

# Ecology and Life Writing

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## Personal Landscape: Shen Congwen and Gao Xingjian's Autobiographical Writings

This article examines Shen Congwen's *Autobiography* and Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain*. By looking at a modern Chinese autobiography and a contemporary work of Chinese autobiographical fiction, it aims to answer two questions: First, what is ecocriticism's most pressing agenda within the Chinese context? Second—and of more relevance to a volume focusing on ecology and life writing—why should autobiography be considered the genre *par excellence* for addressing this agenda?

I introduce a trope, following Greg Garrard, to approach the two questions. In his book *Ecocriticism*, Garrard employs the efficient method of treating environmental writings as rhetorical structures. Of these structures, he writes: "Since all are, in some sense, ways of imagining, constructing or presenting nature in a figure, I will call my chapter headings 'tropes.' Each trope will gather together permutations of creative imagination: metaphor, genre, narrative, image" (7). Garrard's tropology includes such prototypes as pastoral, wilderness, pollution and Apocalypse. As he explains, "the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse [are] pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature that may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible" (2). As a whole, they form a coherent tropological system. More importantly—since he is speaking primarily from a Western standpoint—this system is also avowedly culture-specific; it is almost a mini-history of the human-nature relationship in the West, suggesting such stages as urbanization, the dichotomy between city and country, and industrial revolution.

As the horizon of ecocriticism continuously widens from its American origins, it becomes necessary to develop its plurality. This is effectively formulated by Ursula Heise:

I hope, nevertheless, that the inclusion of texts in other languages, as well as the examination of how texts written in the United States draw on non-American sources and traditions, might serve as a comparative reminder that neither environmentalism nor ecocriticism should be thought of as nouns in the singular, and that the assumptions that frame environmentalist and ecocritical thought in the United States cannot simply be presumed to shape ecological orientations elsewhere. (9)

There is yet another task at hand. When considering cultures which far predated such issues as industrialization and urbanization, can ecocriticism still work? If yes, how? Looking at Garrard's system of ecocritical tropology, one would notice that despite its relatively young age, ecocriticism stems from a cultural soil that extends all the way back into history; it is born out of the West's immanent theological and philosophical difficulties. In this tropological system, the ancient and the modern together form a lineage. The past needs to be retrospectively explained by a modern theory. It is especially so with other cultures that call for a historically conscious narration in ecocriticism.

While making use of Garrard's tropological approach for analysis, I shall set aside his culturally specific tropes, and propose a different narrative device—a kind of "ecotopia" that in my opinion occupies a central place in the Chinese human-nature relationship—the "Peach Blossom Fountainhead" (桃花源). This trope symbolizes one of the central aspects of Chinese nature writing. It is precisely within the framework of this trope that the two texts featured in this analysis formulate their own rhetoric.

#### The "Peach Blossom Fountainhead" Trope

First a quick look at the origin of this trope: In 451, the Jin (晋) Dynasty nature poet Tao Yuanming (陶渊明) wrote a fictional account of a Voltairean El Dorado-like place called "Peach Blossom Fountainhead." The novella, entitled "A Record of Peach Blossom Fountainhead" (hereafter "A Record"), is set at a time of extremely violent political and military

conflicts in history, when one day a fisherman accidentally wanders into a beautiful stream that he has not known before. It leads him to a mountain with a small opening, through which he discovers an isolated world. The people here are descendants of refugees who fled cruel wars hundreds of years ago. They lead a peaceful, simple and idyllic life in harmony with nature, totally unaware of the turbulent happenings outside. Farming is the sole source of their living. Everyone in the community is well taken care of. And unlike El Dorado, this small community does not have a governing body. On his way home, the fisherman marks the route and later tries to revisit the place, but never finds his way back again.<sup>1</sup>

Economical, sociological and philosophical readings of this minimalist piece have been made. But the text is primarily political in its overt anarchism. Its mode of narrative discloses several thematic prototypes that are fundamental to Chinese literature, and virtually sets the tone for Chinese nature writing in the years to come. I borrow the term "ecotopia" from Ernest Callenbach<sup>2</sup> but do not mean to include his modern concerns. Since utopia is certainly a political idea, the coinage in the present context literally means the aligning of a concern for nature and political idealism.

