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IN SEARCH OF CREATIVITY: AGONY AND ECSTASY IN GAO XINGJIAN'S *LINGSHAN*

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Abstract

Beleaguered by an artistic void and creative anxiety that were shared by many Chinese writers after the Cultural Revolution, Gao Xingjian embarked on a search for artistic creativity in the 1980s. *Soul Mountain*, along with *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*, can be seen as Gao Xingjian's major undertakings in the 1980s in his attempt to restore creative energy. Based on a critical analysis of *Soul Mountain*, this essay discusses Gao Xingjian's understanding of artistic creativity, his particular vision of the creative process, and the dynamics of the novel that engender both creative agony and satisfaction. I suggest that Gao Xingjian's understanding of artistic creativity be defined as a persistent struggle for the unique description of personal experience, and for the understanding and expression of the self. I believe that Gao Xingjian's particular vision of artistic creativity and the creative process is typically revealed in the protagonist's facing an imminent death threat, in his drastic environmental dislocation, in his resorting to the "primitive," myths of origin, legends, and folk literature, and in his exploration of loneliness and sexual desire. I argue that Gao Xingjian posits the infinite "self-quest" as the origin of individual creativity and the impetus for his pursuit of creativity.

Artistic Creativity

In an interview with Gérard Meudal, a journalist for the French newspaper *Libération*, Gao Xingjian 高行健 claims that *Lingshan* 灵山 (*Soul Mountain*) embodies his effort to search for "inspiration and creative energy" (Meudal 1995). Indeed, the search for artistic creativity constitutes one of the central themes of *Lingshan*, in which Gao Xingjian engages in a complex of issues circumscribed by the concept of artistic creativity. In pursuit of creativity, he turns to the "primitive," loneliness, attends mythopoetic trope, taps into insatiable sexual "desire," and embarks upon a discourse of the self that posits the quest for the self as the origin of individual creativity. The paradoxes and overarching tensions involving these issues constitute, as I will argue here, the

dynamics in *Lingshan* that engender both creative agony and satisfaction. The primary focus of this article is to examine Gao Xianjian's understanding of artistic creativity by exploring his pursuit of creative inspiration which reveals his particular vision of artistic creativity and the creative process, and to probe his "self-quest" (338/308)¹ that defines the creative imperative and constitutes an impetus for an infinite search for creativity.

Raymond Williams (1961: 3) began his extensive discussion on creativity in *The Long Revolution* with the following comment about the word "creative:" "No word in English carries a more consistently positive reference than 'creative'." The same can also be said, if we replace the word "English" with "Chinese," for the May Fourth and the immediate post-Mao periods in Chinese literature, in which Chinese writers acutely felt an artistic void and creative anxiety, and tried to draw inspiration from both Western literature and traditional Chinese cultural roots.² Yet the meaning of the word "creative" varies considerably in different times and for different writers. As a result, "the very width of the reference involves not only difficulties of meaning," as Williams (1961: 3) pointed out, "but also, through habit, a kind of unthinking repetition which at times makes the word seem useless." Hence it is necessary, before we engage in a more detailed discussion of creativity issues in *Lingshan*, for us to provide a brief account of the concept of artistic creativity as it applies to and is construed by Gao Xingjian.

Many May Fourth writers, especially Creation Society members, tried to rejuvenate their artistic creativity by turning to Western Romantic writers. They readily adopted the Romantic vision of creativity, which emphasizes what

1 All references to *Lingshan* appear in brackets, giving page numbers of the Chinese original (Gao 2000) first, followed, after a forward slash, by page numbers of Mabel Lee's (Lee 2000) translation. I have mostly used Mabel Lee's translation for the passages I quote from the novel, but made changes in the English translation when I have found Lee's reading of the Chinese to be inaccurate or inconsistent. My changes appear in square brackets, and I also explain in footnotes why I made the changes.

2 Benjamin I. Schwartz (1961), Chow Tse-tsung (1967), and Chang Hao (1971) discussed how the general idea of creativity was first introduced into China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. On the literary scene of the early 20th century, the Chinese writers' views on creativity were inspired chiefly by Western Romantic writers and Nietzsche, but also by authors such as Kuriyagawa Hakuson. See, for example, Leo Ou-fan Lee (1973), Yue Daiyun (1984: 140-166), and Marston Anderson (1993: 249-268). In her article "The Anxiety of Out-fluence: Creativity, History and Postmodernity," Bonnie S. McDougall (1993: 99-112) tried to theorize the concept of creativity and explore the meaning of literary creativity in contemporary China.

Williams (1961: 29) termed “two traditional ideas of creativity in aesthetic theory;” namely, “the idea that the artist is specially inspired,” and “the idea of ‘revelation’, the discovery of a ‘superior reality’.” According to this Romantic view of creativity, art should be seen as special and extraordinary and artists as original geniuses. Gao Xingjian did not share this Romantic view that essentially restricts literature specifically to those individuals with great talent. The you-narrator in *Lingshan*, for example, defines fiction in such a broad sense that it includes even the writings “on geography and natural sciences, street talk, [hearsays], and miscellaneous records of strange events” (503/453)³. Like many other post-Mao Chinese writers, Gao Xingjian first turned to Western modernist writers in his attempt to restore his creative energy,⁴ and formed a rather modernist vision of artistic creativity.

In a discussion on the modernity (*xiandai xing* 现代性) of the contemporary writer, Gao Xingjian (1996: 126) describes “creativity” (*chuang zao xing* 创造性) as “an effort to find a modern, unique language to express one’s own perception” (*nuli wei ziji de ganzhi zhaodao yizhong xiandai de, dute de yuyan, biao shu chulai* 努力为自己的感知找到一种现代的, 独特的语言, 表述出来). Here we see several key words in the configurations of Gao Xingjian’s views on literature in general, and on creativity in particular. The word “unique” signifies the intimate link between creativity and originality; “language” foregrounds the critical role played by language and implies a “language consciousness” that is seen by Gao Xingjian as “a creative attitude” (1996: 146); and “express” indicates at once a mediation between the interior and the exterior and a descriptive interpretation that is critical for the creative act. With the word “own,” Gao Xingjian seems to emphasize an individual creativity in contrast to collectivity, which he tries to avoid in *Lingshan*. The content of the “expression” here is “one’s own perception,” instead of the

3 Mabel Lee’s translation of the Chinese phrase *dao ting tu shuo* 道听途说 is incorrect. It should be translated as “hearsay,” “rumors,” etc.

4 Gao Xingjian’s book *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*, for example, was intended to stimulate Chinese writers’ creativity by, among other things, introducing skills developed and experimented with by modern Western fiction writers. Although the book focuses mainly on specific narrative skills, Gao Xingjian touched on some important issues of artistic creativity, which he later extensively engaged in *Lingshan*. *Lingshan* was originally commissioned by the People’s Literature Press. The editor suggested that Gao Xingjian write a novel to showcase his idea expressed in *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*.

representation of external social reality that used to be the key tenet of the Chinese realist paradigm.

“Perception” is a word that Gao Xingjian uses often in his writings and is understood by him both as consciousness and as subjective observation, as interpretation of external reality as well as life experience. Hence, the concept of “perception” seems to be used here to mediate a traditional literary duality that looks at literature in a binary mode and separates literature and reality by seeing literature either as the representation of reality, or as the direct expression of purely aesthetic experience and the writer’s vision. Gao Xingjian considers it impossible for us to assume that there is any reality experienced by a human being into which his/her interpretations do not enter. Hence he states in *Lingshan*: “reality exists only in human experience, which, furthermore, must be personal experience” (18/15). “Personal experience” here denotes a person’s own perception or interpretation of the external reality and his/her personal life. To express one’s own perception means thus to express one’s personal experience that includes his/her interpretation of external reality, and his/her own consciousness or own self. Personal experience and the self thus become the ultimate content of expression. Hence, Gao Xingjian (2001: 21) terms literature ultimately as “man’s focusing his gaze on his self” and focuses his understanding of artistic creativity on the quest for the self. In fact, the origin of individual artistic creativity is seen by Gao Xingjian ultimately as an infinite quest for the self and self-realization. Gao Xingjian’s understanding of artistic creativity can thus be defined as a persistent struggle for the unique description of personal experience, for the understanding and expressing of the self.

