Still Hidden by Spirits and Immortals:
The Quest for the Elusive “Stele of Yu the Great”

Nobel laureate in literature Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940; figure 1), in his novel *Soul Mountain* 灵山 (1990), describes the peregrination of a young man who, disillusioned by post-Cultural Revolution China, sets out in search of a place he has heard of, “Soul Mountain,” where perhaps he will find some remnants of the “soul” that has so clearly disappeared from Chinese life. Towards the end of this ultimately fruitless search, the typically modern antihero visits the “Tomb of Yu the Great” 大禹陵, at Kuaiji 會稽 near Shaoxing (figures 2, 3). Yu the Great, a figure of myth and legend but in recent centuries considered as historical by Chinese scholars, is best known for draining the flood waters that once covered the world (figure 4). He is supposed to have performed this feat in the “twenty-first century BC,” according to Gao’s fictional character; *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, first published in 1931, following tradition dates his reign as emperor from 2205–2197 BC.

After reviewing in his mind the various claims made by history about Yu the Great, including his ability to transform himself into a bear, and also entertaining various modern rationalizing explanations for the story of Yu and the flood (“... it is possible to search for elements of prenatal memory in the amniotic fluids of the womb. In overseas countries there are people carrying out this type of research.”), the young man comes upon a “stone epitaph 石碑” attributed to Yu himself, inscribed with characters which remain undecipherable: “[E]xperts still cannot decipher the tadpole-like script on the stone epitaph opposite the main hall.”

*Figure 1. Gao Xingjian at Book Signing*

Public domain website.
But our (anti)hero decides that indeed they can be read as follows — to cite only a few of his “interpretations:”

. . . history is lies. . . history is nonsense. . . history is a state of mind. . . history is absolutely nothing. . . history can be read any way and this is a major discovery!1

When I first read this, I understood at once how completely a generation of Chinese intellectuals had joined the ranks of their compatriots in Europe, the United States, and indeed throughout the world. Far from being a “major discovery,” the doctrine that there is no truth, or if there is, we cannot possibly know it, is the perennial dogma of Sophistry, represented in classical antiquity by Gorgias and Protagoras — and in China by such figures as Hui Shi 惠施 and Gongsun Long 公孫龍 — and reborn in the modern era as the fundamental premise of virtually all modern thought. As Richard Weaver was able to write in 1948, the “very notion of eternal verities is repugnant to the modern temper,” this because “the soul of modern man craves orgiastic dis-

order.” Thus the “philosophic position of modernism” is in fact “the sheerest relativism.”

But the idea of absolutized relativism and subjectivism was germinating well before the late 1940s. To take one particularly good example, one might consider *Livro do desassossego*, or *The Book of Disquiet* by Portugal’s most distinguished modern poet, Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935; figure 5). Pessoa wrote this diary-like series of fragmented thoughts from 1912 to 1935 under the name of Bernardo Soares, one of the “heteronyms,” or literary alter-personalities, into which he felt himself to be divided, although it was never published in his lifetime. Pessoa is a particularly fine exemplar of what

---

*Figure 4. Yu the Great Pictured in Two Wood-block Illustrations*

*The illustrations appeared in You Xia zhizhuan (An Account of the Xia Dynasty), a work of popularized historiography attributed to Zhong Xing (1574–1624) and Feng Menglong (1574–1646), and printed during the Chongzhen period (1628–43).*

*Top:* “King Yu commands that a sacrifice be offered to the deity of the Western Sacred Peak [Mount Hua].”

*Bottom:* “The Yellow Dragon attempts to overturn the boat [from which King Yu is taming the flood waters] but King Yu does not change expression.”


*Figure 5. Fernando Pessoa Walking through the Streets of Lisbon*

*From Maria José de Lancastre, Fernando Pessoa (Lisbon: Hazan, 1997), p. 169.*

---

I am broadly terming “modern thought,” because he is, especially in this particular work, uncharacteristically (for modern intellectuals) candid and explicit about his actually quite dogmatic relativism and even nihilism. For example,

... That is what I believe, this afternoon. Tomorrow morning it will be different, because tomorrow morning I will be different. What kind of believer will I be tomorrow? I don’t know, because to know that I would need to have been there already. Tomorrow or today not even the eternal God I believe in now will know, because today I’m me and tomorrow he may perhaps never have existed. 3

Gao Xingjian’s protagonist, over half a century later, might well have adapted this as yet another “translation” of the Stele of Yu 禹碑. The premise is precisely the same.

As it happens, when Gao’s character visits the Mausoleum of Yu the Great, he becomes the most recent in a long series of pilgrims to this spot, and others associated with the culture hero, in hopes of somehow getting closer to Yu’s spirit, or even discovering actual writings of his. None other than China’s great historian, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 BC) famously visited the site as a young man, in hopes of perhaps recovering ancient documents associated with Yu the Great. In the “Author’s Preface 自序” to his masterpiece, early China’s single greatest historiographical work — the Shi ji 史記 or “Records of the Historian” — Sima states, “At the age of twenty [nineteen by Western reckoning] I traveled south to the Yangzi and Huai River region, ascending Kuaiji and exploring the Cave of Yu.” 4 This is said to be the cave in which Yu deposited some of his writings. Thus there was an association of the Kuaiji locale with Yu the Great at least by the time of the Han dynasty, as well as a statement about certain writings left behind by the ancient Yu. But Sima goes no further than informing us that he visited the site.