Here, rural life is set as the counterpart not of anything like urbanization or human exploitation, but rather a pervasive political tyranny. Nature is an escape from politics, as much as nature writing is an escape from literature serving propaganda purposes. Behind this rhetoric is yet another conflict that runs much deeper: that between the Confucian ideal of the literati's social responsibility and the Taoist pursuit of individual freedom. The obsession with nature thus becomes the manifestation the individual's claim for personal independence.

The effect of Confucian ideology is far-reaching; it not only emphasizes social norms, but also helps construct (the myth of) a state of civilization that is dominated by the Han-Confucian reign, which subjugates its fringe elements both ethical and cultural. But it is not until China is transformed into a modern nation state that Chinese writers, in a topo-

<sup>1</sup> See Tao Yuanming's "A Record of Peach Blossom Fountainhead." (《桃花源记》) 479-80.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Callenbach: *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*.

graphical turn of nature writing that I will explain in the following, find an effective way to deconstruct such ideologies.

Tao Yuanming's novella also has an autobiographical dimension. After several years of service in the local authority, he quit office to lead a rural life, and went on to compose some immortal poems praising nature and its simplicity. For him, "to go away and cultivate one's garden" has a distinctively autobiographical undertone.

Thus, the narrative structure of "A Record" mode can be summed up as follows: First, it makes nature the central element in constructing an idealist, depoliticalized counterpart to real society, employing Taoism's naturalist and individualist quest as the author/protagonist's rejection of Confucian social engagement.

Second, the Peach Blossom Fountainhead lies spatially side by side with the artificial and hence degenerated "outside world" and remains isolated from it. It is not a stage in the development of history, but a geographical alternative. It is ahistorical. Here a few words about a broader cultural background are necessary: Some of the Western utopian modes, following the Christian tradition which imagines a better life *after* the present one, are usually framed in a temporal structure. The Chinese tradition, on the other hand, focuses on the present life as the only possibility, and does not pay serious attention to such an idea as an afterlife; thus the ideal life has to be imagined within the boundary of *this* earthly life. As a result, it is always geographically located *outside* rather than temporally located *beyond* (here I also include the case in which it lies beyond the end of time). So unlike Western modes such as Eden (as the beginning), and the utopia and Apocalypse (as the ultimate stage) that adopt a linear structure enfolding *in time*, the Peach Blossom Fountainhead always exists *outside of time*.

Third, with such concentrated attention on personal choice in life, the trope inevitably includes an autobiographical aspect. Having this perspective in mind, I now turn to the two texts featured in this article.

### Shen Congwen and his *Autobiography*

Shen Congwen, writer and one time professor of Peking University, was undermined by the left-wing critics for more than half a century,<sup>3</sup> but was later elevated to the zenith of twentieth-century Chinese literature by their right-wing counterparts, notably C. T. Hsia.<sup>4</sup>

My analysis focuses on Shen's *Autobiography*, but the relevance of the discussion is not limited to it because a large number of his fictional writings are autobiographically colored variations of the author's actual experiences. In *Autobiography*, Shen recounts his odyssey from his hometown through various places until he is determined to go to the metropolitan capital Beijing. His hometown Fenghuang (凤凰) is located in the west of Hunan Province in southern China; the area borders Guizhou and Sichuan provinces. It used to be a military stronghold that kept an eye on the rebellious Miaos. In Shen's time both Han and Miao (苗) populations lived in the area. The novella that he is most famous for is entitled *The Border Town* (《边城》), which fictionalizes Fenghuang. The Chinese word "边" assumes ambivalence by playing on a pun: it means either "border" or "marginal." It thus becomes a keyword because Shen's whole life, together with his worldviews, aesthetics and morals that are inextricably linked with this small border town, is characterized by this marginality.

In Shen's time, from a metropolitan reader's point of view, his hometown is not only marginal, but also eccentric. Hardly any modern Chinese writer is more conscious of his or her own cultural identity than Shen; and he knows more clearly than anyone else that this identity is an inferior one—coming from a relatively isolated place, remote from the cultural and economic centers, and not belonging to the Han majority. In the opening chapter of *Autobiography*, Shen unambiguously states that

<sup>3</sup> For a description of this history, see Li Yang's *Shen Congwen's Later Life: Shen Congwen's Last Four Decades* (《沈从文的后半生、沈从文的最后四十年》) and Fu Guoyong's *1949: Private Journals of Chinese Intellectuals* (《1949年：中国知识分子的私人记录》).