This concept of creativity sounds indeed very much like the typical modernist, humanistic theory of creativity, in which creativity is intimately linked to originality, the critical capacity of the artist to introduce aspects of private experience into a shared language. The concept of “expression” itself already presupposes an autonomous individual subjectivity and posits the self as an autonomous existence that precedes and exceeds the operations of language. It is worth noting here that Gao Xingjian’s view on some key issues related to the concept of creativity, such as subjectivity, self, and language, is often ambiguous and at times contradictory. In his writings, for example, he seems to take a postmodernist stance on the concept of the autonomous subject when he expresses a strong skepticism about the certainty of the self in chapter twenty-six of *Lingshan*, and when he defines the subject as a being “constructed through the operations of language” (1996: 96). In light of this, creativity should not be seen as the expression of an inner experience, or the product of an autonomous

subject; rather the subject, or the self itself, emerges and is sustained only within the employment of language and during the act of artistic creation. In a sense, Gao Xingjian's proposition concerning "no isms" (*meiyou zhuyi* 没有主义) suggests a strategy to appropriate various isms, including modernism and postmodernism.

Gao Xingjian's concept of creativity suggests that he belongs to a generation of writers of the 1980s who sought to rework the modern Chinese literary paradigm. Some of the ideas in his vision of artistic creativity represent some typical views expressed in the creative and controversial literary trends of the mid-1980s: Chinese modernism (*xiandai pai* 现代派) and the "search for roots" (*xungen* 寻根) movement. His modernist vision of artistic creativity reveals a close relationship with Western modernism, which many of his contemporary writers accepted, to use Li Qingxi's 李庆西 (1988: 16) words, "as both an artistic methodology and a structure of feeling." His "language consciousness," purposeful deconstruction of the Chinese realist paradigm, and awakening of the individual subject could be found in many contemporary writers.

Searching for Creative Inspiration

In the beginning of *Lingshan*, the protagonist, beleaguered by an artistic void and creative anxiety, is trapped in a deep crisis. The desperate situation pushes him to embark on a search for creative inspiration in an attempt to restore his creative energy. In the following pages I will discuss a few aspects of his search that reveal Gao Xingjian's particular vision of artistic creativity and the creative process. These aspects can be placed in the following categories: 1) imminent death threat – the protagonist's misdiagnosed lung cancer; 2) a drastic environmental dislocation – a sudden change in the protagonist's habitual world; 3) the "primitive" – marginalized ethnic minorities living in peripheral regions amidst ancient rituals, shamanism, and nature that is untouched by human civilization; 4) myths of origin, legends, and folk literature; and 5) sexual encounters.

In *Lingshan* we see some important isolated moments, in which the protagonist experiences, often in the existential or the Zen Buddhist sense,⁵ the sudden revelation of his authentic self, or the exterior reality, and feels the

5 Li, Shixue 李爽学 (2001: 75-78) describes *Lingshan* chiefly as a work of a Buddhist pilgrimage.

impulse to elucidate the new experience his sensitivity reveals. We may call these moments “creative encounters,” because in these moments the protagonist suddenly gains the unique mode of perception, which sheds light on some essential aesthetic issues. One of the most painful creative encounters experienced by the protagonist in *Lingshan* is probably his facing imminent death, even though it turns out to be a false alarm and lasts only for a relatively short time period.

In the second chapter we are told that the protagonist has just “gone through a crisis” (13/11–12) caused by the wrongly diagnosed lung cancer. After his father had died of lung cancer, the same doctor who treated his father diagnosed his illness as the same disease. For a period of time, the protagonist firmly believed that he was facing imminent death. We learn from Heidegger that it is impossible to hide from one’s most crushing existential situation such as death by taking refuge amid the generalities of “Das Man” (or “the they”).⁶ The I-narrator’s assertion that “the birth of I derived from fear of death” (337/308) might be understood in the same vein. The generalities of “Das Man” are meant by Heidegger as the inauthentic conformity of the masses to public opinion and conventional wisdom in contrast with the autonomy of individual self-determination and self-expression. This is precisely the condition the protagonist finds himself in when facing a death threat. He struggles hopelessly in his habitual world; that is, in his everyday working environment, in the literary world, and in the familiar community he lives in. The struggle becomes so desperate that he feels himself “like an insect caught in a spider’s web” (14/12). Following the thinking habits and aesthetic conventions of the time, the I-narrator feels “alienated from life,” and thus ends up with “distorting reality” (14/12). When facing imminent death, the protagonist suddenly feels that he has become most acutely aware of his inauthentic conformity and reestablishes contact with his deepest inner self. It is the misdiagnosed lung cancer that literally “kills” his habitual world and inauthentic, habitual self, and launches his quest for the authentic self. In this sense he acknowledges, after the torment: “Fortunately, the doctor who gave the wrong diagnosis saved my life” (14/12).

- 6 In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger sees the discovery of finitude as ultimately a liberatory experience and the ensuing “epiphany” as an experience that shakes the anxious comfort of inauthenticity: “What is characteristic about authentic, existentially projected being-toward-death can be summarized as follows: Anticipation reveals to Da-sein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself [...] to be itself in passionate anxious freedom toward death which is free of the illusions of the they, factual, and certain of itself” (1996: 245).

The two immediate actions taken by the author/protagonist following his cancer incident – “returning to nature” and writing *Lingshan* to tell his “personal experience” – indicate two major approaches in his quest for his real life and authentic self. “Nature,” in *Lingshan*, carries the connotation of the nonhuman world, as well as our human spontaneity and original or natural condition.⁷ Hence, the protagonist is not only eager to leave the big city behind and plunge into mountains and primeval forests, but also keen to tap into childhood, the “primitive,” creation mythology, and primordial drives. Such a “nature” is seen by Gao Xingjian as a vast reservoir of creative energy and a source in which to find the genuine layer of himself. At the same time, Gao Xingjian tries to find his real life and authentic self in writing – fictionalizing his lived life, a creative process that could reveal or even create the author’s real life and his authentic existence. His quasi-Cartesian motto, “I express myself, therefore I am” (*wo biao shu gu wo zai* 我表述故我在)⁸ (1996: 128) should be understood in this vein. The protagonist’s experience of misdiagnosed cancer thus becomes a “creative encounter” that brings him to the realization of the fundamentally creative nature of artistic activity, which enables him to grasp his true existence. Proust once described this creative nature of art in his novel *In Search of Lost Time*:

The grandeur of real art is to rediscover, grasp again and lay before us that reality from which we live so far removed and from which we become more and more separated as the formal knowledge which we substitute for it grows in thickness and imperviousness – that reality which there is grave danger we die without ever having known and yet which is

- 7 Thomas Moran (2002: 207-236) discussed nature in *Lingshan* in detail. However, his discussion focuses on the nonhuman nature as well as its symbolic and allegorical meanings.
- 8 The Chinese phrase *biaoshu* 表述 can be translated into English as “express,” “convey,” “state,” “voice,” etc. My decision to use the word “express” and to add “myself” in the English translation is chiefly based on Gao Xingjian’s discussion of this quasi-Cartesian motto in his *No Isms*, where he used this phrase when discussing explicitly “the expression of the self” (*dui ziwo de biao shu* 对自我的表述 1996: 128). Gao Xingjian used this phrase at various places in his writings, and the meaning of the phrase may vary in different contexts. In his article “Why Write?” (*wei shenme xie zuo* 为什么写作), for example, this phrase should probably be translated as “I write, therefore I am.” In her translations of Gao Xingjian’s works, Mabel Lee translated this phrase as “I say and therefore I am” in Gao’s Nobel laureate speech “The Case for Literature” (Gao 2000: 8) and the variation of the same motto *ni biao shu cai de yi cun zai* 你表述才得以存在[...] as “it is only through expressing yourself that you exist [...]” in *One Man’s Bible* (*Yige ren de sheng jing* 一个人的圣经) (Gao 2002: 140).

simply our life. Life as it really is, life disclosed at last and made clear, consequently the only life that is really lived, is literature. (Proust 1934: 1013)

The protagonist in *Lingshan* literally feels that he almost died “without ever having known” his “life as it really is” and “that is really lived.” The artistic activity to “rediscover, grasp again and lay before us that reality from which we live so far removed” is essentially to reveal previously unseen or unknown aspects of life and reality – both exterior and inner reality. This is precisely what *Lingshan* sets out to accomplish.

