoned?... or find liberation?

Time to ascribe 4 and a half stars to Gao's. He plainly deserves them.

(by painter Zheng Banqiao; 1693-1765)

Post Scriptum

"I recall when I was a child the Yangtzi water was pure in all seasons".

Gao Xingjian

(Chongqing city, south-west of China, in *The Economist*, Feb 4th 2012)

(air pollution, ... 2013 Beijing)

*

(China's cancer villages -- areas with cancer patients significantly above the national average -- mapped out by various researchers and produced by environmentalist Deng Fei in 2009).

Nick Wellings says

What is it with mountains? Be they Bare, Magic or Soulful like this, they exert a pull on the soul and they move men to poetry.

Equating height with Homeric majesty, Keats stood his Cortez silent upon a peak in Darien, to tug his conquistador's soul towards some higher sublimity. Where Christianity has the abode of God and attendant angels reposing in the celestial crenelations of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus, Homer – grounded realist that he was, had his on semi-earthly Olympus. Not for nothing did his extra-human actors sit high above the world of Man, the height of the place affording, like stout Cortez, the luxury of conspectus, a panorama of the world spread below to be taken in by a glance. High up yet grounded. Removed from the earth, but not so far away as to divorce them from meddling for pleasure in our petty concerns.

Primus inter pares of the megalithic are surely Uluru in Australia and "Everest". What draws us to these titanic structures? In a world where some (such as, fictionally, Pynchon) believe in ley lines, where crystals and "energy"* (non dark) are invoked, and where, not least of all in Chinese medicine - as Chi – energy is suggested to explain internal workings, responses to medicines (western or not) and even more prosaically, how best to arrange one's living spaces, might a mountain not affect us viscerally? If not though some repository of chi, then at least through an encounter with the sublime?

In his Zarathustra's "upgoing", his ascent to enlightenment, Nietzsche's had this more sublime anabasis in mind. So too, Moses, receiving the word of God atop his mountain Sinai. Frodo goes into Doom to drop the Ring and Abraham ascends Moriah to slay his only Son. The Summerians loved mountains, and their

Ziggurats are like man-made attempts at mountain-making. (By contrast, the Pyramid of Cheops, 500 years younger than Ur, thrusts a sharp deliverance into the eternal, and by orientation and construction, addresses the stars.)

What is it then, that links height with enlightenment? Which figures spiritual movement with ascent towards empyrean? If Orpheus found only grief in the chthonic, so too Persephone and all the suffering Greeks (we recall that Sisyphus was tasked to roll a rock up a mountain in the underworld forever...) it makes sense then, that on the flanks or summit of a mountain, the climber is laid bare physically and emotionally and spiritually. Not for nothing were the Greeks moved to cry $\theta\lambda\alpha\tau\tau\alpha!$ $\theta\lambda\alpha\tau\tau\alpha!$ (thalatta, thalatta – the sea, the sea), and not $\rho\omicron\varsigma$ (oros) (mountain). A mountain is a dead thing, and the sea was life. We can stand atop a mountain but not conquer the limitless sea.

Too, some theorists suggest that the preponderance of mountain backgrounds (a picture with river running through it, a path to the distance, grassland) excites our primordial response for settling, for home.

All these are traditional responses and ideas. Gao skirts at the edges of them, frustrating our expectations. No upgoing for him: Gao is very much an Alpinist, given to excursions up easy narrative peaks. Only once does he try a harder ascent, trying to walk up a mountain that others advise him to not even try, and needless to say, he is beaten back. It begins to emerge that, like Mann and Nietzsche (those poets of the Tyrol) his encounter is with the mountain as prompt, existential anchor. Soul Mountain, Lingshan exists, and is not, Hilary or Mallory-like, (or Tenzing-like) to be conquered so much as sought, moved towards, contemplated. A waypoint geographic and physical.

At one point (a chapter of two pages) he asks an old man which way he should go to find the mountain. The man answers in riddles, and the narrator gets coiled up Laocon like in the coils of Zen-ish dialectic, the way seems to be the way he has just come from, yet he is “getting further and further away” (What better description of the fugitive self than this?). In that moment, his existence becomes a koan, a paradox of existenz and the narrator reflects ‘on a proverb dating back thousands of years’ which reminds one of Heraclitus, yet tinged with the common sense of all folk sayings: “existence is returning, non-existence is returning, so don’t stand by the river getting blown about by the cold wind.”

