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iThenticate Page 4 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

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# When the self dissolves into causes and conditions: Reading *Soul Mountain* through Abhidharmakośabhāṣya

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**Abstract -** This study examined the profound intersection between Buddhist philosophy and contemporary literature by investigating Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* through the lens of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. While previous scholarship frequently regarded Buddhist elements as mere external motifs, this research recognized the critical need to address how foundational scholastic frameworks could function as a structural and ontological methodology for interpreting narrative mechanics and the dissolution of the self. By employing a comparative and structural-ontological approach that integrated Abhidharma scholasticism with modern narratological frameworks, the research analyzed the novel's spatial symbolism, narrative temporality, and ego-effaced character configurations. The findings demonstrated that the textual representation of sacred spaces and fractured identities dynamically mirrored the universal law of dependent origination and impermanence, wherein psychological crises and suffering emerged from complex causal networks of mental formations. Furthermore, the shifting narrative voices reflected the dissolution of a unitary ego into a continuous stream of psycho-physical aggregates. The study concluded that Soul Mountain transcended conventional narrative forms by embodying complex philosophical ontology, offering a transformative spiritual path where inner contemplation and the realization of dependent origination provided an ethical resolution to modern existential alienation.

**Keywords:** Abhidharmakośabhāṣya; Gao Xingjian; Dependet Origination; *Soul Mountain*

## 1. Introduction

*Soul Mountain* has been acclaimed as "*one of those singular literary creations that seem to provide its own reference point*" (Swedish Academy, 2006, p. 647). Far from being a conventional linear quest narrative, the journey depicted in *Soul Mountain* serves as an intricate re-excavation of Chinese cultural strata following the profound trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Embedded within its travelogue, diary, and memoir-like structure is a complex network of narrative voices that reflects a traumatized consciousness striving for humanistic and national reconciliation. Within the rich tapestry of Chinese cultural elements revisited in *Soul Mountain*, Buddhism emerges as a salient motif. Although Buddhism was not natively born in China, its multi-millennial assimilation has transformed it from an imported religious system into an intrinsic mode of national cognition and cultural structure.

Gao Xingjian's literary oeuvre has predominantly been analysed through the lenses of Western postmodernism, existentialism, trauma studies, or narrative techniques. While several scholars have noted the presence of Buddhist motifs, religious symbols, or Chan (Zen) aesthetic flavours in *Soul Mountain*, previous studies often treat Buddhism merely as an external thematic element, an exotic cultural landscape, or a vague spiritual backdrop. There remains a critical



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iThenticate Page 4 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 5 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
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research gap regarding how foundational Buddhist philosophical frameworks, specifically the rigorous scholasticism of the Abhidharma tradition-can function as a structural and ontological methodology for interpreting the dissolution of the self and narrative mechanics in modern literature. As Gao Xingjian explicitly stated in his Nobel lecture *Without Isms* (*沒有主義*), literary creation should not serve as an illustration of any political ideology or rigid dogma, asserting that "*literary creation has always been a surge of an author's individual passion, having little to do with 'isms'...*" (Gao X., 2006, p. 680). Consequently, a major theoretical problem arises: how can a text be rigorously read through a religious-philosophical text without reductively labelling the author or imposing a dogmatic "ism" onto the creative work?

To address this gap and solve this interpretative dilemma, this article proposes an alternative textual and philosophical approach: utilizing the scholastic taxonomy and relational ontology established in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* as an analytical framework to decode *Soul Mountain*. Rather than attempting to assign a religious identity to Gao Xingjian or using the novel to prove the theological validity of the Abhidharma system, this study investigates dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as an underlying cognitive, cultural, and narrative structure. By grounding the inquiry in the *Dhātu-nirdeśa* (classification of elements) and *Indriya-nirdeśa* (faculties and causes/conditions) chapters of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, this research analyzes how the novel's ego-effaced character configurations ("I", "me", "she"), symbolic spaces, and existential crisis reflect the dynamic interaction of *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus*, and the complex nexus of sūtra-based causality (*hetu-pratyaya-phala*).

The primary objective of this article is to elucidate how the principle of dependent origination functions as both a deep-seated Chinese cultural philosophy and an innovative narrative architecture in *Soul Mountain*, thereby demonstrating the capacity of the modern novel genre to embody complex philosophical ontology. The novelty and significance of this research lie in bridging Abhidharma scholasticism with modern literary analysis, shifting the paradigm from superficial thematic reading to a structural-ontological decoding. By doing so, this study not only clarifies Gao Xingjian's profound humanistic concern for modern individuals who have lost their capacity for inner contemplation amidst existential rupture, but also reveals how Mahāyāna engaged spirit and indigenous Chinese culture interact to offer an ethical path toward spiritual reconciliation.

