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Myth, Tradition, And Modernity: How Epistemology Has Shaped Views And Lives In Modern Literature

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Abstract

Tensions between modernity and tradition are key themes in global literature, especially in areas experiencing rapid changes that raise questions about reality. An individual's view is shaped by societal acceptance and personal choice. By looking at Natsume Soseki's *I Am a Cat* (1905) and *Botchan* (1906) alongside Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (1990), we can explore the limits of human understanding. Many works from Chinese and Japanese literature critique Confucian values, pointing out the flaws in hierarchical and moral beliefs when applied to real life. Zen Buddhism is important in Japanese literature, emphasizing perception and "emptiness" regarding assumptions. Meanwhile, Taoist philosophy in Chinese literature reflects doubt toward strict knowledge forms and investigates how accepting ambiguity can lead to harmony.

Franz Kafka's works have influenced East Asian writers like Abe and Murakami as they address existential and knowledge-related themes. Michel Foucault's ideas about knowledge and power, especially in *The Order of Things*, inform postmodern literary methods. Ludwig Wittgenstein's studies about language limitations also prompt writers to question how knowledge is expressed and understood. *Soul Mountain* was written in Beijing and Paris between 1982 and 1989 and published in Chinese in Taipei in 1990. It is reflective and semi-autobiographical, inspired by Gao's journey along the Yangtze River. The story follows an intellectual figure misdiagnosed with cancer, who struggles spiritually between life and death and searches remote rural areas of Southwest China for self-discovery, cultural roots, and identity.

The narrative shifts between first, second, and third-person perspectives, challenging the idea of a single identity and aligning with postmodern theories about language and truth. It examines how external systems like government and language impose assumptions. Gao Xingjian's experiences with political persecution during China's Cultural Revolution shape his investigation of knowledge and power. His writing explores how individuals perceive reality and often blurs the line between objective truth and subjective experience. The narrative interweaves folktales and myths with real events, highlighting that knowledge is formed through diverse cultural and personal lenses.

I Am A Cat and *Botchan* both express that knowledge is subjective, based on personal experiences and social influences. They suggest that knowledge is dynamic, changing with societal and personal perspectives. In *I Am A Cat*, the cat narrator offers a sarcastic, detached view of human nature, revealing the inconsistencies between traditional Japanese values and Western ideas. This perspective illustrates the fluidity of truth, which is shaped by characters' limited understanding and conformity to societal norms. In *Botchan*, a young man navigates the tension between modern beliefs and strict rural customs while attending a provincial school. His modern outlook is tested against the old-fashioned mindset represented by school authorities.

Botchan struggles with his self-awareness and the expectations around him. He initially believes he is a rational modern individual, but encounters at school challenge this view, indicating that modern values are inadequate for understanding rural social dynamics. Like the cat in *I Am A Cat*, *Botchan* realizes the gap between his understanding and societal expectations. The cat's satirical tone critiques unreliable societal beliefs amidst Japan's Westernization, while *Botchan's* belief in his ability to navigate the rural school proves misguided, demonstrating that modern ideals cannot easily overcome entrenched traditions.

Introduction

Gao Xingjian is often seen as a key figure in Root-seeking Literature, a literary movement that began in the early 1980s and is considered a significant trend in post-Mao Chinese literature. This genre focuses on China's rural landscapes, which remained largely untouched by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* is autobiographical, telling the story of a person's journey for self-identity and its connection to the community. The narrative includes both a real-world journey and a spiritual exploration based in imagination. The protagonist seeks to rediscover an authentic life represented in the folk songs of ethnic groups like the Qiang and the Miao, as these songs express life more vividly than the contemporary songs of his time. *Soul Mountain* explores how deeply the desire for companionship and safety affects an individual's identity, illustrating how relinquishing personal identity to the group can become a strong norm across cultures.