To be able to discover and grasp those previously unseen or unknown aspects, according to Gao Xingjian, the artist has to avoid following social conformity, particularly the habits of thought and aesthetic conventions that dominate at the time. As a way to break with conformity and get out of the “spider’s web,” the protagonist chooses to initiate a drastic change in his habitual world. One of his very first actions is a sweeping environmental dislocation, leaving his whole habitual world, including his own apartment, the familiar literary world, and the big city, to roam in geographically remote and politically marginalized regions. The political persecution suffered by the author/protagonist and his misdiagnosed cancer both play an important role in his decision to go into self-exile. In a Foucaultian sense, the false diagnosis of lung cancer described in the novel is not to be seen as simply a medical “disorder,” but lends itself to an allegorical reading: it casts the author, Gao Xingjian, as an outsider in relationship to the “rational” (ruling) order and power structure of the dominant political system.⁹ In a repressive society, self-determination and self-expression are restricted and treated as renegade and unhealthy. For a period of time in the early 1980s, Gao was indeed seen in some ways as a spiritual “cancer.” He was singled out for criticism in the “oppose spiritual pollution” campaign and was rumored to be ready to be sentenced to labor on a prison farm in Qinghai 青海. Seen in this light, the protagonist’s self-imposed exile expresses his refusal to conform to the dominant state ideology and the social rules of collectivity.

The environmental dislocation is described in the novel not chiefly as a political action, but rather as an aesthetic strategy for the protagonist to search for creative impulses and to rejuvenate his artistic creativity. When choosing

9 In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault’s study on the historical transformation of the concept of madness suggests that madness in the West is historically both a medical “disorder” and a sociopolitical definition that serves the social and economic system by casting out those who do not conform to the “rational” order (Foucault: 1973).

peripheral regions as his destination, where marginalized ethnic minorities reside, and primitive cultures, ancient myths of origin, and folk literature and arts still exist or are traceable, the protagonist actually follows a strategy employed by both the Western modernist writers and artists, and the Chinese writers in the May Fourth and post-Cultural Revolution periods. We all know that the formal innovations of Western modernist art and literature were inspired by “exotic” cultures and by primitivizing non-Western lands and people. From painters such as Picasso and Cézanne to writers like James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, many modern artists and writers, at moments of cultural crisis, turned to the “primitive” to search for creative impulses. On the Chinese literary scene, some writers, facing the crisis of artistic creativity in the May Fourth and the immediate post-Cultural Revolution periods, turned to mythology, folklore, and the “primitive” to restore their creative energy.¹⁰ Rey Chow discussed this approach and what she calls the “dialectic between formal innovation and primitivism” in *Primitive Passion*. She identifies this approach as a strategy employed by both “elite, cultured intellectuals everywhere in the world” and by “modern Chinese intellectuals,” and claims that the latter turned their attention to the “primitive” because they found in it “a source of fascination that helps to renew, rejuvenate, and ‘modernize’ their own cultural production in terms both of subject matter and of form” (Chow 1995: 21).

The focus of Rey Chow’s discussion of the primitive is on socially oppressed classes, women in particular. In *Lingshan*, the term “primitive” chiefly connotes common people and ethnic minorities in geographically remote and politically peripheral regions, who are seen by the protagonist/author as the Other of an intellectual, or more precisely, of a Han intellectual. Through selective recording, collecting, and re-telling of folk rituals, customs, and folk literatures, the author of *Lingshan* tries, by primitivizing others, to find the creative impulse in order to restore his creative energy and extricate himself from the intellectual and psychological void he experienced, along with many other Chinese writers at the time. It is therefore not surprising that Gao Xingjian’s description of local folk, ethnic people and their cultures turns out to be essentially a narcissistic imagining of the Other. In fact, he is primarily interested in his own identity rather than in the identity of the local folks and ethnic people he visits. The seemingly sympathetic images are unmistakably controlled by the gaze of a dominant Han Chinese intellectual, who

10 These writers include Lu Xun 鲁迅, Shen Congwen 沈从文 and the so-called “search for roots” writers such as Han Shaogong 韩少功 and Acheng 阿城.

demonstrates, intentionally or unintentionally throughout the novel, the “latent superiority complex” (*qianzai de youyue gan* 潜在的优越感) of an intellectual towards common people, to use Chen Sihe’s 陈思和 (1997: 121) comments on intellectual writers’ dealing with common people, and the greater sense of power and legitimacy of a Han intellectual towards ethnic minorities. His self-presentation and articulation of the Han Chinese intellectual is itself already a sign of his privileged identity. He is always aware of his origin, aware of coming from the urban political center, and always prepared to take advantage of this. Several times the protagonist intentionally shows his ID card for the *Writers Association* and presents himself as a “reporter from Beijing” (268/250) or as a writer “from Beijing” (236/223) in order to seek preferential treatment, which indeed brings favor to him.¹¹ He claims that the generations of villagers “don’t know the history of the place, don’t [even] know about themselves” (45/42),¹² with the implication that he is there to play the role of witness and explorer of ethnic history and cultures. It is worth noting that this sense of superiority of an intellectual and the typical Han reading of ethnic minorities come from a protagonist who himself has become an outcast in the dominant Han culture and has been marginalized by the mainstream society. This, however, does not prevent him from clinging to the power of his intellectual and Han perspective, and from actually seeking a return to his former social identity in his appropriation of common people, ethnic minorities, and “primitive” cultures.

In his article “Returning to Commoner” (*Huanyuan minjian* 还原民间), Chen Sihe discussed the typical literary practices of Chinese intellectuals in relation to common people after the Cultural Revolution. He pointed out: “The world of common people’s lives is like Kafka’s castle, in which intellectuals, after wandering around for a long time, ultimately face only themselves” (Chen 1997: 119). The protagonist K., in Kafka’s novel *The Castle*, cannot find that mysterious and godly figure – the Count – because what he longs to see is produced by his own wish in imagination. Similarly, what the protagonist of *Lingshan* looks for in common people and the ethnic minorities and their cultures is what he misses in his own intellectual life and in Han people in the urban areas. As a result, what he sees is a projection of his own view or desires rather than the true reality. This is clearly reflected in his search for creative

11 For example, he does get a free ride in a local official’s car and special treatment by presenting himself as a journalist sent by the central government. On another occasion, he uses the same trick to get a lift from a truck driver.

12 The Chinese original is: [...], *tamen shenzhi dou bu zhidao tamen ziji* 他们甚至都不知道他们自己。

inspiration in the “primitive.” Gao Xingjian’s notion of creativity is closely connected with naturalness, spontaneity, and unconsciousness, which promote and emancipate the instincts, emotions, and imagination. He projects this notion onto the minority people and their cultures, essentializes them, and describes their attributes as “primitive,” spontaneous, sincere, and authentic in contrast to the modern, artificial, hypocritical, and inauthentic characteristics of the dominant Han people and culture in the urban areas. This is also true of the description of minority women in *Lingshan*. In contrast with the major Han female figure’s deceitful, victimized, suicidal, weak, and manipulative personality, we see innocent, youthful, fresh, joyful, and erotic minority female figures, Miao women in particular. These minority women do not “understand what it is to be jealous” (244/230), carry no “[burden of the concepts of status, wealth, religion, ethics, and so-called culture]”¹³ created by the “so-called civilization,” and for them “sexual impulse” and “love” (241/228) are not separated. There is also sensual description of their lips, noses, raised breasts, eyes, and graceful bodies, in which minority women become the embodiment of innocent beauty, and the protagonist’s sensual gaze at the female native serves as a visual displacement of sexual desire.