Buddhist elements in *Soul Mountain* have tended to be studied through a motif-oriented approach, in which scholars identify Buddhist concepts and doctrines and analyze how the novel symbolizes them. Hoye (2009) points out that the title *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*) is linked to the episode in which Śākyamuni transmitted the Dharma to Mahākāśyapa at Vulture Peak (Lingshan). In the novel, Lingshan is at once a real or legendary toponym and a symbol of an invisible spiritual destination, where the protagonist commits himself to the search for his authentic being and for liberation. Most findings, whether following a Buddhist or a Taoist approach, concur that the quest for Lingshan is an effort to break free from a dogmatic and despotic reality. This is comparable to the way humans perceive the cyclical movement of adversity and prosperity (*否 – 泰*) in order to attain non-action (*Wuwei*) (Le, 2026), or the need to confront different modes of truth and to juxtapose traditional cosmological experience with modern anthropological cognition in order to attain liberation (Hoye, 2009). The elusive and indeterminate nature of Lingshan has also been read as a symbol of the Buddhist "other shore" (*pāra*), signifying the realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in Prajñāpāramitā thought and humanity's aspiration for enlightenment. The novel closes with the image of a green frog resting motionless in the snow, which expresses the realization of emptiness and the impermanence of all things (Zhang et al., 2024).

The narrative voice and personal pronouns in *Soul Mountain* manifest the fragmentation of reality (Xu G. G., 2002) (Le, 2026); the Buddhist-oriented line of research interprets this feature as the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*), whereby the self is no longer a unitary entity but dissolves into the flow of consciousness (Zhang et al., 2024; (Lee, 2012). Accordingly, Buddhist elements in *Soul Mountain* have been received as symbols, and researchers interpret their significance on the basis


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iThenticate Page 5 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 6 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
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of Buddhist knowledge while also exploring the layers of meaning generated through the interaction among these symbols. Although studies increasingly uncover subtle relationships among the symbols, their function in representing Buddhist space has not yet been fully explored. The spatial dimension has largely been examined from an ecocritical perspective or as an expression of the Taoist unity of heaven and humanity (*tianren heyi*). Thus, the significance of representing Buddhist space through a network of symbols remains largely unaddressed.

As regards theoretical frameworks, researchers examining the Buddhist dimension of *Soul Mountain* have drawn on narratology and linguistic analysis (Xu G. G., 2002); Zhang et al., 2024; (Lee, 2012); phenomenology (Hoye, 2009); a combination of Brecht's distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) with the Zen practice of contemplative observation (*jingguan*); and comparative literature and cultural translation (Xu F. , 2025), among others. To date, however, virtually no study has approached the Buddhist elements in *Soul Mountain* on the basis of the Buddha's doctrine itself, that is, by employing the Tripiṭaka (Sūtra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma) as a philosophical system to engage in dialogue with the issues expressed through these elements. This approach does not aim to use the literary work to validate the correctness of a philosophical system. Rather, drawing on conclusions derived from the processes of analysis and comparison, we seek to reconstruct the distinctive features of Chinese culture and thought in the pursuit of truth and, above all, to contribute to the study of Gao Xingjian's poetics.

The *Abhidharmakośa* is a system of Buddhist philosophy and psychology developed by Vasubandhu on the basis of the Buddha's teaching (*buddhavacana*) (Vasubandhu, 2012, pp. 15-16). Vasubandhu holds that the doctrinal system of Abhidharma is implicit within the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 53). The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* was chosen as the basis for analysis in this paper because it represents a system of Buddhist doctrine developed by Vasubandhu, an exegete of the Sarvāstivāda school from Kashmir; it was later brought to China by Xuanzang and translated into Chinese (阿毗達磨俱舍論) between approximately 645 and 664 CE. This event constitutes material evidence of the transmission of Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent to China, and provides a basis for recognizing this doctrinal system as having been disseminated widely as a mode of thought in China.

The term *Abhidharmakośa* carries the meaning of a system; *kośa* means "store". *Abhidharma*, in turn, is formed of two elements, "abhi" and "dharma". Philologists of Sanskrit have traced the root "abhi" across a range of languages, including Primitive Indian, Old Persian, Gaulish, and Old High German, and Gothic (Mayrhofer, 1978). The *Pali-English Dictionary* gives two principal senses for "abhi": a) facing and aggressing, towards, against, on to, at; and b) mastering, over, along over, out over, on top of (Rhys & Stede, 1921, p. 61). In the interpretations offered by the Sarvāstivāda and the Sthavira schools, the prefix "abhi-", when attached to a verb or noun, carries two principal meanings: a) *incomparable*, together with related senses such as *supreme* and *superior*; and b) *directed toward*, together with related senses such as *oriented to* and *pertaining to* (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 37). Accordingly, contemporary scholars of Abhidharma likewise hold that "abhi" bears two senses: excellence and relation to (Sakurabe, 1969).