The main theme of *Soul Mountain* can be related to two significant and intertwined events in Gao Xingjian's life: his experience of being criticized during the Cultural Revolution and a misdiagnosis of lung cancer. His encounter with death led him to recover many forgotten parts of his past, which he portrays in his novel. The story follows the protagonist's five-month journey from Beijing to Sichuan province and along the Yangtze River to the coast, structured in eighty-one chapters, each depicting different experiences in various places or times. The narrative includes two points of view: the "I" narrator's journey through the Yangtze River valley and the "you" narrator's symbolic spiritual quest for Lingshan, the Mountain of the Spirit. The nature of this mountain and the spirit connected to it are left uncertain, adding to the book's mysterious quality. There are significant portions of dialogue, folk songs, and chants that reflect how primal instincts are often suppressed by civilization, and how attempts to erase superstitious customs during the Cultural Revolution were largely ineffective.

I Am a Cat, a comedic novel by Natsume Soseki, was first published in 1905. It tells the story of a stray cat living with a group of intellectuals during Japan's Meiji era. The novel acts as social commentary, using the cat's viewpoint to critique society and politics of the time, blending humor with Sōseki's deep pessimism about human nature. The cat, residing with an English professor named Sneeze, feels increasingly troubled by the conversations happening in the professor's study. The narrative shifts between sharp criticism and sardonic humor, asserting that self-awareness is vital for both animals and humans, and that understanding oneself leads to greater respect.

Natsume Soseki's other work, *Botchan*, revolves around a young man from Tokyo who takes a teaching position in a small rural town on Shikoku Island. He struggles with both the students and his coworkers as Japan rapidly modernizes, leading to a clash between new Western ideas and traditional Japanese values. Feeling isolated due to poor communication, he finds solace in letters to Kiyo, who cared for him as a child. Ultimately dissatisfied with teaching, Botchan quits and starts a job as an assistant mechanic at the Tokyo Tramcar Company, unconnected to education. This role helps him adapt to his new life, reflecting both his personal struggles and the experiences of educated individuals in a changing society.

Literature Review

Associating our research with 'epistemology,' it is noted that while the term "epistemology" is relatively new, its field is as old as philosophy itself, garnering attention throughout history. There are many interpretations of understanding statements made by critics. The works of Gao Xingjian and Natsume Soseki show different views of life, but both share a pursuit of 'freedom.' Gao's writing reflects his concerns about the loss of privacy, spontaneity, and freedom in a bureaucratic society. His characters do not confront communism outright, but express dissatisfaction with how the political system robs them of joy. A key scene illustrates this when townspeople urge a singer to perform, only to be stopped by an official due to permit issues, showcasing bureaucrats as an annoyance rather than a threat. Gao's narrative conveys the coldness and ineffectiveness of the bureaucratic system, as seen with elderly individuals struggling in poor retirement homes while others enjoy better facilities. A relative's search for a deceased parent highlights disappearing records, emphasizing bureaucratic failures. The narrative also connects sexual violence with environmental harm, pointing to imbalances and the tragic fates of girls affected, indicating a deeper connection with nature.

Similarly, Natsume Soseki's works like *I am a Cat* and *Botchan* connect characters to nature. Scholars note the importance of *Botchan*'s unreliable first-person narrative in reflecting knowledge issues. He is seen as an unreliable narrator with a subjective view of his reality. Scholars, including James A. Fujii, argue that *Botchan*'s biases prompt readers to question truth and perception. This leads to an exploration of the conflict between personal experience and objective reality. Ruth Ozeki has examined *Botchan*'s moral philosophy, contrasting his rigid morals with the relativism of his peers, suggesting that his strong sense of morality arises from the chaotic changes of Meiji Japan. Toshio Iwai discusses moral relativism within the novel, indicating characters often manipulate moral ideas for personal gain, raising questions about the authenticity of *Botchan*'s moral clarity.