All this makes for interesting reading. Denying us an easy narrative of spiritual encounter with the mountain, Gao instead uses the traditional device of peripatetic narrator to guide us through a journey into China in all its guises. The book is part travelogue, part history, part anthropology and the telling of it is part biography, part fable, part fiction. Structurally the book is novel: chapters alternate with a protagonist “I”, versus chapter using “You” to report through the second person, and it’s not until reading a bit that I realise that the You is not accusing me, but is a You formed from an I. Gao’s intent here, to examine the diversified self, to knit it back together in the crucible of experience, of which an encounter with Lingshan, forever postponed, would be the apotheosis.

Thus ‘The Encounter’ is for Gao, the process by which he determines his own existential position, his thoughts emitted like the most tender bremsstrahlung by his collisions not with the infinite, but the quotidian. He meets a naked abandoned toddler and tries to rescue him. He meets many peasants and ecologists, most of whom are hospitable. He meets monks. He meets women. He sleeps with women. The sum total is to suggest the questions “who have I been?” and more pointedly “who am I?” questions we all find ourselves asking at some point, but not to the extent and depth Gao does.

Thus with The Other and Encounter as its narrative vehicle, Soul Mountain the book itself is less an edifice itself, (hard to scale, vast, unforgiving – the 500 pages suggesting a tiring read) than a lacquerware cabinet of curios: each chapter captures the attention. People search for Wild Men, feral beings, they hunt tigers to extinction, deforest entire areas within 10 years, and discuss the then nascent idea of the Three Gorges Dam.

Gao seeks the dying embers of tradition, seeks out monks, folk song singers, finds shelter in peasant beds and knows it is all in the pursuit of progress.

So to do the characters speak of evil bandits, dragons, giant salamanders. In Soul Mountain, the lines of truth and fiction, even in a medium as fabulistic as the novel, as always blurred. As a consequence it is a fun read. I read it quickly in my edition because of this, because line spacing was wide and chapters short and because the narrative voice is compelling, strong and intimate. I really enjoyed reading this.

Yes, there is eroticism - or attempts at - but not for titillation. The intent is to counterpoise the ruminations on the historical and mythic, to root (forgive the pun) the book in the quotidian, where sexual energy and lust is carnal but not graphic, where coitus is matter of fact (tinged, granted, with the poetic) but never gratuitous. In the cosmic or novelistic pan of scales, Gao balances this narration of the normative, with the mythos of the past, the distant and unattainable. It is this past that is one mountain, one of the many peaks available to human scrutiny, but not conquering. We cannot go high enough to rise above it, to see all. The rise of history forms a great chain of other peaks into our past: the horizon wreathed in clouds of forgetting. And, more importantly, as Gao makes us see, it is the mountain of the soul, the enduring, perduring self, that will forever deny conquering – not that it will stop us from trying to scale it....

IN FIVE WORDS:

Wandering self meets unscaleable soul. (not my best attempt!)

* Mountains exert not just a spiritual pull on people but a gravitational one:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schiehal...>

with about equivalent force of the stroke of a single gnat's wing towards themselves. The reader of Pynchon's Mason and Dixon will be familiar with this special rock. Might some be more sensitive to this than others, accounting for the sale of crystals, for the adventures of trekkers?

Hameed Younis says

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linhtalinh says

Tôi thú th?t r?ng mình ch? ph?i là ng??i có ki?n th?c và gi?i c?m th? "v?n h?c-v?n h?c". Tôi ch? hay ??c

"truy?n" là chính. Tôi không có tí kĩ?n th?c nào v? các lý thuy?t v?n ch??ng, ch? ??ng nói t?i vi?c ??nh tranh cãi xem th? pháp ngh? thu?t, hình th?c tác ph?m c?a Cao Hành Kĩ?n trong **Linh S?n** ra làm sao. V?y nên xin mi?n cho vi?c bàn v? s? "??t phá" (n?u có) c?a tác ph?m.

?y nh?ng quái l? làm sao, ?ôi khi có nh?ng tác ph?m tôi không hi?u ???c h?t nh?ng v?n c? say mê ??c.