The studies explore Gao Xingjian's Soul Mountain through the perspectives of aesthetics, Taoist philosophy, and narrative strategies. Research on the novel's aesthetics highlights its literary techniques and distinctive artistic expression, contributing to an understanding of how narrative form shapes its philosophical and cultural meanings (Lee, 2012). More recent research examines the concept of wu-wei (non-action) as a narrative strategy, emphasizing the influence of Taoist thought on the novel's storytelling and its representation of individual experience, freedom, and the relationship between humans and nature (Le, 2026; Dat, 2026). Meanwhile, research on Vasubandhu's theory of pramāṇa provides a perspective on Buddhist epistemology and the interpretation of philosophical arguments, although it addresses a different intellectual tradition (Lee, 2024). Overall, these studies demonstrate the importance of examining literary works through philosophical and cultural frameworks, while further comparative research could clarify how Taoist concepts shape the narrative structure and aesthetic significance of Soul Mountain.


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iThenticate Page 6 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 7 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
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"Dharma", for its part, carries two principal meanings: a) dharma as realized truth (法所證), the truth that the Buddha himself realized through direct experience – "*all that exists or does not exist, whether real or apparent, and that is governed by one or more governing principles; both the governing principle and that which is governed are dharma in this sense*" (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 40); and b) dharma as taught doctrine (法所說), the instruction and guidance in practice given by the Buddha so that the practitioner may attain the state of Nirvāṇa. Abhidharma may therefore be rendered by two meanings that do not stand in contradiction with one another: "the dharma that transcends" and "that which pertains to the Dharma" (that is, to the Buddha's own teaching). For, within the question of Buddhist textual transmission, the Sūtra and the Vinaya have a clearly established origin, being attributed to the Buddha himself and recited anew at the First Council held after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa. The Abhidharma, however, cannot be verified as to its origin with the same clarity. Exegetes have proposed origins that are at once mythological and rationally grounded, among them: 1) that the Buddha, by means of supernatural power, taught the Abhidharma to the devas in the Tuṣita heaven; 2) that the Buddha taught the Abhidharma in concealed form, dispersed throughout the sūtras, and that later exegetes gathered and arranged it; and 3) that the Abhidharma was compiled by the saṅgha at the time of the first compilation of the canon (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 42) (Nāgārjuna, 2024, p. 71). Whatever uncertainty may surround its origin, the position and role of the Abhidharma corpus within Buddhism cannot be denied.

The studies provide a broad overview of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya and its significance for Buddhist philosophy, particularly in relation to non-self, rebirth, causality, and the nature of reality. Comparative research highlights the connections between Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical traditions, especially concerning ethical responsibility, the self, and rebirth (O'Brien-Kop, 2024; Tsai, 2016; Watson, 2020; (Woo, 2024; Fujimoto, 2023). Other studies examine the development of non-self and emptiness, demonstrating how Vasubandhu's arguments contribute to broader debates about personal identity and the nature of phenomena (Jo, 2016; Kim, 2024). Research on Vasubandhu's epistemology and the sectarian affiliation of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya further clarifies its philosophical and historical complexity (Lee, 2024; Kim, 2025). Textual studies of Uighur manuscripts and visual meditation practices expand the understanding of Buddhist intellectual transmission and religious practice (Mirkamal, 2020; O'Brien-Kop, 2026). Additionally, investigations into Buddhist critiques of divine creation and the Sarvāstivāda doctrine that all dharmas exist contribute to understanding Buddhist cosmology and theories of existence (Szanyi, 2025; Xin, 2024). The relationship between Vasubandhu's thought and other Buddhist philosophical positions also remains significant for interpreting the historical development of momentariness and doctrinal affiliation (Yang, 2025). Overall, these studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya for understanding Buddhist metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the historical evolution of Buddhist thought.

This article applies the principles and worldview introduced in the first two chapters of the *Abhidharmakośa*: the chapter on the classification of elements (*Dhātu-nirdeśa*) and the chapter on faculties (*Indriya-nirdeśa*). In the first chapter, Vasubandhu establishes the three categories of *skandhas* (aggregates), *āyatanas* (bases), and *dhātus* (elements). The relationship among these three categories aims to comprehensively explain all existences and their relational structures, along with their functions and functional relationships, encompassing both the mind-body complex of sentient beings and the world they inhabit. Existence is analyzed through the aggregates to uncover the nature of the self. This analytical method is carried out through psychological observation. From the reciprocal functional interactions between internal and external factors, the concept of the existence of a self is formed. In the second chapter, the article primarily utilizes the framework of causes, conditions, and effects (*hetu-pratyaya-phala*). Causes, conditions, and effects are specific relational categories of *dharmas* analyzed from the universal law of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Within these relational categories, causes and effects are either simultaneous or non-simultaneous, homogeneous or heterogeneous, pure or defiled. The Abhidharma establishes six causes, four conditions, and five effects, neither more nor less. The


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iThenticate Page 7 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 8 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
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rationale for this formulation, according to the Abhidharma, is to assert that a single cause cannot independently produce a single effect. This objective aims to refute worldviews that posit a universe formed from a single, unitary cause (Vasubandhu, 2012, pp. 72-74).

