Chinese literature focused on the individual was, from 1942 to the end of the Cultural Revolution, considered a contradiction. Mao Zedong's decree at Yan'an for literature and the arts to be for the masses was incompatible with individualistic thought. Mao stated that "artistic fronts must be subordinate to the political struggle because only through politics can the needs of the class and masses find expression" (Mao Tse-Tung 87). Consequently, literature of that time positioned itself on the axis of its political beliefs, and in effect began a national art form that suppressed individualism. Books opposed to or apart from the official ideology were confiscated and burned. As history was shaped by Mao's rule, so too was literature. Polemics molded texts into political statements and eliminated the independence that a writer had once possessed. Literature became a tool of politics, and the individual seemed to be rendered obsolete.

Throughout the 1970's and 80's in the nationalistic texts, "the individual as author, reader, and fictional characters [sic] was divested of psychological, intellectual, and physical autonomy" (Lee, "Nobel Laureate" paragraph 10). There were, however, revolutionaries who sought to write against the national orthodoxy. These voices stated concern for the individual rather than the masses. If such authors were silenced with sentences to prison farms, they still reacted against the tenets established by Mao Zedong, thus dedicating their lives to the struggle for personal expression. Using the tumult of both the Cultural Revolution and the spiritual pollution campaign to document the plight of the individual self, then, the work of Chinese author Gao Xingjian came to critical light in the West.

Gao Xingjian counters the doctrinaire approach to literature mandated by Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Rather than construct narratives for the masses, he invited governmental censure by writing for and about the individual self. However, before looking at Gao Xingjian, it becomes necessary to document a predecessor so that the monumental change can be highlighted. Perhaps no predecessor is as well known in the West as Bei Dao. Born in 1949, he belongs to the school of writers distinguished as the Misty Poets. Known for their oblique imagery and idiomatic freedom in their poetry, the Misty Poets came into being in the 1970s, responding directly to the restrictions placed upon writers after Mao Zedong's decree. In both his poetry and his fiction, Bei Dao focuses upon the individual, examining the ways that people were shaped during the Cultural Revolution. In his collection Waves, and in even his darkest fiction, therapeutic healing can be found in language and communication.

Bei Dao's short story "In the Ruins," for example, focuses on an exiled intellectual, allowing Bei Dao to critique the institutionalized oppression of the Cultural Revolution. Narrator Wang Qi laments the turbulent state of society as he submits to his ostracism, for "in the midst of a people's deep suffering, individuals are negligible" (6). From this passage, Dao seems to reaffirm the ideology of Mao Zedong, for the individual becomes subordinate to the masses. However, Dao juxtaposes his statement against its literal meaning, arguing against the negligibility of individuals, for even great suffering does not make the individual expendable; even the smallest interaction can strengthen the individual's resolve to endure. Thus, Bei Dao ironically subverts Mao's ideology to reclaim the individual as a being separate from politics.
However, "In the Ruins" also reveals an inherent weakness, for the text adheres to the literary model of realism that Mao mandated. Bei Dao thereby reaffirms the conventional aesthetics of Chinese literature. In order to subvert the ideological stance of Mao, the writer must transcend Mao's politics, including his politicized aesthetics. In this respect, Bei Dao fails, leaving an impression, certainly, but failing to break from the national orthodoxy. As a result, literature remained artistically locked in the box of Mao's realism until the postmodern techniques of Gao Xingjian offered a way of writing outside this box. Using episodic structure and semi-autobiography in Soul Mountain, Gao utilizes history and the power of language to reclaim the individual self, thereby allowing him to subvert the aesthetic of Mao and the Cultural Revolution.

Gao Xingjian, born in 1940 and winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature, conceptualizes the struggle for selfhood in the midst of political suppression by stripping Soul Mountain of all characters but the generic if dispersed individual. Gao thereby subordinates politics to individualism, refusing to isolate the individual from his novel. Furthermore, this technique allows Gao to create a work contrary to Mao's tenets. While the Chinese government had denounced modernist fiction, feeling that it privileged European capitalist society, Gao brings the Chinese novel straight to postmodernism through experimentation with language and character (Lee "Modernism and the Chinese Writer" 130).