Linh S?n là m?t chuy?n ?i tìm ng?n núi h?n. Nh? ph?n gi?i thi?u tác ph?m có nh?c ??n, cu?n sách ch?ng có ??u có cu?i. Nó t?a nh? m?t chuy?n du hành vô t?n, tìm mãi tìm mãi, th?y ?? th?, nh?ng ch?ng th?y h?t, và suy cho cùng ng?m l?i thì ?ã th?y cái gì? Núi, r?ng, sông, v?c, nh?ng b?n làng, nh?ng câu chuy?n l?ch s? và thân tho?i quái g? và ghê r?n, cái xã h?i và con ng??i, ?àn ông và ?àn bà và tình yêu và tình d?c. N?a m? n?a t?nh, n?a s?ng n?a ch?t. ?ó là m?t hành trình vào sâu trong thiên nhiên và vào sâu trong vô th?c c?a tâm h?n. Nh?ng, nh? ?ã nói, cu?i cùng ta th?y gì?

Tôi c?ng ch?u, ch? bi?t. Nh?ng cái hút h?n tôi nh?t là gi?ng v?n t?. Nó mang m?t th?n l?c khi?n tôi m? m?. Tôi mê nh?ng chuy?n ?i, tôi mê cái cách vi?t v? thiên nhiên, v? ??i s?ng con ng??i nh?ng vùng xa xôi h?o lánh ?y, mê nh?ng th? ngh? thu?t dân gian, mê nh?ng phong t?c t?p quán. Ngày x?a tôi mê Nguy?n Tuân và *Ng??i lái ?ò sông ?à* cung là vì th?, b?i ?úng cái ?o?n trích trong sách giáo khoa v?n v? dòng sông và ông lão lái ?ò. Th? nh?ng **Linh S?n** không ph?i là phóng s?, nó không ??t ng??i ??c ra ngoài chiêm ng??ng m?t m?u v?t. Chính vì cách vi?t n?a h? n?a th?c nên tôi càng đ? ??m chìm vào cái th? gi?i m? t??ng ?y.

Nói th? nào nh?, nó nh? là m?t s? ch?y tr?n. Mà nó chính th?c là m?t s? ch?y tr?n. Dù là m?t s? ch?y tr?n b?t thành. B?i cái cu?c s?ng mà tác gi? và nhân v?t trong tác ph?m mu?n ch?y tr?n kh?i c? ?eo bám, và xâm chi?m cái th? gi?i còn nhi?u ph?n hoang dã kia.

Tôi ch?t ng? ra, à, v?y là ta c?ng mu?n tr?n ch?y. Nh?ng bi?t tr?n ch?y ?i ?âu?

Horace Derwent says

It throes me, the content, the soul of the author and the struggling people. Now that we're here, but it's still so far away...all the mistakes one life contains, all the struggle we fought was in vain...they all finally start to fade away

I can get purified from reading it and obtain more from it whenever I scatter my eyes on and imprint my fingers in the pages, so why don't you give it a shot?

What a beautifully written book of a mastermind, and it's still being banned in Chinkland for sure, it throes me too

Fuck! Can I say some F words?

Hadrian says

I could have enjoyed this book very much. Spiritual journeys, fragmented writing style, interlocking narratives, historical references and the unfolding changes of history. Unfortunately, the more I know about Chinese, the more I think this translation could have used a bit of work. There are references to 'father' here which I think could be ??, which refers to Laozi, author of the Dao De Jing. I even recognized a few mangled ??, or idiomatic expressions.

One of these days I may have to read the original, and return closer to ?? once again.

Tia says

This is barely a book. It's the at once epic and intimate journey of one man, told in different persons and with feelings sometimes instead of words (somehow), almost miraculously bound together and made tangible.

I am prone to exaggeration. But I have such specific remembrances--memories of feelings and moments of hyper-awareness--tied to this book.... For all the incredible books I have come across so far, NONE of them gave me what this book did. None of them made me so viscerally part of their story.

Lisa says

Why do you give yourself reading tasks? Why do you embark on a journey to read all Nobel Laureates in Literature?

Over the years, reading all kinds of books by a wide range of different authors from all over the world, I asked myself that question quite often. Some laureates had been favourites for decades before I started the project, others were completely new to me, and some were even hard to find in bookstores.

After I had finished Gao Xingjian's Soul Mountain, I thought I had an answer to the question:

It made me move into unknown territories, discovering elements of literature that enriched me in a surprising way, and it challenged my comfort zone by inviting me to embark on a spiritual journey in China. I would never have read this novel without the project that made me look beyond the most famous, the most popular, the most well-trodden paths.