In *Lingshan*, the protagonist often presents himself as a collector of folk literature, which reflects the author’s expressed wish to search for “inspiration and creative energy” from the Southern Chinese cultural tradition that, in his own words, traditionally “nourished creative energy, great writers, poets, and artists” (Meudal 1995). This cultural tradition, which Gao Xingjian sees as a source and repository of literary creativity, typically features Laozi, Zhuangzi, Qu Yuan, and Li Bai, but also folklore, legends, and myths along the Yangtze River Valley. In *Lingshan*, those myths and legends, for example, are prominently featured and are often placed at the very center of some of the “creative encounters” and spiritual epiphanies the protagonist experiences. The mountain Lingshan in the title already alludes to the mythopoetic trope of the novel, when the protagonist traces it in the first chapter directly to “the ancient shamanistic work, *The Classics of the Mountains and Seas*” (*Shanhai jing* 山海

13 The Chinese original *houshi zhi suowei wenming* [...] *you zhizao chu mendi jinqian zongjiao lunli guannian he suowei wenming de fudan* 后世之所谓文明 [...] 又制造出满地金钱宗教伦理观念和所谓文化的负担 is translated by Mabel Lee as “So-called civilization in later ages [...] created the concepts of status, wealth, religion, ethics and cultural responsibility.”

经), an immense repository of Chinese myths (6/5).¹⁴ Chapter nineteen offers a typical example of how the narrator taps into specific ancient creation myths to draw upon primal creative energy.

The chapter begins with the you-narrator's dream: he walks in dense heavy darkness enclosed by a totality of primitive chaos and tries to protect his rapidly vanishing consciousness, which is dim like a candle in the darkness. The fading flame of consciousness, which can be seen as symbolizing modern human beings and, in a sense, also its waning creativity, is strongly contrasted with the primitive creative forces engendered by sexual intercourse and the creation myths of Pangu 盘古, Nüwa 女娲, and Fuxi 伏羲. Hearing the breath of the "she" who is lying beside him in bed and touching her body interrupts abruptly the you-narrator's dream and arouses his sexual desire. What follows is a poetic eruption driven by the you-narrator's Dionysian creative urge and emotional intoxication in a description of intensive, violent sexual intercourse. This eruption of primal creative forces is directly linked to Chinese creation mythology through the story told by the you-narrator about Pangu, the creator of the universe in Chinese mythology, and especially the genealogy story about Nüwa and Fuxi:

When the great flood broke out, only a small boat was left in the world, a brother and his younger sister were in the boat; they couldn't bear the loneliness and huddled close together, only the flesh of the other was real, could verify one's own existence [...]. The girl was seduced by the snake, the snake is my big brother (125–126/116).

The brother obviously refers to Fuxi, who is said to have mated with his sister Nüwa – the younger sister here. The snake refers to the legend that describes Nüwa and Fuxi as having the head of a human and the body of a snake (*renshou sheshen* 人首蛇身). The you-narrator obviously spins the scene of Nüwa and Fuxi in the boat to suit his purpose. "Boat" is an imagery appearing many times in the chapter, several times evidently symbolizing "her" genitals. The you-narrator compares his entering the woman's body in sexual intercourse to entering the boat, and thus associates his fiction directly with the story of Nüwa and Fuxi. This chapter invites the reader to explore the associations between literary creation and the Chinese myth of origin. In Chinese mythology, Nüwa and Fuxi are the creator-god and creator-goddess who are credited with creating human beings and instituting marriage. It is creation or creativity that links the

14 Gao Xingjian's play *Shanhai jing zhuan* 山海经传 is based on the myths and legends in *Shanhai jing* 山海经 and was written at about the same time when *Lingshan* was written.

author's literary activity and the creation mythology. Also, as the I-narrator describes in chapter fifty-one, the early literary creation, "the mythical union of Fuxi and Nüwa, both with the bodies of snakes but human heads, is derived from the sexual impulses of primitive humans" (337/307). Hence, the allegorical layers of meaning that can be derived from this chapter are: sexuality is intimately linked with creation and creativity, and the primal creative forces can be accessed through myth.

The intimate link between sexuality and creativity in this chapter alludes to another aspect of the protagonist's search for creativity – sexuality – which represents an important source of creative inspiration for the author and is prominently featured throughout the novel. As discussed above, Gao Xingjian sees artistic creativity as a persistent struggle for the understanding and expressing of the most profound and most elusive self. Sexuality is depicted in *Lingshan* as an agent that promotes creativity by revealing the individual's authentic existence and the roots of self, thus opening a way of self-understanding and self-knowledge in the act of union with another. To be sure, Gao Xingjian (1999: 143) does affirm the primacy of pleasure and sensual fulfillment by claiming "paradise is a woman's genitals," but more importantly, he feels that "only the flesh of the other was real, could verify one's own existence" (125/116). It is the sexual act that enables him to intuitively grasp a particular and individual existence, or a Dasein, to use Heidegger's term, that exists in a concrete situation.

In *Lingshan*, the intimate link between sexuality and creativity constitutes a dynamic relationship that at once nourishes the sexual relationship between the protagonist and the "she," and generates the creative impulse for the protagonist. Throughout the novel, the you-narrator and the "she" are both trapped in a miserable relationship that is depicted as a game of sexual dominance, a power struggle, accompanied by sexual violence, degradation, emotional abuse, and manipulation.¹⁵ Their relationship is kept together literally only through creative

- 15 Although the "she" is an important character in *Lingshan*, the true feminine is never developed in the novel; the "she" is rather an abstract concept and an archetype. In a sense, the "she" can be seen as an "anima projection", to borrow Jung's (1955: 221) term. In other words, Gao Xingjian expresses in the feminine voice of the "she" his own desires and presents his own ideas. A similar attitude towards gender relationship and articulation of the feminine voice can be observed in another Gao Xingjian's major novel *One Man's Bible*. In his article on *One Man's Bible*, Carlos Rojas argues that "the various women who populate the work [...] could all be seen as embodying different dimensions of the narrator's own subjectivity" (2002: 169).

activities, especially storytelling – telling each other stories, fairy tales, legends, folklore, and also personal experiences. It is not accidental that the you-narrator and the “she” go to listen to a storyteller telling a thousand-year old story in a traditional teahouse when he first seduces her. Then, before they meet for the second time, the you-narrator already begins in his own mind to tell various stories to her. They spend most of their time together telling or listening to stories. With his story, the you-narrator seduces the “she” to make love to him for the first time, and the very first thing “she” asks him to do after their first sexual intercourse is “tell me a story” (125/116). It is indeed the various stories, histories, myths, legends, and anecdotes, including the one about the elusive mountain, Lingshan, that capture her attention and keep her by his side. At the same time, it is the you-narrator’s sexual desire – to hold on to the sexual relationship with her – that inspires his creative urge, which produces those stories. Hence the intimate connection between sexual relationship and literary activities seems to cut both ways: the sexual relationship between the you-narrator and the “she” is nourished by the artistic creativity of the narrator – the stories he tells are either his own creation or recreation based on what he has collected on his trip; and this sexual relationship, or more exactly, the you-narrator’s insatiable sexual desire, also constitutes the dynamics that nourish his artistic creativity.