## 2. Method

In terms of ontology and philosophical methodology, the research originates from the concept of Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda) systemized in Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam by Vasubandhu (translated by Tuệ Sỹ). This principle is not merely viewed as a pure law of cause and effect, but as a multidimensional network of interconnectedness and mutual conditioning, where all phenomena lack independent self-nature and operate within the continuous stream of arising and ceasing of the aggregates, spheres, and elements. When applied to Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* (translated by Trần Đĩnh), the ontology of Dependent Origination serves as a philosophical lens to decode the figurative structures, space-time, and psychological transformations of an exiled and fragmented world, thereby regarding the work as a microcosm operating according to the laws of dependent origination and cessation.

To transform abstract philosophical categories into literary analysis tools, the research establishes a modern narratological theoretical framework based on the foundations of Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. The textual structure is approached through the tripartite model (story, text, narration), combined with a detailed examination of narrative temporality poetics (order, duration, frequency) to reflect the mindset of recollection, fragmentation, and the cycle of consciousness (Bal, 2017) (Genette, 1980). Additionally, the system of internal focalization, character poetics under the lens of "allotropic states", and forms of speech representation (such as free indirect discourse) are deployed synchronously to highlight polyphony, the fluid shift of the ego, and the spirit of letting go within the work (Rimmon-Kenan, 1994).

Table 1. *The Research Process and Implementation Methods*

| Research Method | Content and Implementation Purpose in the Study |
|---|---|
| **1. Textual Analysis** | Close reading of the text *Soul Mountain*, combined with cross-checking against the original text and theoretical guidance from modern narratology treatises to dissect the artistic structure of the work. |
| **2. Comparative Method** | Comparing the narrative structure of Soul Mountain directly with the ontological principles in *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* to discover harmonies, thereby demonstrating the process of transforming philosophical structures into the novel's artistic structure. |
| **3. Synthesis and Systematization** | Synthesizing in-depth analysis results regarding time, focalization, character, and tone to affirm the central thesis: The element of Dependent Origination comprehensively governs the mode of text production and the kinetic structure of the novel. |

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Results

#### 3.1.1 The Recreation of Buddhist Space in Soul Mountain: The Symbolic Layer

Buddhist elements are concretely manifested in *Soul Mountain* through images and symbols such as monks, nuns, abbots, temples, and the transmission of the robe and bowl. These images are densely arranged in chapters 36 and 47, alongside the narrative mode in which the character "me" recounts the transmission of the robe and bowl to "she", bearing a strong Chan (*Zen*) *kōan* quality. All of these construct a Buddhist-Chan aesthetic space. However, these images do not merely appear as cultural signs of Buddhism; in their interconnection, they also manifest the development of the theory of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the concept of cause and effect.


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iThenticate Page 8 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 9 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
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According to Buddhist scriptures, dependent origination is one of the foundational teachings, alongside the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* states: "*When the characteristic of production gives rise to what is produced, it is not separated from the combination of causes and conditions*" (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 404). Dependent origination refers to the emergence and formation of phenomena based on the principle of inter-arising; each phenomenon is formed through the coordination of multiple conditions. The implication drawn from the principle of dependent origination is that it constitutes a dialectical system of thought: causes, conditions, and effects can be distinguished, yet nothing is permanent. Because it is impermanent, there is neither a beginning nor an end.

Gao Xingjian opens up this spiritual space through communal scenes, demonstrating the expansive diffusion of Buddhism in Chinese social life: "*Good men and pious women crowd the paths through the forest*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 198). The image of the crowd of believers not only reflects the scale and influence of Buddhism but also evokes the intimate relationship between religious faith and secular life. This scene is elevated to a climax through the description of the temple space overflowing with a stream of pilgrims:

> *Me says the chanting of the sutras echoes far beyond the grand gate of the temple. Not a single mat is left empty inside the temple. Those who arrive later kneel right on the ground, and those arriving even later must wait outside. Behind the massive crowd of believers who cannot squeeze inside, yet another vast crowd is pressing together* (Gao X. , 2023, p. 198).

Here, the temple is not merely a religious architectural structure, but becomes a symbol of the peak state of communal spiritual life, where collective faith reaches a point of high condensation.