After reading some of his plays, I dared to attempt Gao Xingjian's masterful novel - a collection of disruptive narratives reflecting on humankind and nature, and their fragile relationship to each other. I am sure many layers of the the novel remained unseen by me, being a novice in Gao Xingjian's world and mindset, but enough of it resonated strongly and left me utterly grateful when I closed the heavy volume: what a great philosopher!

"Young man, nature is not frightening, it's people who are frightening! You just need to get to know nature and it will become friendly. This creature known as man is of course highly intelligent, he's capable of manufacturing almost anything from rumours to test-tube babies and yet he destroys two to three species every day. This is the absurdity of man."

And part of the absurdity of (wo)man is to set herself strange tasks!

Linh says

Cao Hành Ki?n và Linh s?n

Cái ??p và s? th??ng c?m - ?ó là ??nh ngh?a chính xác nh?t v? ngh? thu?t.

(Nabokov)

1. Cao Hành Ki?n

L?i c?m t? c?a Cao Hành Ki?n (v?i qu?c v??ng Thu? ?i?n t?i l? trao gi?i Nobel v?n h?c 2000):

“Qu?c v??ng b? h? tôn kính,

Con ng??i ?ang ??ng tr??c m?t ngài hãy còn nh?, anh ta h?i tám tu?i, bà m? b?o vi?t nh?t ký, anh ta ?ã vi?t nh? th? này, và c? vi?t mãi cho ??n lúc tr??ng thành.

Anh ta c?ng còn nh?, khi vào tr??ng trung h?c, th?y giáo d?y t?p làm v?n treo lên b?ng m?t t?m tranh qu?ng cáo, không nói ?? m?c, m?i ng??i hãy vi?t v? b?c tranh này. Nh?ng anh ta không thích b?c tranh ?y, bèn vi?t m?t bài dài phê bình nó. Th?y giáo không nh?ng không n?i gi?n mà còn cho anh ta ?i?m cao, l?i có l?i nh?n xét n?a: Bút l?c r?t kho?. Anh ta c? th? ti?p t?c vi?t, t? ??ng tho?i sang ti?u thuy?t, t? th? ??n k?ch, mãi khi cách m?ng v?n hoá t?i, anh ta s? quá, ??t h?t toàn b?.

Sau ?ó anh ta ?i làm ru?ng khá nhi?u n?m. Nh?ng v?n ng?m ng?m vi?t, ?em b?n th?o gi?u vào trong h?, chôn xu?ng ??t.

Nh?ng tác ph?m anh ta vi?t sau ?ó l?i b? c?m in.

V? sau, khi sang ph??ng Tây, anh ta v?n vi?t và không quan tâm t?i vi?c xu?t b?n hay không. D?u xu?t b?n ?i n?a, c?ng không ?? ý là có ph?n ?ng hay không. B?ng nhiên l?i ???c ??n ??i s?nh l?ng l?y này, ?? nh?n t? trong tay qu?c v??ng b? h? ph?n th??ng cao quý.

Th? r?i, không nén ???c, anh ta h?i: Th?a qu?c v??ng b? h?, ?ây là th?c ?? Hay là câu chuy?n ??ng tho?i?”

[1]

??c bài này, không kh?i gi?t mình ngh?, n?u ng??i th?y giáo trung h?c c?a h? Cao c?ng theo thói th??ng tình, ch?m bài theo ?áp án s?n có mà cho Cao ?i?m th?p hay phê phán ?? ??o Cao thì li?u Cao còn c?m h?ng ?? sau này ti?p t?c vi?t, “?em b?n th?o gi?u vào trong h?, chôn xu?ng ??t” không? Và không bi?t n??c Trung Hoa h?n 1 t? dân t?i gi? li?u có ng??i nào ???c t?ng th??ng gi?i Nobel v?n h?c hay ch?a?! N?m tr??c, c? n??c Vi?t Nam xôn xao vì l?i ch? c?a m?t em h?c sinh l?p 11 v?i tác ph?m V?n t? ngh?a s? C?n Giu?c c?a nhà th? Nguy?n ?ình Chi?u trong m?t cu?c thi h?c sinh gi?i v?n. Ch?t ngh?, l? nào các nhà giáo d?c n??c ta l?i h?p h?i h?n ng??i th?y giáo c?a h? Cao m?y m??i n?m v? tr??c?