To work against Mao Zedong's ideology, Gao foregoes names and characters. Instead, there are only pronouns used throughout the episodic chapters: "I," "he," "she," and "you." Each pronoun symbolizes a distinct persona of the self, yet all of them are a feature of the same self. This technique does not work against the novel's emphasis on individuality, but rather highlights individuality within a postmodern conception of the self as disparate and inconsistent. As I journeys through China, I creates you for discussions, and I lets you "create a she, because you are like me and also cannot bear the loneliness and have to find a partner for your conversation" (312). The fragmentation of the self underscores Gao Xingjian's dialogues between each self. The technique claims self-identity, but also reveals the fragmentation forced upon individuals during and after the Cultural Revolution. Unity does not exist, but rather disassociation. Thereby, Gao's idiomatic technique allows each pronoun to remain divorced from the masses.

In fact, the novel's refusal of plural pronouns has received critical study. As Mabel Lee notes, "[t]he use of the plural form of the self, 'we/us' is anathema for Gao: he insists on the use of the singular self for to do otherwise would be to compromise the self and perceptions which can only be unique to the self" ("Personal Freedom" 148). This distinction helps Soul Mountain explore the sanctity that only the individual self can offer. As party-state lines forced writers to adhere to their mandates in the years directly following the Cultural Revolution, Gao became wary of pluralisms, for such pluralisms compromised his singular vision. For that reason, the concept of breaking from political, social, and material groupings become vital, even as this very action parodies a political concept.

The novel begins with I journeying through the Chinese countryside to learn and experience what is native to the self. I strikes up a conversation with a fellow traveler, and the two converse on "Lingshan, ling meaning spirit or soul, and shan meaning mountain" (2). Lingshan irrevocably seizes the mind of I, as the sad pathos and inertia that I sees in the masses is not what I desires. Rather, the mystic Lingshan offers "virgin wilderness" unperturbed by decades of political rule and becomes the enigma that I strives to find (3). I finds in Lingshan a symbol of his travels through China, for Lingshan resists the political/ personal suppression that govern reality. Lingshan thereby becomes an abstract that spite orthodoxy, subverting realism and Mao's decree.

As a result, the concept of Lingshan provides the framework for the remainder of Gao's novel. Roaming the lands for Lingshan, I sees his own compliant past reflected in the masses' current compliance to dictatorship. Gao's identification with peasantry is essential, for, during Mao's reign, "[p]easants, like intellectuals and officials, were expendable in the service of an ideal" (Fairbank 341). By living among peasants and documenting their lifestyle, Gao reaffirms the need for freedom and self-expression, for these are the acts that liberate the self from such suppression. In one such episode, I takes a job as mountain ranger only to realize how "life is monotonous and lonely on the mountain" (39). I notes that his fellow workers do not talk to one another, but have in fact come to identify with their voiceless lives. In Soul Mountain, disassociation from language leads to empty, futile lives, for language is the tool that frees individuality.

Gao Xingjian uses this didactic tool
throughout *Soul Mountain*, examining the dislocated individual in the midst of national identity. Gao refuses to surrender his artistic vision to the political hegemony of the Cultural Revolution, or to succumb to the literature of politics. Thus, Gao subverts the political thinking that had long saturated Mao’s reign even as he refuses to let the individual become subordinate to the masses. If the self cannot be documented, then that itself becomes the indictment against Chinese ideology. Knowing that governmental control repudiated such self-expression, Gao indicts the Maoist belief that individualistic writers were expendable.