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 9 in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* by C. T. Hsia.

"I should follow the city folks' tone, and say that this really is a weird place!" (1).<sup>5</sup>

Eccentricity is one of the characteristics of Shen's narratives of his wandering life in the area. There are two main factors of this particular region that distinguish it: ethnically, it is inhabited by the Miao minority group (Shen is partially Miao in origin<sup>6</sup>); historically and culturally, this province was the seat of the ancient Chu State (楚国) around 700 to 200 BC, one that had a culture significantly differing from the dominant Northern Zhou (周) civilization. Their influence on the region can still be felt today.

Through an unrestrained exhibition of this eccentricity, he identifies himself with this fringe environment rather than with the dominant Han urban society. Episode after episode, Shen depicts events of oddity and crudity. For instance, in Chapter 9 "What I saw during the 'Qingxiang,'" <sup>7</sup> Shen depicts the astonishing incident of a young bean curd seller who disinters the corpse of a girl that he loved from the grave, then takes her home and spends three nights with her body until he is discovered. After being escorted to the police station, he murmurs "wonderful, wonderful," and smiles in silence (55).

He also depicts the conflict between Miao and Han. When still a child, he witnesses the bloody 1910 Revolution. In Chapter 4, "A Lesson from the Xinhai Revolution," after the suppression of the revolution, he recalls the massacre of the Miaos in the city. A vivid scene is conjured up under his pen:

When I could go out without restraint, I always went [along with other children] to the city gate to view the beheadings on the other side of the moat. If the beheadings were already over, children would compete with their visions by counting the number of the corpses. Or we would follow the convicts to the Temple of the Heavenly King to see them draw lots [in front of the god who determined their life and death], to see how those countrymen, closing their eyes, forcefully cast out their lots, and how some of them kept their eyes shut long after the results were dis-

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from Shen's *Autobiography* are my translation, based on The People's Literature Publishing House 1981 edition of 《从文自传》.

<sup>6</sup> The genealogy of the Shen family is accounted in Chapter 2 of *Autobiography*.

<sup>7</sup> "Qingxiang" (清乡) means distinguishing the good from the bad in the town.

closed. I also saw the expressions of lamentation and complaint directed at the god displayed on the faces of those who were destined to die but still could not give up thinking of their little children, their calves, piglets and lambs. These expressions I would never forget. They helped develop my intense loathing of the abuse of power. (23-24; my translation)

There is an ethnical undertone in the story that might possibly distance Shen from the Hans. With these depictions, the author constructs a regional identity that is in stark contrast with the dominant Han culture. The narrative mode of "A Record" is implicit in it. It derives its virtue primarily from rural straightforwardness and an attachment to the soil that contrasts urban life's pretention and rootlessness. Its remoteness ensures geographical isolation. It refuses to be dragged into the historical development of the city that was labeled "modernization" and sternly remains outside of the process. And finally, by so doing, it retains its independence. Shen's biographer Jeffrey C. Kinkley reveals the purpose of his descriptions of his native land, setting them in a broader context:

Shen yearned to stage a general revolt against the cultural complacency of upper crust society. "Confucianism" was his explicit enemy. . . . Confucianism identified culture with morality, drawing clear lines between the civilized and the savage. In Southwest China, one of those lines divided "human" from Miao. (113)

One point should be considered: Why is Shen so ready to identify himself with this remote, backward, isolated and "weird" place, when he is already in the cynical and snobbish milieu of the capital? I consider this a tactic that has its cultural and especially political motivations. Shen's unhesitating admission and open depiction of his native land's eccentricity is aiming at giving voice to an ignored and suppressed cultural identity. His writing displays both regionalism and a topographical concern. These places where he stops during his early-year roaming are the carrier and setting of an organic whole of non-mainstream cultures. Folklores, ritual ceremonies, customs and characters of local people all show their unfamiliar faces when set against the dominant Han-Confucian culture.

Besides, Shen inherits the unyielding character of his people. The Miao people are generally characterized by an indomitable spirit. Bandits were active in the area. Kinkley notes the sustained endeavor of the Miaos to fend off, among others, both Nationalist and Communist rule:

“Throughout history, the West Hunan Miao had resisted every new regime that meant to tighten political control over them” (261).<sup>8</sup>

Identifying himself with this “marginal” place, Shen never gives up striving for personal autonomy, keeping distance from politics as well as any literary organizations and movements. The Communist government’s coming into power makes him give up writing, rather than learning a whole set of new propaganda rhetoric like many of his colleagues.

#### Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain*

Shen’s literary endeavor was destined to be short-lived, but his latent impulse for personal independence was revived in the late twentieth century. In the 1980s, stimulated by a deep awareness of Western civilization as well as what would become China’s Cultural Renaissance (or “Reawakening”)—albeit soon abruptly interrupted—Chinese intellectuals began to feel troubled by their problematic cultural identity—their ambiguous Chineseness.

Gao Xingjian’s novel *Soul Mountain* is a product of such anxiety. Laureate of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature, Gao defected to France as a political refugee in the late eighties and has been living there ever since. Dismissed by the Chinese authorities as a dissident, his defection was hence understood mainly as an act of political rebellion. Though overshadowed by such interpretation, the cultural side of the story should be explored more carefully.

Compared to Shen Congwen of the previous generation, Gao is much more openly rebellious against “mainstream” ideology. Not having a minority background as Shen does, he is nonetheless more ready to employ marginal elements for his attack. His half-fictional, half-autobiographical novel is a distorted record of the author’s real-life journey from the source of the Yangtze River in Southwest China to its estuary in the East. Three characteristics can be identified: First, the work begins with a mid-life crisis and adopts the mode of a journey of self-discovery and reaffirmation; it is a personal journey in which the author, after being misdiagnosed with lung cancer, begins a ten-month trek along the

<sup>8</sup> For more details, see pp. 261-65 in Kinkley’s *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*.

Yangtze trying to rediscover and soothe his spiritual self. In his Nobel Prize address he explains, “I began writing my novel *Soul Mountain* to dispel my inner loneliness at the very time when works I had written with rigorous self-censorship had been banned” (“Nobel Lecture”). Thus the work is distinctively autobiographical. Second, the structure of *Soul Mountain* is geographically horizontal. The places, forming a line along the river, lie parallel to the mainstream cultural centers, but largely remain undisturbed by the latter. Third, set at a time of cultural skepticism, the novel’s autobiographical mode serves as a metaphor for China’s self-discovery of the varied and hybrid constituents that contribute to its culture as a whole. It questions, among other things, the meaning of “Chineseness” and the justification of conformism, a problem that again reaches back to the conflict between Confucianism and Taoism. The “Peach Blossom Fountainhead” mode is embedded in the work.

Gao incorporates depictions of witchcraft, local customs, obscure Taoist temples hidden deep in the mountains, as well as life among Chinese minorities like the Qiang (羌), Miao (苗), and Yi (彝) peoples into the novel’s narrative framework. He also inserts his own sometimes fictive “histories.” Although they appear fantastic to most Chinese today, they really exist—along the Yangtze River area, not at all far from the most “civilized” centers of the country. They are not historic relics that can only remind people of the long history of this land; they are alive, and though neglected, still exist side by side with mainstream culture. They testify to the fact that the disguised Chineseness covers many an element difficult to identify and recognize.

These passages, partially real and partially fictive, dislocate the accepted theory regarding China’s origin. In chapter 20, the narrator says:

[r]ecent research on the Yi [彝] people has advanced evidence that Fuxi [伏羲], the first ancestor of the Han people, had the tiger totem of the Yi people. There are vestiges of the tiger totem everywhere among the Ba [巴] people and in the Chu [楚] region. A Han Dynasty brick excavated in Sichuan province has an engraving of the Queen Mother of the West which is definitely a tigress with a human face. In this Yi singer’s mountain stockade, by the fence of woven chaste tree branches, I saw two children crawling about and playing. Both were wearing cloth hats embroidered with red tiger heads similar in style to the tiger head hats which I saw on children in the mountain regions of the southern Jiangxi province and southern Anhui province. Even the clever and intelligent

Jiangsu and Zhejiang people, who originate from the ancient Wu and Yue kingdoms in the lower reaches of the Yangtze, retain a fear of the tigress. Could it be that the totem worship of the tiger in matrilineal societies exists in people's subconscious memory? History is bewildering: it is only the singing of the *bimo* which is loud and clear. (121)