David H. Slater highlights how characters twist language to obscure truth in a rapidly changing society, criticizing the rhetoric's growth in the Meiji era. Steven P. McGuire discusses *Botchan*'s straightforward language countering complex intellectualism. The theme of self-knowledge is emphasized through *Botchan*'s intellectual flaws that complicate his understanding of others. Scholars note that his confusion in Tokyo reflects the broader cultural crises of modernization. Ward William points out that *Botchan*, while not Soseki's first novel, reflects his honest spirit, embodying ideals that challenge old customs. Soseki admired *Botchan*'s naturalness, which he wished to emulate. Despite feeling constrained in his choices, Soseki rejected government honors, displaying a rebellious spirit visible in *Botchan*.

Gao Xingjian's literature underscores freedom of expression, advocating for it for writers and readers alike. His own journey through a misdiagnosis of cancer led him to a renewed commitment to control his thoughts and dedicate himself to art. Anurag Bhattacharyya notes that the protagonist of *Soul Mountain* explores authentic Chinese culture and its relevance to the literary imagination. Gao is regarded as a key figure in root-seeking literature, wanting to reconnect with China's cultural roots after a period of historical amnesia. In his reflections, Gao asserts that loneliness is essential for freedom and self-discovery.

Kanok On Tangjitcharoenkit explains that Soseki's choice of a cat as a main character symbolizes independence and defiance of societal norms. Initially intended as a short work, the narrative evolves, indicating Soseki's waning interest in the cat's perspective after a certain point, leading to the cat's transformation and reduced role in the unfolding human interactions. Another key theme in *I Am a Cat* is its use of an unreliable, non-human narrator. Scholars Edward Seidensticker and Mark J. Williams highlight that the cat's limited perspective shapes its observations, which raises questions about perception and knowledge.

The cat serves as both an observer and an outsider, critiquing human absurdity while questioning the reliability of knowledge from an incomplete viewpoint. Williams discusses how the cat's ignorance of human emotions reflects challenges in gaining true knowledge in society. By remaining a spectator, Sōseki emphasizes the gap between personal perception and objective truth. The cat's awareness of its limits offers depth to the narrative, showcasing the difficulties of self-knowledge. Foster adds that the cat's skepticism about social knowledge critiques modern pretentiousness. Wright and Kitayama explore how characters fail to recognize their misunderstandings in philosophical discussions. Thomas argues that the cat's struggles with human language reveal deeper gaps in knowledge. Pollack concludes that the cat's irony reflects skepticism about attaining certain knowledge of oneself and the world.

Analysis

Soul Mountain- Gao Xingjian

1.1

Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* epitomizes knowledge as a trip, both nonfictional and tropical. The promoter's peregrination through pastoral China represent an attempt to understand not only the external world but also his inner tone. The novel's use of shifting perspectives interspersing between "I," "you," "he," and "she" — blurring distinctions between self and other, personal memory and collective history, illustrating the fluid nature of knowledge. These narrative shifts challenge the anthology's understanding of reality, suggesting that knowledge is multifaceted and private. The promoter's trip reveals that verity is n't absolute; rather, it emerges through particular gests , recollections, and soulsearching. Gao contrasts ultramodern rational knowledge with the intuitive wisdom set up in nature and traditional church.

As the promoter retreats into the nature, he discovers an indispensable epistemology embedded in Taoism and ancient myth. This connection to nature suggests that knowledge isn't solely attained through intellectual logic but also through emotional and spiritual transformation with the world. The trip in *Soul Mountain* is sparked by the promoter's misdiagnosis with lung cancer, which triggers a battle with mortality. This empirical extremity frames knowledge as essential for survival, not just physically but emotionally. By seeking out stories, myths, and particular hassles, the promoter attempts to attune his actuality with the vast, frequently incomprehensible world around him.