In his sexual relationship with the “she,” the protagonist finds both sexual fulfillment and creative satisfaction, which are seen by him as attached to the satisfaction of the vital needs of a human being, and of a creative writer in particular. This is implied in imagery used often by Gao Xingjian. In his novel *One Man’s Bible*, Gao Xingjian (1999: 114, 426, 446) bluntly compares the act of writing to sexual ejaculation and imagines literary products as “ejaculated semen.” The metaphor of “ejaculated semen” implies, on the one hand, sexual fulfillment as ejaculation “brings you joy” and “the ecstasy of sexual love” (1999: 306), and on the other hand, “ejaculation” – sexual activity – is possibly involved with something that is literally creative in human beings as a race. As a matter of fact, Gao Xingjian confesses openly, in a Freudian sense, that his writing sublimates his sexual desires and he finds in it both a conscious and unconscious outlet for his sexual frustration in real life. In chapter thirty-five of *Lingshan*, the protagonist satisfies, in dream, the sexual desire that is consciously repressed in real life by touching “a woman’s moist lower body,” whom he “wants but can’t have” in reality (213–214/199). In *One Man’s Bible*, he tells a story about one of his students in a village school. She is a young, beautiful, sexy girl, who radiates irresistible temptation and seems ready to be seduced.

Although the protagonist is very much attracted to her, he has to repress his sexual desire because he feels strongly that it would be socially unethical to have a sexual relationship with her. This sexual frustration finds its outlet in writing, in which he “makes love to her in imagination” (446/448). The protagonist candidly admits that he “consigns his sexual fantasies to his writings” in order to substitute for “the women in their absence” (218/213).

Writing is seen by Gao Xingjian not just as the outlet of his sexual frustration in real life, but as serving the function of liberating himself from the prison of the actual world by converting things into literary images. His literary texts create a space for him to regain his freedom and creative spontaneity, which, he believes, a human being possesses when he is born, and is repressed later in the society, and can be regained by him through images and in writing. “To start with you came fearlessly shouting and yelling into the world,” the you-narrator says to himself, “then you were stifled by all sorts of customs, instructions, rituals, and teachings. Now finally you have regained the joy of shouting with total freedom” (466/419). What makes the regaining of the joy in shouting possible in *Lingshan* is the you-narrator’s imagination – he regains his joy of shouting only in his dream and at the time when he decides to leave “the human world” behind and charges “towards the dark River of Forgetting” (456/418). The baby’s fearless cry is a spontaneous, natural, and unconscious act. The author longs to return to this spontaneity and unconsciousness, as he conceives them as sources of creative minds.

Lingshan seems to suggest that a strong link between originality and “nature” – understood as man’s spontaneity and original or natural condition – is inherent in Gao Xingjian’s concept of creativity. This explains why the protagonist is eager to tap into childhood, the “primitive,” creation mythology, and primal drives. In this “nature” Gao Xingjian sees primitive vitality (virility might be a more fitting word), desires, intuition, and spontaneity, which he finds critically important for artistic creativity. The I-narrator’s claims such as “reality is only the perception of this instant” (18/15) seem to avow such an experiential realm of immediacy. For Gao Xingjian, artistic creation involves the “description of personal experience,” in which a person’s primal experience looms large. His concept of creativity also focuses on understanding and expressing the self, and in “nature” – chiefly in a person’s primordial drives and desires – he tries to find his “authentic” self – an unquestionable origin and the genuine layer of himself.

Gao Xingjian’s celebration of the elemental forces in both external and human nature is part of his effort to restore creative energy, which, in his

opinion, has been weakened and is waning because of modern civilization in general, and the Chinese sociopolitical reality and realism paradigm in particular. This seems to suggest a typical primitivism that was shared widely by the “search for roots” writers. However, his effort in *Lingshan* should not be seen simply as an innocent return to the natural. It is an effort aesthetically to rejuvenate artistic creativity, politically to challenge the existing sociopolitical reality by reverting to originaive truths of human nature, and culturally to resort to an Other – the Taoist and Zen Buddhist cultural tradition that emphasizes nature, intuition and imagination to counter the dominant ideology of the center – the Confucian cultural tradition. Gao Xingjian’s effort in *Lingshan* can be seen as a modernist writer’s attempt to transcend the social by returning to a private experience of the natural, which results in a literary product that tries to negotiate between these two discrete spheres.

Gao Xingjian’s emphasis on the elemental forces of human nature implies that the source of literature is a primal experience that precedes any expression in cultural symbolism. If artistic creation is about the “description of experience,” as Gao Xingjian suggests, this modernist proposition seems to highlight “experience” – the content of the description – and posit an autonomous subject, whose experience does not need to be mediated by language. On the other hand, Gao Xingjian’s preoccupation with language, as I will discuss below, brings to the fore the “description,” which is frequently seen by him as constitutive of the subject. This seems to reflect the dilemma of a modernist writer who lives in a postmodern era and the tension between his theoretical discourse and literary practice.

Creative Agony

Raymond Williams defines “creative imagination” as “the capacity to find and organize new descriptions of experience,” and terms a person’s “description of experience” as “literally a remaking of himself, a creative change in his personal organization, to include and control the experience.” “The struggle to remake ourselves,” he continues, “is in fact often painful.” Hence he calls this painful struggle “the creative agony.” Artistic creativity – “creative imagination” – is seen here essentially as recreating the self in the act of the description of experience, in which “describing adequately” and “an actual manipulation of words or paint” are a major source of pain (Williams 1961: 26). The description

of personal experience constitutes the central theme of *Lingshan*, in which the protagonist takes on a painful struggle for the adequate description, organization, and re-creation of his life experience. The protagonist's search for creativity is, as his search for the mountain Lingshan metaphorically implies, inherently and intimately linked with "creative agony."

If Williams interprets the "description of experience" as recreating the self, Gao Xingjian goes a step further by claiming that the act of the "description" itself is constitutive of the self. His quasi-Cartesian motto "I express myself, therefore I am" seems to suggest that the existence of the self is dependent on the linguistic, narrative act – "expression." "What is 'the consciousness of a human being'?" Gao Xingjian (1996: 123) asks this rhetorical question and then gives the following answer: "It is nothing but a totality of chaos without linguistic expression." This "totality of chaos" (*yi tuan hundun* 一团混沌) is figuratively described by the you-narrator in chapter nineteen:

On this chilly late-autumn night, dense heavy darkness encloses a totality of primordial chaos [...] you are wholly fused with this chaos, conscious only that you once possessed the outline of a body, but that this outline in your consciousness is rapidly vanishing (121/113).

Here Gao Xingjian tries to paint a picture of the self, or more precisely, the prenarrative self, which he literally calls "a totality of chaos" (1996: 264). The imagery of "primordial chaos" suggests that the self is not exactly some prelinguistic and presymbolic entity that can be held onto; it is rather, to borrow Saussure's (1974: 112) metaphor describing the thought without language, "a vague, uncharted nebula." It is language and narrative that, as Gao Xingjian tries to demonstrate in *Lingshan*, brings the self into being and sheds light on this "primordial chaos" enclosed by "dense heavy darkness."¹⁶

Lingshan is a fictionalized autobiography of the author, who describes his own experience by telling stories about himself, telling his own stories, and telling these stories to himself. Hence the protagonist calls the novel a "lengthy soliloquy" (341/312). These stories, no matter whether they are historically verifiable, or are pure fiction, are his "description of experience" that is

16 Here we need to be cautious and should not place Gao Xingjian alongside postmodernists who put the self under erasure. Gao Xingjian's own understanding of the relationship between subject and language is ambiguous and at times contradictory. On one occasion, for example, he contended: "The existence of the self is nothing but linguistic expression" (1996: 96-97). In another place, he clearly stated: "The real world and the self exist independent of language" (1996: 13).

constitutive of self and gives the self an identity, as Paul Ricoeur (1985: 214) commented: “[...] our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity.” It is in this sense that Gao Xingjian (2001: 17) firmly believes that “literature is born primarily of the writer’s need for self-fulfillment.”

What we often see in *Lingshan* is not an ecstatically diffused writing self described in Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*, but a narrating subject who most acutely experiences creative agony. And this creative agony is felt most intensely by the narrating subject when he struggles to express himself and describe his new experience – “the perception of a modern being” (Gao 1996: 168) – in his own words, for which language in general, and the existing, conventional language in particular, is inadequate. The utter ineptness of existing Chinese language was intensely felt by Gao Xingjian, along with a whole generation of Chinese writers after the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s, when *Lingshan* was written. At the time, many creative writers found their self-consciousnesses awakened. And their awakened selves and strong subjective consciousnesses generated a burning desire to express their individual selves. When they tried to do this, however, they suddenly realized that the language they were using was still the language that had been used for decades. That language was not only outdated, but also thoroughly contaminated, highly politicized, and strictly normalized during thirty years of censorship, especially during the Cultural Revolution. They found themselves in a desperate situation in which they could not find an appropriate way to express themselves and to describe their new experiences.