However, this peak state does not imply permanence. Within the movement of the novel, Buddhist images are progressively placed in relation to time and destruction. The image of the ancient temple becoming a ruin and a haven for bandits after five hundred years transforms the meaning of the religious symbol: "*Saying that five hundred years later, that deserted ancient temple becomes a lair for bandits who sleep by day and descend the mountain at night to pillage villages…*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 206). The collapse of the sacred space entails human tragedies, revealing an intertwined relationship of causes, conditions, and effects, in which the destruction of material forms is not identical with the annihilation of spiritual values, but serves as the inevitable consequence of a developmental cycle. The transformation of the ancient temple into ruins after five hundred years embodies a profound ontological depth regarding the arising and ceasing of conditioned phenomena. The Abhidharma asserts that all conditioned phenomena are governed by momentariness and cannot persist in a permanently abiding state. The collapse of the sacred space does not equate to the complete annihilation of spiritual values, but rather constitutes an inevitable consequence of the cycle of transformation. When the conditions sustaining the physical structure disintegrate, the external form of the temple collapses in accordance with the objective law of impermanence. Nevertheless, the spiritual energy and memory imprints stored in the storehouse consciousness continue to operate through various causal modalities. The connection between the current ruins and past history exemplifies the uniform continuity of traumatic events within the linear temporal flow. Consequently, the ruinous space becomes a living testimony to the principle of karmic maturation, where suffering results ripen from impure causes in the past.

Alongside communal and historical images, *Soul Mountain* also constructs Buddhist symbols at an individual level through the image of an alms-gathering monk on a sandbar of the Yangtze River:

> *Later, in front of a stone temple on a small sandbar in the middle of the Yangtze River, we meet a monk, with a shaved head, wearing a bright red cassock... Unhurried, after finishing his chanting,*

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iThenticate Page 9 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 10 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
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> *he takes off his monastic robe, stuffs it into a black faux leather bag, picks up his curved-handle umbrella to use as a walking stick, and leaves* (Gao X. , 2023, p. 268).

This image does not emphasize rituals or monumental temple spaces, but focuses on the engaged action of the ascetic. Through this, dependent origination is manifested in a living form: spiritual practice is inseparable from daily life, unfolding within the very movement of mundane causes and conditions. The chain of images gathered into events is presented along a seemingly linear axis of time, yet when reflected upon in terms of their essence, one perceives the homogeneous flow (*samtāna*) of events. They all share the equalized flow of suffering when values are stripped away. These pains are stored within the collective storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), generating other tragic stories—they are the resultant effects of maturation (*vipāka-phala*): "*The fruit attained therefrom is that which has ripened but is of a different category from its cause, hence it is called vipāka (maturing differently)*" (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 172). At the individual level, the image of the alms-seeking monk along the Yangtze River conveys a profound engaged perspective on the process of inner cultivation. Practice is not separated from mundane life but takes place right within the subtle movement of everyday conditions. According to the analytical framework of dependent origination, every minor human action serves as a contributing factor generating future results. The monk relinquishes elaborate ritual forms to immerse himself in the natural flow, demonstrating a thorough realization of the non-self nature of the aggregates. The presence of the ascetic figure amidst the river landscape evokes a perfect harmony between a purified mind and the fluctuating external world. This illustrates the viewpoint that liberation is not an escape from reality, but rather the capacity for awakening in the face of all external stimuli. As a result, the individual space in the work transforms into a pure spiritual domain where the practitioner directly perceives the structure of reality just as it is. Thus, by choosing any arbitrary point on the timeline, whether looking hundreds of years backward or forward, the characters encounter images and symbols recounting tragic catastrophes that share the same form of deprivation-induced suffering.

From the dense and intentional arrangement of Buddhist imagery, it can be seen that Gao Xingjian has constructed a dynamic spiritual artistic space where symbols do not remain static at the level of religious meaning, but are continuously deployed to reflect the law of arising, staying, changing, and perishing (*utpāda, sthiti, anyathātva, bhaṅga*). The images of temples, monks, nuns, believers, rituals, and alms-gathering both reflect Chinese Buddhist life and serve as a medium to express the localized thought of dependent origination and cause and effect. Consequently, *Soul Mountain* not only portrays Buddhism as a religion, but also highlights Buddhism as an ideology deeply ingrained in the spiritual and cultural structure of the Chinese people, intimately linked to how human beings perceive time, history, and their own inner lives.