1.2

The protagonist seeks truth about history, culture, and his own identity, but what he encounters is a multiplicity of conflicting narratives. Gao suggests that absolute knowledge may be an illusion, and truth is instead something fluid, shaped by perception, interpretation, and experience. He, an intellectual, initially approaches his journey with skepticism and rationalism. However, as he delves deeper into China's remote landscapes, he encounters traditions, superstitions, and spiritual beliefs that challenge his assumptions.

Daoism, with its emphasis on natural spontaneity (ziran), the ineffability of truth (wu wei), and the rejection of rigid intellectual frameworks, deeply influences *Soul Mountain*. The novel, a semi-autobiographical account of Gao's travels in China, mirrors the Daoist belief that knowledge is not a fixed construct but an evolving, experiential process. The protagonist embarks on a quest to find the elusive "*Soul Mountain*," but this journey is not about reaching a definitive destination or uncovering objective truths; rather, it is about self discovery and embracing the uncertainties of existence. Epistemologically, this aligns with Daoism's skepticism toward conventional knowledge. In the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi warns against rigid categorizations and emphasizes that true wisdom comes from experience and intuition rather than structured learning. The lack of a linear storyline further reinforces Daoist thought, as knowledge is not presented as a logical accumulation of facts but as an organic, subjective unfolding of experience.

Closely related is the theme of historical and cultural relativism. As the protagonist travels through China, he encounters folklore, myths, and oral traditions that contradict official historical accounts. These alternative narratives challenge the idea of history as an objective, factual record. Instead, history is depicted as a product of perspective, shaped by those in power and by cultural traditions often in conflict with one another. Another significant issue in *Soul Mountain* is the inadequacy of language as a means of conveying truth. The protagonist grapples with articulating his experiences, frequently resorting to abstract, poetic, or contradictory language. The novel's shifting pronouns and nonlinear structure further highlight the limitations of language in capturing the intricacies of reality.

I Am A Cat - Natsume Soseki

2.1

In *I Am a Cat*, Natsume Sōseki examines epistemology through a satirical and skeptical perspective. The novel, told from the viewpoint of an unnamed cat, portrays knowledge as innately flawed, distorted by social pretences and individual illusions. Unlike the reflective and fragmented understanding found in *Soul Mountain*, *I Am a Cat* utilizes irony to critique human assertions of intellectual supremacy. The feline narrator watches human actions with a detached interest, revealing the inconsistencies and absurdities of human knowledge. Intellectuals, scholars, and self-proclaimed authorities are portrayed in the novel as objects of mockery, their supposed wisdom undermined by arrogance and folly. The main character, Kushami, exemplifies this irony. Although he is an academic, he often misinterprets events, makes poor choices, and demonstrates an exaggerated sense of self-worth. His understanding, informed by formal learning and scholarly discussion, is ultimately depicted as superficial and ineffective when dealing with real-world challenges. The book suggests that what humans regard as wisdom is frequently nothing more than self-deception, influenced by societal norms rather than true comprehension. Additionally, the cat's observations prompt inquiries about the limitations of human perception. Another notable theme here is the conflict between Western and Japanese intellectual traditions. The Meiji period, during which the novel occurs, was a time of swift modernization in Japan, causing clashes between traditional and Westernized thought. The novel critiques both perspectives, implying that neither fully comprehends the intricacies of human existence.

2.2

The cat, despite its physical limitations, serves as an omniscient yet ironically unreliable observer, raising questions about perspective, objectivity, and the limits of human self-awareness. The cat frequently mocks the intellectual and scholarly figures it observes, exposing their arrogance and lack of true understanding. Through satire, Sōseki questions whether humans truly possess superior knowledge or if their self-proclaimed wisdom is merely an illusion. Because the story is told from a cat's perspective, it highlights how knowledge is always shaped by the observer. The cat understands human actions in its own terms, often misinterpreting human behavior in humorous ways. This narrative choice suggests that all knowledge is subjective and dependent on perspective—no single viewpoint can claim absolute truth. The cat, despite being highly articulate, acknowledges the limitations of language. While it can describe and analyze human behavior, it cannot fully understand human emotions or social complexities.