This frustration of “wanting to express, but struggling in vain to project out” (Gao 1996: 129) is clearly shown in chapter sixty-four, in which the he-narrator describes exactly such a feeling through a sleepwalker who is himself. The sleepwalker “suddenly felt he had discarded all responsibilities, and had attained liberation, he was at last free” (454/409) – a typical feeling of most writers immediately after the Cultural Revolution period when they shook off all the confinements and responsibilities and regained freedom. He wanted to cry “without restraint to let the world hear his voice” (454/409), only to discover that he could not produce shouting and thus feels sharp, wordless pain. The protagonist encounters the same voiceless shouting in the ensuing chapter when he embraces the River of Forgetting after having “regained the joy of shouting with total freedom” (466/419). This is precisely the agony a creative writer experienced immediately after the Cultural Revolution, when fervent desire for expression could not be fulfilled because of the utter ineptness of the existing

language. He/she could not express his/her strong emotion because he/she could not find adequate language. It is hence no wonder that the 1980s witnessed the awakening of a new consciousness of the function of language in fiction, and different experiments from “obscure poetry” (*menglong shi* 朦胧诗) to “search for roots” and “experimental” literature (*shiyen wenxue* 实验文学). Gao Xingjian’s “linguistic turn” – his preoccupation with language – can be seen as part of this literary trend.

Just as existing language is considered by Gao Xingjian as inadequate for describing new experience, conventional language is seen by him as being unable to express an individual self in his unique way. If we use, he argues, hackneyed, stereotyped expressions, stylized usages, and normalized terminology, we cannot express our own perceptions and feelings. This is the reason why he appeals for writers “not to use idioms in [literary] writing” (*bu yong chengyu xiezu* 不用成语写作) (1996: 131) and refuses to use idioms in his own literary works. Because of their inescapably generalizing nature, idioms are considered by Gao Xingjian as unfit to express specific individual perceptions, feelings, and experience. If one cannot express oneself in a unique way using one’s own language, what a writer does is nothing but repeat what has been said already. This means that he does not come to exist as an authentic self. Said in a different way: “I exist only when I express myself in my own way” (Gao 1996: 128).

The protagonist’s frustration concerning the existing, conventional language is compounded by his agony over the realization of the inadequacy of language in general. Gao Xingjian soon became deeply skeptical about the capability of language to express the self and capture the flow of consciousness. The question “whether language is at all capable of fully expressing the true perception of a human being” (Gao 1996: 13) has haunted the protagonist throughout the novel. The protagonist struggles, for example, in vain to describe his memory, and finds, disappointedly, what has been described as only the “[structured] sentences, the dregs left from the filter of linguistic structures” (357/329).¹⁷ He is agonized by his hopeless effort of describing the self, not only because of the protean nature of the self, but also because of the inability of language. He compares his texts to a silkworm cocoon, which creates at the end only a space of chaos for the creator himself/herself and ultimately strangles the creator:

17 Lee omitted the words *bei shunli guo de* 被顺理过的 in the Chinese original.

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. (351)

Gao Xingjian blames the restriction of the general structure, rules, grammar, and logic of a static language for the inability of language. These constraints, he argues, make language inadequate for the description of the new experience in modern times, or “the perception of a modern being” in his own words. He firmly believes that language, due to those constraints, can never faithfully capture the flow of consciousness that is random, accidental, illogical, and dynamic. Once thought has taken verbal forms, what remains in a written text is nothing but a “stream of language” (*yuyan liu* 语言流) that is seen as a never-ending chain of words in which the consciousness is expressed (Gao 1996: 135). Thus it is no longer the flowing of consciousness, but a static trace and confined by language. Hence, he suggests re-naming “stream of consciousness” in a text as “stream of language.” In *Lingshan*, Gao Xingjian expressed his wish to “re-create” Chinese language in order to “express the perception of a modern being.” The protagonist imagines creating an ideal language to describe the modern experience. And this ideal language would be

[...] a clear pure language with [a continuous sound that is larger than a melody, transcends restrictions of morphology and syntax, does not distinguish between subject, predicate, and object,] transcends pronouns, discards logic, simply sprawls, and is not bound by imagery, metaphors, associations or symbols. (383/351)¹⁸

With “a clear pure language” Gao Xingjian is in fact searching for the transparency of language. Indeed, what Gao Xingjian probes in *Lingshan* is neither elegance nor power, but the lucidity of the Chinese language. His imagined ideal language essentially combines his understanding of the Chinese language with his wishful thinking about a language that directly transmits a “stream of consciousness” through a “stream of language.” Although deeply skeptical about the capability of language in general, he believes that the Chinese language fares better than Western languages in directly transmitting the flow of consciousness and expressing the psyche of a modern being, chiefly because the Chinese language, in his opinion, has a more flexible structure, and

18 I have made several changes in this citation according to the Chinese original.

is a better tool for the spatialization of time.¹⁹ Gao Xingjian's painful struggle to describe his modern experience compels him to make an effort in *Lingshan* to explore new functions of language, a new linguistic structure, and new modes of expression. Part of this effort, which in my opinion is not always successful, is to take advantage of some unique features of the Chinese language to create an eternal present that exists in the flux of language, especially through juxtaposing and intertwining past experience, current events, and future possibilities, all in a narrative language that is unhooked from time-perspective.

In *Lingshan*, we are given to understand, creative agony not only results from the struggle for adequate description, but also springs directly from consciousness and the self. In other words, the content of what one struggles to understand and describe also causes suffering. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva discussed in the context of Dostoyevsky's view on suffering the intimate connection between consciousness and suffering. In summarizing Dostoyevsky's view on the issue, Kristeva (1989: 181) wrote: "Suffering would be an act of consciousness; consciousness (for Dostoyevsky) says: suffer." One of the essential features of human consciousness is its permanent quest for meaning and self-understanding, and this quest at once generates the impetus for artistic creativity and results inevitably in suffering. The protagonist in *Lingshan* also links his suffering directly to consciousness, especially to his self-consciousness, or the awakened self, and to his persistent quest for the self. In chapter twenty-six, after enunciating his futile, painful efforts to describe the self and his various failures in life, the protagonist comes to this conclusion:

The problem is the awakened self in the inner mind, this is the monster which torments me no end. [...] The self is in fact the source of mankind's misery. (162/151–152)

The real pain the protagonist feels lies in a paradox: human beings are condemned to quest for self-understanding and meaning, but can never grasp the self and find the ultimate meaning. This is precisely the allegorical meaning inherent in the protagonist's search for the mountain Lingshan. If we read the title *Lingshan* as a metaphor, the mountain Lingshan could be seen as the

19 Gao Xingjian (1996: 175-176) claims that the Chinese language "affords the writer tremendous freedom," chiefly because "the subject in a Chinese sentence can be omitted and there are no verbal conjugations," which makes it easy to "change the 'I' into the second person (you) or the third person (he/she)." This leads Gilbert Fong (1999: xxii) to assert that Gao Xingjian's tripartite narrative modes "may have been inspired by the special features of the Chinese language."

metaphorical designation of the self or the ultimate meaning of life. Lingshan is always elusive and even fictitious. At the outset, it is already suspiciously beclouded and befogged. The “you” learns of it indirectly through a train traveler who “had only heard about the place” and might well be “just making it all up” (5). At times, Lingshan seems to be close, yet always eludes the seeker.²⁰ As the narrative unfolds and the protagonist’s search progresses, it becomes evident to the protagonist that what he is searching for cannot be found. Nevertheless, he never gives up searching for it on a path beset with frustrations and hardships. The you-narrator obviously refers to this permanent quest when he talks about his habitual mountain climbing: “You know you will find nothing but are driven by this blind thought and keep on climbing” (485/435).