### 3.1.2 The interaction between doctrine and indigenous culture, or the two Truths of the Path and Conventional Truth

When received and interpreted by the masses, the doctrines within the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* took on an engaged character. This is a distinctive feature in the process of foreign thought interacting with indigenous beliefs. During his lifetime, the Buddha distinguished two types of truth in his teachings: conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) – that is, relative truth, which aligns with what is recognized in ordinary daily life; and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) – that is, absolute truth. These two types of truth do not negate each other, but form an interdependent relationship that helps sentient beings gain realization on the path of practice. When compiling the *Abhidharmakośa*, the masters selected only the ultimate truth. Consequently, upon its introduction to China, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* retained its esoteric nature. This created a distanced stance relative to the masses: on one side was profound knowledge housed within an "ivory tower", and on the other was the broad populace, largely belonging to the working class with a low level of abstract thinking. During the development of Buddhism in China, the theory of dependent origination was gradually equated by the masses with the traditional concept of cause and effect. Much like dependent origination, the concept of cause and effect also entails a connection among


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iThenticate Page 10 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 11 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
e-ISSN: 2986-4461
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https://ympn.co.id/index.php/JLLSCS

phenomena and things. As the saying goes, "*Near the mountains, one burns good firewood; near the water, one eats good fish*" (靠山好烧柴, 靠水好吃鱼) – a Chinese folk concept of cause and effect, meaning that whatever conditions are present will give rise to corresponding results. This imputation of rudimentary dialectical meaning (conventional truth) is a unique cognitive operation by the community in tracking down the esoteric meaning of the *Abhidharmakośa*.

When using the phrase "cause and effect" most people tend to think that a fixed cause leads to a definite effect. This identification has led to the consequence that Chinese people in general, and Chinese Buddhists in particular, believe that a specific action will lead to a specific outcome or consequence. Therefore, compared to dependent origination, the traditional concept of cause and effect is more rudimentarily dialectical. Furthermore, this differs from Buddhism, wherein an effect is formed from multiple causes and conditions, ensuring that both the cause (the conditions) and conditions (the combination of conditions) are present for that effect to come about. In *Soul Mountain*, one can simultaneously recognize the application of both the theory of dependent origination and the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of cause and effect. Yet, rather than opposing or negating each other, they work together to clarify the characteristics of Chinese national Buddhism as well as issues of spiritual value.

Gao Xingjian illustrates the human condition of living completely skewed toward the side of the effect, accompanied by the illusion that life has a definitive conclusion. People no longer remember that the effect of this cause is simultaneously the cause of another effect. This skew is clearly manifested in the state of mind waiting for "final" things as the final verse, the master's passing, the succession of the abbotship – while forgetting the present, forgetting that these "finals" are the beginning of something new.

> *Or, an effect is hypothetically spoken of in terms of a cause, just as a cause is hypothetically spoken of in terms of an effect. The scripture says: 'The six spheres of contact at present, know that they are old karma generated from the past'* (Vasubandhu, 2012, p. 171).

The symbol of the monumental temple signifies a life that has reached a peak of prosperity, to the extent that people no longer care about the movement and development of this life, assuming it will permanently maintain this state of peak prosperity. People focus on trivial, ephemeral details such as the abbotship – which is inherently a position to oversee the temple, yet they know nothing of the temple's actual condition. According to the inevitable law of movement, this temple will eventually collapse. The temple collapses, but the Buddha's Way does not, and perhaps it will serve as an even greater catalyst for the development of Buddhism. Because "*The Buddha teaches us that to know enlightenment, we should not know the Buddha through his physical body's countenance; what people call the physical countenance of the Buddha is merely illusory images of the Buddha's physical body, and the images we see are not his countenance, they are the negation of his countenance*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 199). The temple will fall, but whether the Buddha's teachings remain or perish depends upon the assembly of monks and nuns. When no longer bound by form that is, the monumental temple, sentient beings will find their connection to the Buddha's teachings closer and more personal. They will no longer feel that the teachings belong to the monumental temple. Because they are overly preoccupied with the abbotship, no one understands the master's final instruction. Future generations will only know the temple through broken bricks, the remnants of a material world that once achieved prosperity, without knowing its teachings. Or, viewed more broadly, living in material abundance, the Chinese people gradually drifted away from spiritual values and lost the traditional achievements of their nation. Then one day, they no longer perceive any value in a close past as a support, while the future undergoes cyclical destruction. This is a human paradox.

However, Gao Xingjian does not allow the ignorance of the crowd to lead everyone to ruin; he points out that there is always an opportunity for human beings. This reflects the author's humanistic intent. The high-ranking monk is a character who understands all principles of Buddhism and naturally knows the principle of dependent origination. He is a reflection of the