Gao Xingjian most directly responds to Maoist ideology and the imposed limitations of literature through the episodic chapters relating to you. Language can easily be distorted to political means, but Gao Xingjian reveals his indifference toward politics through the telling of a folk tale. After you tells the tale, you reveals the countless ways that it can be skewed for political or religious advantage. However, “you are not a historian, don’t have political aspirations, and certainly neither wish to become an expert in Buddhism, nor to preach religion, nor to become a paragon of virtue, what appeals to you is the superb purity of the story” (285). Gao is unwilling to conform to the politically based decree forced upon all writers during his time; he unequivocally rejects such a premise as preposterous, for it limits the creativity of the self. Gao refuses to skew and subordinate his story for politics, wanting to tell tales that are devoid of such restriction. Only by divorcing political polemics from Chinese literature will writers be able to circumvent the constructs that influence the masses.

In this respect, Gao Xingjian is much like the Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston and her idea of talk-story in *The Woman Warrior*. Gao Xingjian employs folktales not to make polemical points, but rather to remember and reclaim a life. Although critics have revealed *The Woman Warrior’s* feminist aims, the comparison of talk-story remains valid, for Kingston’s novel is foremost about the recovery of lives that have long been suppressed. By telling a narrative largely divorced from politics as is conventionally understood, Gao likewise focuses on the liberation of the individual. Thus, Gao holds that literature is one of the last ways to reclaim the self, for literature is the solitary act of creation by the individual.

However, national criticism of Gao Xingjian because of this subversion has been virtually unanimous in China. Gao is ostracized from society fully, compromising his life by refusing to compromise his artistic freedom. Paradoxically, this state of exile proves necessary, for *Soul Mountain* is about “a banishment of the self to find the self” (Burckhardt 30). Only after exiling himself from all political, social, and material groupings can Gao Xingjian document the case of the individual in literature.

By traversing his own psychological depths, Gao emerges liberated, enlightened, and ever more dedicated to the notion of the self. As I notes late in the narrative, “I have not reached a state of despair” from his journey, but rather “I still haven’t lived enough” (477). Although I seems prepared to continue his travels, the same is not so for the Chinese government. Its reaction to Gao Xingjian forced him to become an exile. While writing *Soul Mountain*, he was forced to seek refuge in Paris, avoiding the prison farms that awaited him had he stayed in China. This juxtaposition suggests the pall that hung over Chinese individualistic writers in the 1970’s into the early 1980’s; their only choice was self-imposed exile over the constant threat of imprisonment.

Therefore, exile becomes linked with the idea of self-discovery that is central to the novel. Empathic in Gao’s novel is the ideal of “(re) discover[ing] the hidden or forgotten layers of history and memory” realized during his travels through southern China (Wang 2). The narrative choices coalesce into a literary voice unique to Gao; his remembrance of his personal tribulation ironically allows him to see the chasms that he has crossed. Language offers him selfhood and allows him to reclaim an individuality that would have been otherwise barred from him. Thus, *Soul Mountain* conceptualizes the need for the self. Gao Xingjian creates a singular voice in opposition to the dominant Chinese ideology and creates a new idiom that reclaims the novel for the individual self.

The work of Bei Dao and Gao Xingjian, then, become a recovery of the individual self amidst and after the Cultural Revolution. Each author argues against the stigma that Mao placed on individualism. With “In The Ruins,” Bei Dao argues against the expendability of the self and argues for the legitimacy of the individual. With *Soul Mountain*, Gao Xingjian transcends Mao Zedong’s mandates for writers to subordinate the individual to politics. In both works, the narrator finds his self-identity, reaffirming the worth of, and indeed, the need for the individual self in Chinese society.
Moreover, the idea that Gao Xingjian's narrative choice is merely an aesthetic issue becomes negated in *Soul Mountain*. Rather, his narrative on the self proves to be an ideological stance against the politics that originated with Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Much like Maxine Hong Kingston revolutionized Asian-American fiction with *The Woman Warrior*, introducing folktales as autobiographical vehicles, Gao Xingjian also revolutionizes Chinese literature with *Soul Mountain*. The concept that narrative and theme must adhere to certain models becomes an idea to be broken by Chinese and Chinese American writers, for such restriction recalls the atrocities done in the name of the masses. Gao Xingjian creates *Soul Mountain*, then, as a meditation on the direction Chinese literature was both coming from and is now heading in.

**Works Cited**