The protagonist’s search for the mountain Lingshan reflects at once the inaccessibility of the self /the ultimate meaning and man’s tenacious longing and obstinate quest for it. This underlying paradox in the novel seems to be an eternal theme both in Gao Xingjian’s own creative writing and in literature in general. As an essential feature of the self/consciousness, this paradox can be seen as “the paradox of subjectivity,” which David Carr’s book of the same title discusses. Carr (1999: 95) describes the philosophical transcendental subject of Kant and Husserl as a “theoretical fiction” and asserts that it “is indeed something like an imaginative construct, a philosopher’s invention, the result of a certain way of looking at things.” For Kant and Husserl, Carr argues, this transcendental self is a necessary fiction required by their theory and method, just like the freely-falling body of Newtonian physics or the “average consumer” of statistics. In *Lingshan*, Gao Xingjian seems to have taken a similar approach towards the ultimate meaning and the self, which, although they cannot be known, are seen by him as an impetus for an infinite quest. He considers this quest meaningful, and hence claims: “It is the individual’s daring attempt to comprehend this inscrutable, ultimate essence that creates the value of life” (Gao 1996: 65). In this sense, the self or the ultimate meaning in *Lingshan* might also be seen as an imaginative construct, and a necessary one as well, because it is meaning-bestowing: the persistent quest for the self and meaning, as Gao

20 This elusiveness can be seen in many of Gao Xingjian’s literary works: in his short story *Buying a Fishing Rod for my Grandfather* (*Gei wo laoye mai yugan* 给我老爷买鱼杆), the “I” cannot find the house where his grandfather lived and where he spent his childhood; in *Dialog and Rebuttal* (*Dui hua yu fanjie* 对话与反诘), the male constantly looks for the door out, but never finds it; and in “Bus Stop” (*Chezhan* 车站), people wait at a bus stop, but never catch the bus.

Xingjian understands it, engenders not only the creative impetus, but also the value of artistic creation.

Loneliness and Creativity

The most articulated source of creative agony experienced by the protagonist in *Lingshan* might be loneliness. Loneliness as a creative agony was also felt by Lu Xun (1981: 532), who expressed his view on the intimate relationship between artistic creativity and the primary emotional effect of loneliness in "Random Thoughts" (*Xiao zagan* 小杂感): "When a person feels lonely, he can write; the minute he is free of loneliness, he is no longer able to write, for he is already without love."²¹ Contextualizing Lu Xun's remark in its historical specificity – the emerging collectivism among intellectuals in post-May Fourth China – Marston Anderson offered the following insightful interpretation:

Here Lu Xun describes creativity as originating in a feeling of separation from others ("loneliness") that is in its essence a longing for connection ("love"). Writing is at one and the same time a private matter of self-expression and an activity permeated, both in its derivation and in its consequences, with social significance. (Anderson 1993: 257)

The seemingly paradoxical longing of a writer for loneliness and companionship, or for companionship through the detour of loneliness revealed in Lu Xun's remarks, constitutes one of the central themes of *Lingshan* and reveal the dynamics that nourish the creativity of its author.

Lingshan, which springs out of the author's inescapable feeling of loneliness and is saturated with its primary emotional effect, offers a typical example of Lu Xun's statement: "When a person feels lonely, he can write." The I-narrator makes this clear when commenting on the autobiographical and self-reflexive nature of the novel in chapter fifty-two:

- 21 The intricate interrelationship between love, loneliness, and creativity might also have intrigued Lu Xun's contemporaries, Creation Society members in particular. This was shown, for example, in their act of printing in fat letters Nietzsche's words on the title page of one of the issues of *Creation Quarterly* (*Chuangzhao* 创造[季刊]) (vol. 2, no. 1): "My brother, go into the solitude with the love and the creating" (*Xiongdi, qing xie ni de aiqing he ni de chuangzhao zouxiang gudu ba* 兄弟,请偕你的爱情和你的创造走向孤独罢). The text is taken from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1896: 86).

You know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my loneliness. You know that this loneliness of mine is incurable, that no-one can save me from this and that I can only talk with myself as the partner of my conversation. (340/312)²²

“Talking to myself,” or the “soliloquy” (341/312) as the protagonist calls it, is the narrative structure of *Lingshan*, which is based on a tripartite protagonist in the form of three personal pronouns “I,” “you,” and “he.” Here Gao Xingjian not only acknowledges the hopeless suffering his inescapable feelings of loneliness bring to him, but also implies that loneliness inspires his creative desire, and writing is employed by him as a coping strategy to alleviate loneliness. This is reiterated in chapter sixty-eight, which begins with an allegorical description of the protagonist’s obsession with mountain climbing, implying his persistent quest for the self, meaning, and truth. This endeavor is, the protagonist says, inevitably accompanied by loneliness. Again, to cope with this emotional distress, he turns to artistic creativity – “fantasizing” and “fabricating some fairy tales” (485/435). Throughout the novel, the protagonist often feels the creative impulse when suffering unbearable loneliness. In chapter thirty-four, the you-narrator strongly feels “lonely” when climbing the ever-elusive Lingshan on a rainy day. This intense feeling of loneliness seems to inspire the protagonist’s artistic creativity and opens the floodgates of his creative imagination, which allows the unstoppable flow of fairy tales, personal stories, legends, folklore, and hallucinations. This eruption of creative energy lasts continuously for several “you” chapters.

Lu Xun (1981: 532) sees the feeling of loneliness as a creative impulse because he believes that “writing is always rooted in love.” And the feeling of loneliness is essentially a longing for love or companionship. However, there seems to be a major difference between a longing for love and actually being in love. While longing for love is a source of artistic creativity, being in love could make a writer’s creativity fade away. That might be why Lu Xun maintains, “the minute he is free of loneliness, he is no longer able to write.” In other words, artistic creativity ultimately springs from a longing for, but not actually being in, love, which is essentially what loneliness implies. This might explain why the protagonist in *Lingshan* simultaneously longs for companionship and love while yearning for loneliness.

- 22 In his Nobel laureate speech, Gao Xingjian (2001: 17) reiterates this point: “I began writing my novel *Lingshan* to dispel my inner loneliness at the very time when works I had written with rigorous self-censorship had been banned. The novel was written for myself and without the hope that it would be published.”

The protagonist is constantly in a state of loneliness and persistently longs for love and companionship. This can be observed most evidently in his pursuit of the relationship with the imaginary traveling companion, “she,” in his numerous involuntary memories, which trace the love he received from his mother and grandmother, his warm relationship with friends and girls at a young age, and his yearning for warmth and love expressed when suffering from loneliness. Once, sitting lonely in a damp cave when he roams in the remote regions, the I-narrator dreams of “a window with a light, where it is warm inside and someone I love who also loves me is there” (218/202). After spending some time alone in remote mountains in the southwestern frontier, he ardently yearns for returning to community:

I must return to the earthly human society to search for sunlight, warmth, happiness, and to search for crowds to rekindle the noisiness, even if anxiety is regenerated, for that is in fact life in the human world. (235/222)

Paradoxically, the protagonist, while longing for companionship and love, actively searches for “primordial loneliness devoid of all meaning” (121/112), which seems to suggest an archetypal primal drive of human beings. He chooses physical and mental exile by leaving the big city and the political center to roam in geographically remote and politically marginal regions. He extricates himself from communal life, and shuns the collective “we” by avoiding using this pronoun throughout the novel. It is worth noting here that the protagonist is sometimes not alone when he feels loneliness. This is also the case in the scene of chapter thirty-four mentioned above, in which the you-narrator is, when struck by loneliness, in fact accompanied by the “she,” with whom he is at the time romantically involved. This suggests that the internal feeling of loneliness is not necessarily linked with being physically in solitude. The protagonist in the scene clearly has company, but feels disconnected from the people around him, even the one he seems to care the most about – a feeling that is certainly not strange for a modern human being. It is apparently the mental distance between the protagonist and the “she” that results in his loneliness. As a matter of fact, the presence of the “she” in the novel only helps to hide the internal loneliness of the protagonist, who is not always in solitude, but is constantly in a state of loneliness.