Here Gao's intension of deconstructing a unified and monolithic civilization state is obvious. In the same vein, he colors the landscape along the Yangtze with an atmosphere of strange, shamanistic unfamiliarity. The natural environment always has a touch of the primitive religions' eerie atmosphere. History, myths, rituals and customs are embedded in the secluded landscapes which the protagonist encounters. Gao is re-reading this once familiar land of his native country with a defamiliarized eye. It eventually verges on a wasteland-like modernism when the protagonist gets lost in the mountain:

The grey sky silhouettes a strangely-shaped tree. The sloping trunk branches into two paths, both similar in girth and both growing straight up without further branching. It is leafless, bare, dead, and looks like a giant fish-spear pointing into the sky. This is what makes it unique. Having got here, I would be at the edge of the forest, so below the edge of the forest should be that dark ravine, at this moment enshrouded in heavy mist, a path straight to death. (63)

Later in the journey, during a visionary scene, it becomes apparent that the protagonist is faced with the dilemma of a worldly life and reclusion—the "Peach Blossom Fountainhead" dichotomy is unconsciously summoned up. The dead tree motif returns, this time compared to a fish skeleton, hinting at the suffocating brainwashing that was common for Gao's generation: "You refuse to be skewered to death on a fishbone like a fish out of water. Instead of wasting energy scouring your memories, why not discard this last thread to the familiar human world?" (418) With the introduction of the "River of Forgetting," he makes up his mind to go down to the river valley, leaving the disappointing human world behind:

You realize you will never return to the human world with its anxieties and warmth. Those distant memories are tiresome. You cannot stop yourself from giving a loud shout and charging towards this dark River of Forgetting. Running and yelling, roars of joy emerge from deep in your lungs and bowels like a wild animal. To start with you came fear-

lessly shouting and yelling into the world, 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. Strangely, however, you can't hear your own voice. You are running with arms outstretched, shouting, panting, shouting again, running again, but still there is no sound. (418-19)

Though he chooses nature rather than the human world, nature also seems disgusting. After a short time of relaxation, he becomes both misanthropic and ecophobic; and the boundary between the exterior natural environment and his inner fantasy vanishes:

You feel you are walking in the river, under your feet are river weeds. You are submerged in the River of Forgetting. At this moment, however, the despair of not belonging vanishes and your feet simply feel their way along the riverbed. . . . You see a long string of reflections and hear a choir singing a dirge as if it were a hymn. . . . However, there are no choirs singing hymns amongst the images of your remote memories. Listening carefully, you find that the singing is coming from under moss, thick soft undulating waves of moving moss which cover the earth. You lift it up to have a look and a squirming mass of maggots disperses. This disgusting sight fills you with wonder. You realize that these are maggots feeding off rotting corpses. Your body sooner or later too will be eaten up and this is not a particularly wonderful prospect. (419-21)

Even the refuge of nature turns out to be hostile. He experiences a sense of loneliness and pervasive helplessness wherever he goes.

The protagonist's journey finally ends on an island at the estuary of the Yangtze. The closing chapter is ambiguous, but the protagonist seems to understand something and recollects his power to go on. Nature, though not necessary cordial, performs the shamanistic function of cure.

#### Nature as a Path to Autonomy

At this point, it is necessary to briefly examine the geopolitical background against which the two works in question are set. The word "China" is too often employed without much critical reflection. It seems that China is a unified and distinct cultural entity. Not long ago, there was a

heated debate in the field of archeology, in which art historian Robert Bagley criticized his counterpart Wu Hung's alleged identification and construction of a monolithic Chineseness in the latter's book *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, arguing that regional diversity in ancient China has been recognized in the discipline of archaeology.<sup>9</sup> Like the Herderian "Volkskultur," a unified Chinese culture is more a constructed idea than a historically factual description. Wei-ming Tu, on the other hand, gives an account of the situation in modern China:

[T]he center no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China. . . . Either the center will bifurcate or, as is more likely, the [coastal] periphery will come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the center, thereby undermining its political effectiveness. (27-28; 12)<sup>10</sup>

Throughout China's history, there has always existed a tension between the power of appropriation, which draws everything together and stamps the unmistakable stigma of Chineseness on it, and the competing power of repulsion, with which varied and unique elements try to claim

<sup>9</sup> "We cannot sensibly apply the same label 'Chinese' to the people of archaeological cultures as distinct as Liangzhu, Dawenkou, Hongshan, Longshan, Shilingxia, Majiayao, and Miaodigou, to mention only a few. To equate all these prehistoric cultures with the Chinese culture of some later period (Anyang or Zhou or Han) is to equate them with one another, in flagrant disregard of everything that archaeology has told us about them. In the last three or four decades archaeology has steadily broken down the idea that there was a monolithic 'Chinese culture' even in historic periods, and regional diversity is now a major theme of both Western and Chinese scholarship on the archaeology of ancient China" (Bagley 232).