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iThenticate Page 11 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 12 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
e-ISSN: 2986-4461
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https://ympn.co.id/index.php/JLLSCS

traditional wisdom of the Chinese nation, as he comprehends that no cause leads to an effect only to end there. An effect is neither permanent nor immutable; an effect is also part of heaven and earth, destined to transform and itself become a new cause. Therefore, when the disciple beneath the platform asks him to whom he will pass on the abbotship, he replies: "*Take this bowl and go alms-gathering*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 200). The master has seen the inevitable destruction of the temple and the deluded illusion of sentient beings regarding its permanence. The act of taking the bowl means accepting the responsibility of acting as abbot to keep the World-Honored One's teachings continuing to spread among sentient beings. However, in the second half of the statement, the act of going alms-gathering is advice to recreate a new cause for one's own effect. The temple has collapsed ideologically and will collapse physically; if one clings to it, the propagation of the Dharma will perish along with its collapse, resulting in no one remembering the taught Dharma. The collapse is inevitable; it will also become a cause for the propagation effect of the successor. Their effect is decided by themselves; "go alms-gathering" means starting over from scratch, going forth to gain experience and figure out ways to sustain traditional values. Ironically, no one hears the master's instruction to "go alms-gathering" except his two close disciples on either side, but they dare not speak of it. Gao Xingjian leaves a glimmer of hope that there will always be those who recognize the situation –the character "me", and then "she", nameless characters who could be anyone. They will speak up to awaken everyone to act and avoid an outcome like the collapse of the temple. Whether the effect of propagating the Dharma succeeds or not depends on your method; whatever the method is, it stems from your own reflections on the experiences gained while alms-gathering.

### 3.1.3 The Ego-effaced character structure: Emptiness and the Principle of Dependent Origination

From the perspective of the Abhidharma's classification of dharmas, the character structure between "you" and "she" is not an enduring self, but a temporary aggregation of the five aggregates (*skandhas*), bases (*āyatanas*), and elements (*dhātus*). The subtle contact between the faculties - such as the eye, ear, and mind - and the external objects along the journey in search of Soul Mountain continuously generates a symbiotic stream of consciousness. For instance, when the work depicts physical ecstasies or the feeling of exhaustion along the way, these are essentially concrete manifestations of the form aggregate (*rūpa-skandha*) and the feeling aggregate (*vedanā-skandha*) under the governance of external conditions. This psychological observational method demonstrates that the concept of an independent "I" completely collapses upon decomposing the constituent elements of body and mind. "She" cannot be separated from surrounding social conditions, such as generational rupture or the survival environment in contemporary China. All psychological manifestations, from familial aversion to the yearning for empathy, stem from the causal interaction between internal dharmas (*adhyātmika-dharma*) and external dharmas (*bāhya-dharma*). Consequently, the characters in the work emerge as entities devoid of intrinsic nature, entirely dependent on the dependent-arising network of psycho-physical factors.

Gao Xingjian frequently mentions her hysteria, which reaches its climax in chapter 46, where she brandishes a knife, threatening to kill "me" for dragging her into the quest for Soul Mountain, depriving her of being with her husband, child, father, and stepmother - people she previously felt weary of and felt aversion toward (Gao X. , 2023, p. 261). The causes have gathered according to conditions; some causes are dictated by life's contingencies, such as the death of her mother and her father's remarriage, while other conditions are self-determined by human choice, such as her decision to follow "me". Once the causes have gathered within specific circumstances (conditions), having tasted bodily exaltations, heard what "me" said, and grown exhausted on the journey to find Soul Mountain that the effect manifests: her hysteria erupts. Stated thus, do causes and conditions according to dependent origination lie beyond human control? According to Abhidharma philosophy, a result of suffering or a state of crisis never stems from a single cause, thereby refuting worldviews positing a universe originating from a unitary entity. The combination of accidental causes and subjective conditions creates a multidimensional,


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iThenticate Page 12 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

iThenticate Page 13 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525
*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
e-ISSN: 2986-4461
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https://ympn.co.id/index.php/JLLSCS

intricately intertwined causal structure. When conditions such as physical exhaustion, resentment over her husband's infidelity, and loneliness fully converge, the result of suffering inevitably manifests as an outburst of hysteria. This explosion vividly illustrates the principle of karmic maturation resulting from heterogeneous causes (*vipāka-phala*), where impure seeds from the past ripen into present suffering.

Gao Xingjian arguably disagrees with this view, adopting a humanistic approach to the issue of causes and conditions; she is not entirely unfortunate. Alongside the aforementioned causes, she has a stable job, a real family, and a gentle father... Causes and conditions do not represent the notion that humans are crushed by fate. Notably, Gao Xingjian wrote in chapter 40: "*Me says she only loves herself*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 239). Narcissism and greed subtly govern people into performing actions that become the causes of crisis-effects. Loving only herself, she could not tolerate her husband's infidelity; she had to exact revenge. Unable to accept it, she continually plunged into hedonistic pursuits with "me", following him while ignoring the sense of familiarity with her own family, rejecting the opportunity for happiness in order to take vengeance.

The absurdity is that she does not seek understanding from her father but instead seeks it from "me", a stranger she happened to meet. The fracture in intergenerational relationships is a consequence of China's developmental process. It is inevitable. People's consciousness is determined by the material environment in which they live; satisfying an increasing number of material needs leaves human spiritual life neglected. Humanity gradually reverts to primordial, ignorant instincts, achieving spiritual satisfaction simply by fulfilling bodily desires.