Sōseki approaches knowledge through lampoon, using the perspective of an anthropomorphised cat to notice mortal idiocy and the asininity of intellectual pretension. Unlike the introspective trip in *Soul Mountain*, knowledge in this novel is primarily experimental and embedded in social relations. Numerous of the novel's mortal characters are intellectualists who flatter themselves on their education and knowledge of

Western gospel; still, the cat reveals their exchanges to be superficial, filled with slang and posturing. Knowledge, in this sense, is portrayed as defective and contingent upon limited perspectives. The new suggests that while people seek knowledge to ameliorate their social standing, they frequently overlook the deeper trueness of mortal nature and society.

Botchan – Natsume Soseki

3.1

In *Botchan*, Sōseki explores epistemology through the lens of morality and particular integrity. The promoter's trip is lower about physical trip and further about navigating the unfaithful waters of social reality. Botchan's black- and-white worldview clashes with the innocently nebulous society around him, raising questions about how knowledge of right and wrong is formed. Botchan's understanding of the world is shaped by his parenting, which instills in him a strict law of honesty and fidelity. still, when he becomes a schoolteacher in a pastoral academy, he encounters dishonesty, insincerity, and manipulation. These gests force him to review his simplistic view of morality, illustrating how knowledge evolves through direct experience and battle with complex social realities.

While Botchan clings to his ideals, the reality of his plant challenges the notion that knowledge of morality is universal or absolute. His coworker, Red Shirt, embodies a more realistic approach, using cunning to navigate the system. This conflict raises epistemological questions Is knowledge of what's "right" ingrain, or is it shaped by the demands of society? The new suggests that social structures frequently hamper the pursuit of authentic knowledge. Bureaucracy, gossip, and power dynamics distort reality, making it delicate for individualities to discern verity. Botchan's frustration stems from this consummation — that knowledge is frequently manipulated to serve particular or institutional interests.

3.2

Botchan presents epistemological questions through the lens of generational contrast. The titular protagonist is a straightforward, hot-headed young man who struggles to understand the social codes of his new environment as a teacher in rural Japan. His epistemological approach is rooted in instinct and moral clarity—he sees the world in black and white, good and evil. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that knowledge is more nuanced than Botchan initially perceives. His failure to navigate political intrigues and societal expectations suggests that epistemology is not just about personal principles but also about the ability to adapt and interpret the complexities of the world.

While Botchan is often interpreted as a coming-of-age story, especially regarding the reliability of personal knowledge and the discrepancy between perception and reality. The protagonist, Botchan, is a young man who subscribes to moral absolutism viewing the world in binary terms, assuming good and evil are distinct

categories. However, as he embarks on a teaching position in a rural school, he quickly discovers that the world does not align with his simplistic worldview. Botchan narrates the story in the first person, providing a highly subjective account of events. His rigid worldview and impulsive nature often lead him to misinterpret situations. He perceives those who oppose him as inherently evil, while viewing his supporters as entirely virtuous, failing to acknowledge the complexities of human behavior.

Botchan's difficulties arise from his refusal to adhere to social norms he values honesty and directness but struggles to grasp the importance of diplomacy, strategic thinking, and adaptability. His inability to navigate social dynamics implies that knowledge encompasses not only personal reasoning but also an understanding of society's unwritten rules. The novel critiques both extreme individualism and blind conformity, suggesting that true knowledge necessitates awareness of personal values and social realities. Finally, Botchan examines the limitations of formal education as a source of genuine knowledge. Despite being educated in Tokyo, Botchan feels ill-equipped for the complexities of the real world. His academic background does not prepare him to confront deception, manipulation, or social hierarchy. This reflects Sōseki's broader critique of the Meiji-era education system, which prioritized rote learning over critical thinking. The novel posits that true knowledge is acquired through experience and reflection rather than solely through formal education.