2. Linh s?n

Tôi g?p cu?n sách l?i sau khi k?t thúc nó vào chi?u cu?i cùng n?m Bính Tu?t. Bi?t nói gì v? Linh S?n ?ây? Th?t khó. Tr? cái c?m giác ?ó là m?t áng v?n tuy?t ??p. H?n n?a, nh? l?i c?a H?i ?ng trao gi?i Nobel 2000, ?ó là cu?n sách t? nó làm thành riêng m?t th? lo?i. G?n ?ây, ng??i ta th??ng nh?c t?i các ti?u thuy?t h?u hi?n ??i, nh?ng trong s? ít ?i mà tôi ???c ??c thì có l? ??i nh? khôn kham (The Unbearable Lightness of Being) c?a Kundera và Linh s?n c?a Cao Hành Ki?n là hai tác ph?m m?u m?c, ?? l?i ?n t??ng nhi?u h?n c?.

V?i Linh s?n, b?n còn tìm th?y ???c m?t v? ??p khó t? c?a thiên nhiên, c?a n?n v?n hoá Trung Hoa giàu có, c?a l?ch s? m?t n??c Trung Hoa b?o li?t. ?ó không ch? là n?n v?n hoá c?a ng??i Hán mà còn là n?n v?n hoá c?a ng??i Miêu, c?a các dân t?c ít ng??i trên vùng biên gi?i Tây Nam, v?n b? ng??i Hán khinh r? và v?n hoá Hán áp ch?. Không ph?i ng?u nhiên mà trong Linh s?n, Cao Hành Ki?n nh?c t?i chuy?n Hoàng ?? - thu? t?

ng?i Hán - đi? Suy V?u, còn ??i V? là k? ??u tiên bóp ch?t k? khác ?? th?c hi?n ý chí c?a mình.

Tr??c kia, tôi v?n ng?i ??c ti?u thuy?t Trung Hoa hi?n ??i vì ghét cái t?n m?n, ti?u khí, hay thô t?c trong nhi?u cu?n - cái khí ch?t c?a m?t thùng phuy n?ng mùi bí bách lâu ngày m?i ???c (th?nh tho?ng) m? n?p. Nh?ng v?i Cao Hành Ki?n thì khác. V?n Cao Hành Ki?n phóng khoáng, lãng m?n, d?t dào, lúc tr?m m?c nh? b?c tranh thu? m?c, lúc hào h?ng cu?n cu?n nh? n??c ch?y, có khi huy?n ?o, có khi l?i r?t phong tình, th?ng ho?c hóm h?nh, nh?ng d? v? ?? l?i l?i là m?t ni?m chua xót và th??ng c?m.

Con ng??i trong Linh s?n ?i tìm Linh s?n, m?t ng?n núi thiêng trong huy?n tho?i. Con ng??i ?ó là ai? Là b?n, là tôi, là cô ?y, là anh ?y [2] ? Là m?t ng??i, hay là nhi?u ng??i? Con ng??i ?ó tìm gì? Tìm v? b?n ngã c?a mình? Hay ?ó là hành trình tìm t?i cái ??p? Tìm v? c?i ngu?n v?n hoá c?a m?nh ??t ?ang s?ng, v? nh?ng mi?n th?i gian ?ã b? ?ánh m?t, nh?ng s? m?nh ?au kh? c?a con ng??i b? ?è nghi?n, b? vùi d?p, b? lãng quên tr??c nh?ng chao ??o nghi?t ngã c?a th?i cu?c?

Con ng??i trong Linh s?n th?t cô ??n. Dù b?n/tôi/cô ?y/anh ?y có b?u vú, yêu th??ng hay hành h? nhau thì b?n/tôi/cô ?y/anh ?y v?n cô ??n. Nh?ng ph?i ch?ng, ch? khi nhân v?t t? ý th?c ???c s? cô ??n ?ó thì m?i tìm ???c mình? C?ng c?n nói thêm là trong Linh s?n, nh?ng trang vi?t v? gi?i tính, v? n?i cô ??n và ham mu?n c?a ?àn ông và ?àn bà r?t xu?t s?c. Nhân v?t n? trong tác ph?m c?a Cao Hành Ki?n sinh ??ng và giàu s?c s?ng không kém nhân v?t nam, trong khi v?n có m?t cái gì ?ó huy?n ?o (các ??ng tho?i Trung Qu?c ch?ng th??ng ?? nhân v?t n? là h? ly tinh l?y ch?ng, sinh con, nh?ng v?n bí hi?m m?t cách r?t chi “h? ly tinh” ?ó sao). Trong khi d? ??ng c?m v?i nhân v?t nam, tôi l?i h?t s?c c?m thông và th??ng xót cho nhân v?t n? c?a ông.