<sup>10</sup> Considerable scholarship has focused on this issue since the 1980s. For instance Edward Friedman's "Reconstructing China's National Identity: A Southern Alternative to Mao-Era Anti-Imperialist Nationalism;" Rey Chow's "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem" and Timothy S. Oakes' "China's Provincial Identities: Reviving Regionalism and Reinventing 'Chineseness'." In the meantime, Oakes' "Shen Congwen's Literary Regionalism and the Gendered Landscape of Chinese Modernity" and Janet Ng's "A Moral Landscape: Reading Shen Congwen's Autobiography and Travelogues" are notable studies of Shen's regionalism and its ideological overtones.

their independent identities and rights. The former is much stronger and usually overpowers the latter. As one of the most important political heritages of the First Emperor's (Shi Huang Di) conquest of the whole of China, the concept of a unified China has become an *a priori*: throughout China's long history, surprisingly few people, when establishing their own regimes, would claim to have an identity other than Chinese. On the contrary, the most usually adopted strategy is rather to claim oneself as the only "orthodox" Chinese central power. The process has accelerated since China was forcibly drawn into the process of globalization, with intellectuals setting their country against such equally homogenized ideas as "the West."

Because the country covers a vast area, the construction of Chineseness is an indispensable mechanism for ensuring its unity. However, the problem with this mentality is that distinctions on an internal and 'micro' level are overshadowed. The rather generalized definition of "Chinese culture" often conceals its inner hybridity, inevitably yielding a hegemonic cultural ideology.

In the light of this background, Shen and Gao's writings can be read as autobiographical attempts to deconstruct such ideology. If Shen's emphasis on regionalism had gone no further than just marketing his beautiful and somewhat "exotic" hometown, its significance would have been small. However, examples like the passages quoted above from his *Autobiography* indicate his attitude concerning the writer's role in a society and his self-assessment. In Fu Guoyong's words,

Throughout his whole life, Shen Congwen rambles outside of politics, keeping a skeptical eye on any organization. . . . For more than two decades, he always maintains the position that "writers should not engage with unpredictable politics," and joins neither "reactionary" nor "progressive" literary groups. . . . He merely resolutely "fight[s] for the freedom of writing." (243. My translation.)

This may have been affected by the Miao's rebellious spirit. There is a logical relationship between his regionalism and fringe identity and his political attitude. Kinkley gives some linguistic clues: "The use of dialects was the revolution's anti-Classical extreme, for their diversity was potentially subversive of linguistic unity. It was symbolic of the conflict between regionalism and nationalism" (123). His overall grasp of the (a)political agenda of Shen's regionalism is much in tune with the geo-



political backdrop introduced earlier in this chapter: "The major obstruction to regional writing in Shen's society was nationalism, especially once unitary, revolutionary nationalism gained preeminence." (114)

Though Shen became very reticent in expressing his political views after 1949, he was nevertheless a keen practitioner. In 1948, shortly before the Communist Party came into power, led by Guo Moruo, the left wing fiercely attacked Shen for his supposed "reactionary" and "pornographic" literature.<sup>11</sup> He sensed that the end had come:

Approaching middle age, my temper is solidified; what's more, I am introverted, lacking the ability to socialize. For two or three decades, my writing style has been based on [independent] "thinking"; now it has to be based on "belief." I'm afraid this is not easy to change. Before long, even if I'm not forced to put down my pen, I will still have to put it down. (*Complete Works* 519. My translation.)

It should be noted that after 1949, writers were not necessarily silenced, but were forced to undergo a process of re-education and re-orientation to the so-called Marxist standard if they wanted to continue writing. Many of them succeeded—though not without much pain—and went on to earn worldly fame. But Shen simply refused to be "educated" by giving up his writing career altogether. He spent the latter part of his life doing research work on antiquity and the history of Chinese dress. This was indeed a blunt rejection. Shen's determination is thorough and sincere: he became virtually obscure as a writer. When in 1989, Göran Malmqvist, a member of the Swedish Academy, inquired about Shen's situation, the response from the Chinese embassy in Sweden was that they had "never heard of this person" (n.p.).