The ostensible tension of the competing, or even opposing wishes experienced by the protagonist – longing for loneliness/solitude and yearning for companionship and community – is part of the overarching tensions in

Lingshan: the tension between the protagonist's pursuit of a radical division of the self from the collective "we" and his identification with the cultural collective, and the tension between his longing for an autonomous, individualized self and his fascination with the cultural history/roots of the nation. For Gao Xingjian, creativity is dependent on an individual's independent spirit and act. "The creative spirit of an intellectual," he argues, "rests precisely on an individual's unyielding independence" (1996: 92). This unyielding independence calls for "the individual to confront the society," which inevitably results in his/her "loneliness" (Gao 1996: 95).²³ As a result, creativity requires a radical division of an individual from the society and is thus intrinsically linked to loneliness. In *Lingshan*, the radical division pursued by the protagonist often results in wretched loneliness, which in turn impels him to search for warmth and community. Gao Xingjian seems to pursue the division between the individual and the collective "we" from a synchronic perspective while searching for community from a diachronic perspective. On the one hand, the protagonist divides himself from his contemporary community – "the contaminated surroundings." On the other hand, he longs for and finds the Other collective community in the Chinese cultural tradition and his imaginary reinvention.²⁴ Thus his division is in fact a spatial paradigm of the individual self vs. the collective "we." From a temporal perspective, however, the self seems to be totally embedded in the community from which he derives his identity.

It is necessary for a creative writer to pursue love and companionship through the detour of loneliness, we are given to understand in *Lingshan*, not only because loneliness implies longing for love and companionship, but also because it implies suffering. In fact, longing for love and companionship is itself frequently a kind of intense suffering. The protagonist obviously feels racked by the suffering of loneliness; hence, he wishes to alleviate it by writing. Paradoxically, a creative writer needs loneliness precisely because it is a source of suffering. As discussed above, the suffering of loneliness seems to infuse creative energy into the protagonist and create a mental condition in which a writer's creativity thrives. When the I-narrator, who on his trip literally follows the footsteps of one of the most creative Chinese poets, Qu Yuan 屈原, visits

23 Gao Xingjian (1996: 92) finds "the feeling of loneliness" (*gudu gan* 孤独感) in Lu Xun's early works and sees it as the result of Lu Xun's confronting the society as an individual.

24 This Chinese cultural tradition, according to Gao Xingjian (1996: 179), consists of folk culture, Taoism and Buddhism, and the culture along the Yangtze River valley.

the place where the legendary poet committed suicide, he asserts that Qu Yuan would never have been so successful in his literary activities if he had not suffered, especially if he had not suffered from the expulsion from the royal palace (347/319).²⁵ A creative writer must suffer – this seems to be the message of Zarathustra, who wholeheartedly enjoys solitude and claims: “The pain causes hens and poets to cackle” (Nietzsche 1896: 426). Nietzsche firmly believes that a creative poet has to suffer in order to be creative, and suffering can be a catalyst that intensifies a writer’s capability for desire and creativity. This view was widely held by traditional Chinese poets and writers and is implied in the famous expression in the Confucian *Analects*, “poetry can express resentment” (*shi keyi yuan* 诗可以怨).²⁶

As mentioned above, being alone, or experiencing solitude, is closely linked to, but not identical with, feeling lonely. Nevertheless, both solitude and loneliness are needed for a creative writer. The narrative structure of a “soliloquy” in *Lingshan* already sets the solitary tone for the novel, in which solitude is employed as a means for the author to explore his most intimate inner-experience. In this regard, Gao Xingjian’s view of the intimate relationship between solitude/loneliness and artistic creativity is quintessentially rooted in his understanding of artistic creativity, at the center of which is one’s capability of understanding and expressing the most profound and the most elusive self. This capability can be best obtained, as *Lingshan* suggests, by a writer in solitude. The protagonist seems to be seeking this solitude by roaming alone in remote regions, mountains and primeval forests in particular. According to psychiatrist Anthony Storr, “the capacity to be alone” is “linked with self-discovery and self-realization, with becoming aware of one’s deepest needs, feelings, and impulses.” Gao Xingjian needs solitude because it is in solitude that his innermost being finds its expression and completion. He is certainly not alone in this view; many other writers also expressed similar opinions on this issue. In a letter to his fiancée, who once wished to be with Kafka when he wrote, Kafka explained to her why he needed to be alone when writing:

For writing means revealing oneself to excess; that utmost of self-revelation and surrender, in which a human being, when involved with others, would feel he was losing himself [...].

25 In his comparative study on Gao Xingjian, Qu Yuan, and Shen Congwen, Jeffrey Kinkley (2002: 130-162) puts Gao Xingjian squarely in the tradition of Qu Yuan.

26 For a detailed discussion on this issue, see Qian Zhongshu’s 钱钟书 (1984: 31-45) “*Shi keyi yuan*.” In this article, Qian Zhongshu discussed extensively how great poetry results from intensive sufferings.

Writing that springs from the surface of existence – when there is no other way and the deeper wells have dried up – is nothing, and collapses the moment a truer emotion makes that surface shake. That is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around one when one writes, why even night is not night enough. (Kafka 1974: 155–156)

Kafka said that he simply could not write when he was in an unfamiliar place or among strange people. A writer expresses his deepest thoughts when he is “behind closed doors,” writes Proust (1958: 311), “for now he exchanges his soul for the soul of the universe.” Interestingly, the essential images associated with both Kafka’s and Proust’s solitude are writer’s own rooms, while in *Lingshan* the essential images associated with the protagonist’s solitude are rather open spaces such as remote, primordial mountains and primeval forests as well as alien places, not familiar, enclosed spaces such as his own room. It turns out to be alien spaces, not his own room that normally represent the secure space for the self to feel at ease, where the protagonist finds solitude; it is alien spaces that create the inner creative space where his encounters with creative impulses take place. The condition described above by Proust that transcends all worldly confinements can be found in *Lingshan* only in nature, as suggested by the I-narrator in chapter eighteen, by “immersing yourself into this lake and mountain scenery where lake and sky unite” (120/111). The protagonist’s choice of solitary spaces in *Lingshan* is determined chiefly by two factors. Firstly, political persecution certainly makes his own room an insecure place. Secondly, he feels that his own room represents a habitual space. Habits, unfortunately, transform the home space into a prison house, which prevents him from getting in touch with his authentic self. The I-narrator finds his own room “oppressive and stifling” (14/12). He chooses, therefore, to go to completely alien places and into the mountains and forests, where he finds solitude and loneliness, and where he is able to lift himself out of his habitual self, which will consequently enable him to perceive new aspects of the self and the reality.

Gao Xingjian’s choosing “lonely writing” (*gudu de xiezuo* 孤独的写作) also results from his belief that this is the only way creative writing would survive in modern times, especially in the post-modern society – “the so-called consumerist society” (Gao 2001: 20). In this society, he argues, literature is becoming increasingly a commodity and “a substitute for power and profit” (Gao 2001: 16). Hence, a creative writer “needs first and foremost to be willing to endure loneliness in order to survive” (Gao 1996: 19). Here, to be alone is seen by the creative writer as a means to fend off the lure of commercial success, to avoid conformity, to separate himself/herself in thought from those who still

adhere to mainstream ideology, to detach himself/herself from the opinions of his/her community in order to gain individual insights. To be alone is to keep himself/herself away from the obsession with nationalism or the political agendas that have plagued Chinese writers in modern times. To be alone is also seen as a way to keep a creative writer from paying heed to the favor of readers and the social consequences of a literary product. In short, loneliness is seen simply as the mode of being a creative writer in modern society. Gao Xingjian's sense of loneliness here seems irretrievably rooted in a profound sense of mental exile in our time.

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