Con ng??i ?ó có tìm ???c Linh s?n không? Mà có Linh s?n không? Cao Hành Ki?n tr? l?i b?ng m?y câu k?, mà ông cho là m?t ng?n ng? c? ?ã có t? m?y nghìn n?m:

“Có c?ng v?,
Không c?ng v?,
??ng ? bên sông gió tái tê”.

Khi ta bi?t là ?ã có th? “v?” r?i, thì ph?i ch?ng là ta ?ã t?i ???c Linh s?n? Ho?c là g?n t?i ch?ng? Có c?ng v?y mà không c?ng v?y, nào khác chi ?âu.

G?n nh? không th? so sánh Cao Hành Ki?n v?i b?t k? tác gi? nào khác. Là m?t nhà v?n th?m ??m ch?t ph??ng ?ông và tính dân gian (b?n thân ông là ho? s? tranh thu? m?c), nh?ng ông c?ng là ng??i th? nghi?m cách vi?t ch?u nhi?u ?nh h??ng c?a ph??ng Tây. Ng??i duy nh?t khi?n tôi c?m th?y có gì ?ó g?n gi?i v?i Cao là Kawabata, v?i nh?ng câu v?n ph?ng ph?t nh? nh?ng bài th? thi?n, nh? k?t tinh trong ?ó v? ??p c?a n?n v?n hoá Nh?t B?n, “??p và bu?n” [3] ? Có l?, không ph?i ngu?n nhiên, mà Cao và Kawabata là hai ng??i Trung Hoa và Nh?t B?n ??u tiên ???c trao gi?i Nobel. ??c h?, l?i ngh? không bi?t ??n bao gi? v?n h?c Vi?t Nam m?i thoát ???c nh?ng t?n m?n c?a th?i gian, c?a áp l?c tên tu?i tác gi? hay m?t m?nh chi?u trên v?n ?àn ?? có ???c nh?ng tác ph?m ??p và gi?i c?m, k?t tinh ???c c? m?t n?n v?n hoá ??c s?c, nh? c?a Cao Hành Ki?n hay Kawabata?

Nhân ?ây c?ng xin nói thêm v? các b?n d?ch Linh s?n. Theo tôi ???c bi?t, có ba b?n d?ch Linh s?n ra ti?ng Vi?t. Đây là m?t hi?n t??ng hi?m hoi, mà theo tôi, ph?n ánh s? ?ánh giá cao c?a ng??i Vi?t v?i Cao Hành Ki?n và ph?n nào là s? t??ng ??ng v?n hoá gi?a Linh s?n v?i ng??i Vi?t (th?c ra b?i c?nh Linh s?n là vùng Tây Nam Trung Qu?c - ?a bàn sinh s?ng c?a ng??i Bách Vi?t c? khi x?a - và r?t có th? b? t?c Âu Vi?t c?a Th?c Phán c?ng xu?t x? t? vùng này mà t?n xu?ng ph??ng Nam l?p ra n??c Âu L?c). B?n tôi ??c là do H? Quang Du d?ch t? ti?ng Trung, và theo tôi, r?t xu?t s?c. Ngoài ra còn m?t b?n d?ch t? ti?ng Pháp c?ng l?y tên là Linh s?n c?a Tr?n ??nh và b?n t? ti?ng Trung, l?y tên là Núi thiêng c?a Ông V?n Tùng.

Vi?t ?ã khá dài nh? v?y, nh?ng li?u b?n và tôi, chúng ta có hi?u ???c Linh s?n không? Xin trích l?i ba dòng

cu?i cùng trong cu?n sách thay cho câu tr? l?i.

“V? làm ra hi?u nh?ng r?t c?c v?n ch?ng hi?u.
K? th?c tôi ch?ng hi?u gì, ch?ng bi?t rõ ?i?u gì.
Nó nh? th? ??y”.

Nh?ng chúng ta có ch?c r?ng ngh? thu?t là ?? “hi?u” không? Hay Nabokov [4] ?ã có lý h?n khi trong bài gi?ng v? tác ph?m “Hoá thân” c?a Kafka, ông vi?t “Cái ??p và s? th??ng c?m - ?ó là ??nh ngh?a chính xác nh?t v? ngh? thu?t. ? n?i nào có cái ??p, ? ?ó có s? th??ng c?m, b?i m?t l? gi?n d? là cái ??p s? ph?i ch?t; và cái ??p luôn luôn ch?t”.