As a defector, Gao is much more open about this subject. In his own words, he clearly expresses his understanding of regionalism:

A friend of mine said, *Soul Mountain* unfolded another kind of Chinese culture. . . . Chinese culture, I think, has approximately four facets. The first, the so-called mainstream culture that is related to imperial power, and its corresponding morals and philosophy. . . . The second, the Taoist religion developed from primitive witchcraft along with India-imported

<sup>11</sup> See Guo Moruo's "Deploring Reactionary Literature and Arts."

Buddhism, which are never orthodox, and serve as a refuge for intellectuals. The third, folklore culture. . . . The fourth, a pure Oriental spirit mainly represented by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's naturalist philosophy, the transcendentalism of the Wei and Jin periods, and the Zen teaching exempting its religious ideology; they became a way of life for the literati to escape political oppression. . . . *Soul Mountain* focuses on the latter three. ("Literature and Transcendentalism: About *Soul Mountain*"; My translation.)

These categories need to be redefined and explained. The first one is virtually the alliance of the reigning political power and the Confucian ideology. It also implies the dominance of the Han people, because Confucian ideology takes a biased view towards other ethnic groups and their customs. This stance is inherited by the Communist government, with its emphasis on Han ruling. Therefore, taking into account the ethnic, ideological and political dimensions, I define this ideology as Han-Confucian-Communist. Gao also mentions that there are two origins of Chinese culture, formulating another dichotomic description of the dominant and the suppressed.<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising that Gao's defection is simultaneously political and cultural. In his Nobel lecture, Gao said: "In the century just ended literature confronted precisely this misfortune and was more deeply scarred by politics and power than in any previous period, and the writer

<sup>12</sup> In "Literature and Transcendentalism: About *Soul Mountain*" (《文學與玄學：關於〈靈山〉》), Gao also explains that there are two main origins of Chinese culture, namely the Yangtze River Culture and the Yellow River Culture. According to Gao, the Yangtze River is a symbol, an alternative to the Yellow River in the cultural geography of China. The Yellow River is universally regarded "the Cradle of Chinese Civilization". It was the political center of the Middle Kingdom and the birthplace of the Confucian School. Yet the Yangtze River area was almost at the fringe of the empire. Its ethnic constitution was more hybrid than pure "Han," and its culture not orthodox. Though this culture boasted a significant number of romantic and fantastical poems, they were not to the taste of the dominant ideology. Therefore, the Yellow River is associated with the mainstream and official Confucian outlook of China, whereas the Yangtze River represents the other facet of the country—sub-cultures or fringe cultures that are too often oppressed and ignored.

too was subjected to unprecedented oppression” (“Nobel Lecture”). In the critic Liu Zaifu’s words,

He [Gao] listens to neither the order of the state, nor that of the masses. Anyone who has a thorough literary stance will definitely refuse to hand in his freedom. . . . Gao says “no” to the masses with a firm attitude, refusing to speak for the masses. . . . He neither represents any individual nor the people. Therefore, he neither condemns nor accuses on behalf of those oppressed, but rather [writes about] his life’s shattering experiences and stories ‘by himself’. . . . Gao often defends the reclusive spirit in Chinese literature. And *Soul Mountain* has entered the highest state in literature—that of reclusion. Obviously he sees reclusion as preservation and guarding of the essence of literature. . . . Boyi and Shuqi, the earliest recluses and escapers of China, maintained a non-political cultural spirit. (42, 46. My translation.)

These remarks already show the parallel between Gao and his predecessor Shen. But Liu’s analysis goes a step further:

In twentieth-century China, no matter whether in the field of political thinking or literature, there is a crucial but totally mistaken concept, which regards the human being not as an individual . . . but as a member, a role or a part of a whole, namely the so-called brick of the mansion of the masses. Correspondingly, the people do not face the world and history individually but collectively. Developed to an extreme, this concept, under the name of the masses and the state, requires the intellectual to assume the role of either a savior of the state and the people, or a hero, or a victim. (47. My translation.)