Conclusion

It is necessary to thoroughly examine how Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and Natsume Sōseki's *I Am a Cat* and *Botchan* represent changing cultural values, identity crises, and the conflict between the past and present in order to compare ancient customs with modern ideologies. Tension between the past and present is frequently caused by the opposition between traditional values and contemporary ideologies. These pieces show how tradition and modernity interact to shape both individual and societal identities, sometimes clashing and other times coexisting. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* is a semi-autobiographical book, which combines memoir and fiction, that follows an unidentified protagonist as she travels through rural China. As the narrator looks for purpose in a rapidly changing world, this journey is physical, spiritual, and intellectual. Gao juxtaposes contemporary ideologies, influenced by political movements like the Cultural Revolution, with traditional customs represented by folklore, Taoist philosophy, and rural ways of life.

Gao incorporates Taoist beliefs, Chinese mythology, and folklore throughout *Soul Mountain*. The main character encounters shamans, monks, and village elders who maintain long-standing customs, highlighting cultural heritage. Folk Traditions shape the protagonist's understanding of China's rich cultural diversity, countering the bureaucratic nature of modern government. Although the protagonist challenges strict social norms, Confucianism still affects social and familial ties. Gao also explores the fallout from contemporary political movements, particularly the Maoist Cultural Revolution, which sought to erase traditional culture for socialist ideology, showing disillusionment with Collectivism. After facing political persecution, the

protagonist opts for individual freedom, rejecting the homogeneous nature of socialist realism. Urban areas are depicted as oppressive and chilling, reflecting the protagonist's fragmented identity caused by political unrest and cultural alienation.

Natsume Sōseki's *I Am a Cat* is a satirical examination of Japan's modernization during the Meiji era. The unnamed cat narrator gives witty insights into human society and the clash between Western influences and ancient customs. Japan's transformation during the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) from a feudal society to a modern industrial state is significant. Sōseki uses examples to illustrate this change, such as the Samurai Ethos versus Bureaucratic Modernity, where the new capitalist system pokes fun at traditional values like honor and loyalty. The cat observes the struggle to balance modern financial goals and traditional morals. While characters follow Buddhist teachings, these viewpoints are challenged by the rise of Western philosophy and science. Additionally, the social hierarchy is depicted through Kushami, the cat's middle-class master, who wrestles with conforming to traditional ways and the changing times. Sōseki critiques both tradition and modernization, highlighting the superficial adoption of Western ideas among Japanese intellectuals. The cat's cynical view suggests that both old and new systems foster hypocrisy, whether through the pursuit of Western materialism or strict adherence to Confucian tradition. Kushami's experience parallels that of Gao's protagonist, experiencing alienation due to societal shifts. Old customs and modern ideologies coexist paradoxically in *I Am a Cat*, with neither being entirely good or bad but both contributing to the absurdity of life.

Botchan by Natsume Sōseki explores the conflict between societal expectations and individual integrity in a coming-of-age narrative. The main character, a passionate and straightforward young man, struggles to adapt to Japan's evolving social structure. Botchan embodies the bravery and honesty of traditional samurai values, but finds his ideals clash with the corrupt society around him. The Samurai Code's integrity is contrasted with the dishonesty of modern bureaucracy, as Botchan takes pride in justice while society does not reward his directness. The education system of the Meiji era is presented as ineffective and self-serving, prioritizing personal gain over actual learning. Although Botchan is raised with strong family values emphasizing loyalty and respect, his family views him as reckless for rejecting social norms.

Key Words

Modernization, western ideas, social norms, ideals, moral clarity, fidelity, ameliorate, anthropomorphised, instinct, Taoist Philosophy, identity crisis, hypocrisy, ill-equipped, manipulation, illusion, introspective, incomprehensible, spontaneity, contradictory, Bureaucratic Modernity, ancient customs, cultural alienation, mortal idiocy.

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