> *Me cannot help feeling a bit of pity for her; 'me' takes her injured hand and sucks the flowing blood. She pulls 'me' toward her, still crying; 'me' tries to pull away, but she hugs 'me' tighter and tighter, finally pressing 'me' close to her chest. What are you doing? 'Me' is furious. She wants 'me' to make love to her, she wants it! She says she only wants to make love to 'me'. 'Me' struggles to free himself from her grip, gasping as he tells her that he is not an animal! Is that so, yes you are! You are an animal! she screams savagely, a strange fire blazing within her*" (Gao X. , 2023, p. 264).

Emotions and feelings are no longer powerful drivers propelling people to interact within relationships. Lacking a correct perspective and self-reflection, individuals easily allow greed, hatred, and delusion to govern them, driving them to miss opportunities for happiness. The fierce tug-of-war between instinct and reason reveals the fracture between mental formations and their functional activities (*citta-cetasika*). Causes and conditions may contain contingent factors, but for an effect to be produced, it is also subject to human decision and choice, the character chooses what seed to sow.

At the higher-level narrative structure, the boundaries between characters are further dissolved when Gao Xingjian directly reveals the illusory nature of the entities within the work. In chapter 52, Gao Xingjian also writes:

> *In this long dialogue, 'me' is the object that 'I' narrate, it is 'I' listening to 'myself', 'me' is nothing more than my reflection. When 'I' listen to 'me' or to 'myself', 'I' have allowed 'me' to create 'she', because 'me', just like 'I', cannot bear loneliness and both need to find an interlocutor* (Gao X. , 2023, p. 321).

Both "me" and "she" are products of "my" mind. "I" can by no means say "we" for "I and me" because no connection remains. "Me" and "she" have independent lives; what they experience is a reflection of "my" inner world, things that "I" want to escape from and whose urgency "I" no longer see. "Me" is merely a story "I" created during moments of boredom on the journey. "I" possess omniscient insight into both "me" and "she". "I" have witnessed everything, every cause leading to each event between "me" and "she". Amidst these inner torments, the character stands before countless crossroads to confront the contradictions within his own mind.


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iThenticate Page 13 of 16 - Integrity Submission Submission ID trn:oid:::3618:157664525

*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
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https://ympn.co.id/index.php/JLLSCS

This is also a question posed by Gao Xingjian: once humans fully and clearly know all causes, including contingent factors, that lead to this or that event, what attitude will they choose or what will they do about them? The issue for modern humanity is no longer about having to know everything, but whether individuals can perceive themselves from within. Because causes and conditions are multi-layered, intertwined, and without beginning or end. Only by contemplating mental formations and bodily activities can one see that the ability to change causes and conditions depends largely on oneself. Humans have fractured from within their own inner minds and no longer sense which causes and conditions they are avoiding resolving; the inevitable consequence of this evasion is the fruit of suffering, the fruit of crisis, and the fruit of self-negation (the shifting narrative voice from "I" to "me" within the same chapter 55). Upon thoroughly realizing the dependent-arising structure and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of phenomena, the practitioner recognizes that all character forms are non-self, impermanent, and entirely empty. Consequently, the ego-effaced character structure completely harmonizes with Abhidharma insight, where all ego-grasping is thoroughly eradicated before the arising-and-ceasing flow of all things.

## 4. Conclusion

Thus, in clarifying the principle of dependent origination in *Soul Mountain* from the perspective of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, we perceive Gao Xingjian's concern regarding modern humans who are gradually losing the capacity to look inward to attain spiritual fulfilment. The disposition of Eastern peoples in general, and the Chinese nation in particular, favours the exploration of spiritual life and harbours a firm belief that peace stems from within. It is evident that Gao Xingjian employs Buddhist elements in a humanistic manner; rather than portraying Buddhism as exerting influence merely as an agnostic spiritual factor, he utilizes it as a profound framework for posing questions grounded in Buddhist doctrine. Furthermore, the author's literary talent is demonstrated through his depiction of the transformation and assimilation of Buddhist thought into indigenous Chinese culture. Although the chapters incorporating Buddhist elements carry a supernatural flavour, the messages they put forth remain highly practical and urgent for modern individuals. This likewise represents an expression of the engaged spirit intrinsic to Mahāyāna Buddhism. The clearest evidence for this assertion appears in Chapter 47, where the master responds to "me" concerning whether the Buddha accepts a monk wearing lay attire to practice medicine for a living, thereby avoiding any negative impact on the image of the Buddhist order.

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*Journal of Language, Literature, Social, and Cultural Studies,* Volume 4 Number 3 (Nov 2026), p. 415-426
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