Interestingly, the above paragraph finds its exact corollary in another Chinese writer in exile. In the opening chapter of *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin is obviously troubled by the question “as whom does he write,” “because it involves the writer’s sense of identity and tradition” (3). He defines his role as follows:

“As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it.” I viewed myself as a Chinese writer who would write in English *on behalf* of the downtrodden Chinese. . . . In general, writers from less-developed countries are apt to define themselves in terms of their social roles, partly because of the guilt they feel for emigrating to the materially privileged West and partly

because of the education they received in their native lands, where the collective is usually held above the individual. In fact, the word ‘individualism’ still has a negative ring in China. . . . (3-4, italics mine)

One may notice that the latter passage seems almost an illustration of Sir Henry James Sumner Maine’s famous thesis:

The word Status may be usefully employed to construct a formula expressing the law of progress thus indicated, which, whatever be its value, seems to me to be sufficiently ascertained. All the forms of Status taken notice of in the Law of Persons were derived from, and to some extent are still colored by, the powers and privileges anciently residing in the Family. If then we employ Status, agreeably with the usage of the best writers, to signify these personal conditions only, and avoid applying the term to such conditions as are the immediate or remote result of agreement, we may say that the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement *from Status to Contract*. (164-65)

We see in Ha Jin’s critical observations a desperate effort to cope with the “status” dilemma in Maine’s sense. In a somewhat extreme remark, the monolithic “Chineseness” is presented as at least one of the causal factors in Ha Jin’s (and indeed also Shen’s and Gao’s) predicament: “A Chinese is programmed by his culture to be ‘Chinese.’ In other words, in-bred cultural predispositions make the Chinese what they are and prevent them from being full-blown individuals. Dynamic human growth is an alien concept to the Chinese” (Barme and Minford, 136).

Shen and Gao represent an opposite attempt to break away from this predestination, although the sociopolitical terms are not yet available for them. Regionalism in the form of travel writing is precisely the mechanism of which Shen and Gao make use to achieve this purpose.

### Conclusion

My analysis focused on three elements implicit in Shen and Gao’s texts: environmental concern, the autobiographical framework, and the travel writing mode. The first two find programmatic formulation in the “Peach Blossom Fountainhead” trope. By conjuring up an idealized ecotopia that provides an alternative to a politically charged reality as

well as a metaphor for autobiographical empathy, the two texts, like "A Record," frame the two elements into its narrative.

By social convention the only proper choice for traditional Chinese literati is to be a Confucian official. But writers are also men of letters who cherish freedom and independence. They usually find it difficult to reconcile the Confucian imperative of social responsibility with a longing for the Taoist individual freedom. This dilemma finds its modern incarnations not only in Ha Jin's troubled confession, but also in Shen's and Gao's autobiographical accounts. Nature thus becomes a convenient and effective venue for them to project their personal ideal.

If Shen Congwen's depiction of his native landscape is affectionate, Gao's is nevertheless mysterious, dangerous, ghostly and sometimes even disgusting. Such defamiliarization provides a potential for theorizing natural landscape. For tradition writers in the United States, the American landscape can serve their patriotic purposes, but for Gao, the eerie Yangtze landscape dislodges his own cultural identity as well as that of the country.

The third element, that of the travel writing mode, represents a topographical turn characteristic of modern Chinese nature writing. As elaborated, it is the result of both a reflection on the diversified constituents of "Chineseness" and a deliberate deconstruction of it. In Tao Yuanming's case, the topography is totally unexplored, whereas Shen tracks every stop of his odyssey carefully, exposing an avid sense of place that is set against the urban and the mainstream; and it significantly ends at the point when he is setting off to Beijing. Gao's fictionalizing of his travel obscures concrete place names, but anyone who has a rough idea of the Yangtze geography can follow the protagonist's journey from Sichuan all the way to Zhejiang. In Shen and Gao, a vast canvas of Chinese cultural geography is unfolded; each location has its distinct history and local character. The readers see more diversity than similarity. This, I believe, is the inner structure that links the three elements and provides a Chinese answer to the interrelation of "ecology and life writing."

The two texts examined here give a glimpse into an alternative to the Western mode; Chinese environmental-autobiographical writing takes another route. Rather than addressing non-human issues and questions of climate change Chinese writers engage nature to pursue individual freedom against political. Hence their texts are humanistic and individu-

alistic in tone. If it does effect "political action in the real world" (Estok 221), the action may be of another kind. In the particular case of China, the deep-ecology mode of nature writing is certainly in need, but it will not receive adequate attention until the quest for humanistic concerns in a developing country has achieved success.

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