Trong Linh s?n, ng??i ??c có th? ch?m vào cái ??p và s? th??ng c?m trên t?ng trang sách.

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[1]In trong cu?n Linh s?n, nhà xu?t b?n V?n H?c 2003, b?n d?ch c?a H? Quang Du.

[2]Các ??i t? nhân x?ng ch? các nhân v?t trong Linh s?n theo b?n d?ch c?a H? Quang Du.

[3]Tên m?t tác ph?m c?a Kawataba

[4]Nhà v?n n?i ti?ng ng??i Nga s?ng l?u vong ? Pháp và M?, tác gi? cu?n Lolita.

Cao Hành Ki?n và Linh S?n

Jessica says

Update: What an amazing book. I truly have never read anything like it, and I found some of the observations and insights to be thrilling. Oddly, I found myself enraptured by the descriptions of the Chinese landscapes more than anything else. There is much to be awed by--fables, stories-within-stories, heartbreaking recollections of the Cultural Revolution--but it was the lengthy passages about China's mountains, forests and (increasingly polluted) rivers that kept me reading more than anything else. This is strange for me; usually I glaze over during such scenes in most books. I would cite a passage or two to help sell this book, but I've already lent it out..! So, this book is challenging, and threw conventional approaches to narrative out the window, but it is also immensely satisfying in its scope and humanity.

So, this is some crazy stuff, this book. It's like a meta-biography, if there can be such a thing. Here's the basic idea behind it's wacky narration: So, the story is told by "I" (being the author), who is cognizant of the need for companionship while traveling across China (!), but he's alone, so he creates "you" for company. But "you" and "I" are part of the same person, the narrator, so he creates "he". But "he" is just the back of "you" or "I" walking away, hence "she" is given a voice. Whoa. I'm on page 30 of 500+, so this one is going to take a while!

Oscar says

This was a difficult book to read. Not because I found Xingjian's writing style too disjointed or because I

thought it was too dense, but because his gaze never seemed to swerve far away from his own navel. In the beginning the book seemed very promising but as I continued it read more and more like the recounting of a long and stupid dream.

Xingjian's preoccupation with himself reaches the point that when one character has the temerity to impose on his splendid isolation with a story of her own suffering it makes him physically ill. In another chapter he abandons a child by the road. Allegory or not, it is very telling of the kind of character that the I, he, you of the book is. There were interesting parts in the book, yes, but they all seemed to be used solely as backdrops to his endless self-adoration.

I realise the book is meant to be a meditation on the self and that is well and good but the impression it leaves me with is a man so enraptured by himself that he thinks every slightest creative whim of his own and every particular about his life has immediate significance and importance to the reader.

His treatment of women is also off somehow. They are invariably portrayed as cluelessly drifting along until snatched up by some willful male. For example, there are countless references to horrible crimes against women, including a lot of rape, that do not seem to do much in the way of raising the ire of the author but are instead presented as some immutable law of the universe.

That said, there were times when the book offered an engrossing window into the country and people there but without any overarching vision to tie those solitary gems together they remain unpolished diamonds buried in a soulless mountain of dung.

Alison says

I'd like to start with a view that dissents with those of some other reviewers, who (in praise, often) claim that this book works outside the rules of fiction, or is unlike all other books, or isn't even a novel. Of course it is a novel, and a hyperliterary one at that—and it operates within structures of fictional form that are common (even commonplace) in the twentieth century, not to mention in earlier works that share some of its more astonishing features (such as *Don Quixote*). And Gao got a degree in French literature and appears to have been well acquainted with modernism. So there's that, to start.

I am not a huge, huge reader of nonlinear and/or nontraditional narrative myself, but the events surrounding this book's composition in the wake of the Cultural Revolution gave it a fresh interest for me. So to place this book within a literary context is hardly to denigrate it or to take away from what makes it wonderful (on the contrary, I think that that enriches it). Also, if you don't know where Guizhou or Anhui are, look at a map. I promise that being able to follow the narrator's travels will increase your reading pleasure.

Additional thoughts here:

<http://alisonkinney.com/category/gao-...>

Thanks!