4 Sima Qian, Shi ji (e-SKQS), 130 [2a]. For the first time in any of my publications, I have decided to cite Siku quanshu editions, which I have consulted in their electronic version. Comparisons with printed editions have convinced me that, at least for certain purposes, these texts are dependable. In some cases I have referred to alternate editions, especially when the findings of modern scholarship are directly relevant to points being made here. (The primary e-SKQS texts are unpaginated; in some cases the accessible original pages show pagination.) I am grateful to Stephen D. Allee for first — and very patiently — introducing me to the mysteries of the e-SKQS, and to Ronald Egan for graciously answering questions raised in my mind by his superb discussion of this resource, “Reflections on Uses of the Electronic Siku quanshu,” Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews 23 (Dec. 2001), pp. 103–13.
The earliest reference to an actual “Stele of Yu” occurs in one of the few remaining fragmentary passages of a lost book, *Xiangzhong ji* (An Account of Affairs within the Xiang River Region), by the Jin-dynasty scholar Luo Han 羅含 (ca. 301–ca. 385): “On Mount Goulou 嶲嶁山, there are jade tablets; Yu took instruction from these texts for draining the flood waters. On this mountain is the Stele of Yu.” 5 Now, Mount Goulou, far from being located at Kuaiji, is one of the peaks of the Southern Sacred Mountain, or Mount Heng 衡山, in Hunan Province. Yu is indeed supposed to have passed through this range during his labors. Although Luo Han does not specifically state that the stele was executed by Yu himself, that seems to have been the general belief. And so intoxicating was the possibility, that no less a figure than the great Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), one of the architects of the whole Neo-Confucian revival that would eventually bear full fruit in the Song dynasty, took the trouble to travel to Mount Goulou in hopes of finding this stele! His poem on the journey is a key text: 6

Mount Goulou

峴嶁山尖神禹碑 On the very top of Mount Goulou is the Stele of Yu the Divine,

字青石赤形模奇 The characters greenish, the stone reddish, the writing forms quite strange:

科鬥拳身薤倒披 Like tadpoles curling up their bodies, or scallions hanging spread out,

鸞飄鳳泊拿虎螭 Roc-birds soaring, phoenixes perching, tigers, dragons clawing.

事嚴跡秘鬼莫窺 The matter strictly secret, the traces hidden, unseen even by demons;

道人獨上偶見之 Yet a man of the Way, climbing alone, once happened to catch sight of it.

我來咨嗟涕漣洏 I have come here, full of sighs, tears now flowing down:

千搜萬索何處有 A thousand searches, ten thousand seekings: where is it to be found?

森森綠樹猿猱悲 Among the thick, thick greenery of trees, the gibbons and apes all mourn.

---

5 As cited in Chen Yaowen 陈耀文 (jinshi, 1610), *Tianzhong ji 天中記 [Account of Affairs in Heaven] (e-SKQS), 8 [29b].

6 Han Yu, *Wubai jia zhu Changli wenji [Collected Literary Works of Changli [Han Yu] as Annotated by Five Hundred Scholars] 五百條注昌黎文集 (Song edn.; e-SKQS), 3 [17a–18a].
It would appear as if Han Yu’s pilgrimage, like that of Gao Xingjian’s antihero centuries later, ended in failure! The greatest of all Neo-Confucian philosophers, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), would compile a book of “Corrections of Anomalies in the Writings of Han Yu” (Han wen kao yi 韓文考異), in which he would state, “On Mount Heng there really is no such stele. What is recorded in Han’s poem is merely the errors of legends transmitted at that time.” And yet Zhu himself, together with his friend Zhang Shi 張栻 (1133–1180) and his disciple Lin Yongzhì 林用之, in 1166 undertook a journey of his own to Mount Heng. The trio wrote a great many poems as they traveled, including “linked verse 聯句” or composite poems coauthored by the three. These they later published as a separate collection, Anthology of Poems Exchanged at the Southern Sacred Mountain (Nanyue changchou ji 南嶽倡酬集).

The friends appear not to have visited Mount Goulou in particular, although they did spy some mysterious “cliff-paintings” along the way, and all three men wrote poems about them, unfortunately lacking any details as to what those paintings depicted. It would appear as if Zhu and his associates were so certain that there was no stele to be found, that they did not even attempt to find it.

One would have thought that the failure of Han Yu to find the stele, and Zhu Xi’s summary dismissal of its very existence, would have ended the matter for good and for all. And yet shortly after Zhu Xi’s death, in 1212, a little-known man by the name of He Zhi 何致, courtesy names Xianliang 賢良 and Ziyì 子一, is said to have found the stele. The sole account of his experience is recorded in a book called Recording Matters Heard While Traveling as an Official (Youhuan jiwen 游宦紀聞), by a scholar named Zhang Shìnán 張世南 (1208–1233). Here we are informed that He Zhi, in the year 1212,

... traveled to the Southern Sacred Mountain. When he reached the foothills of the Zhurong Peak 祝融峰, he consulted the Illustrated Guide to the Southern Sacred Mountain 嶽山圖, which indicated that the Stele of Yu was on Mount Goulou. Upon inquiry, he met a woodcutter who stated that once, cutting wood on that peak, he had seen a stone cliff with several tens of characters inscribed on it. He Zhi considered that this must be the very stele, and so

7 As cited in Yuding peiwenzai shuhua pu 閔定佩文齋書畫譜 (e-SKQS), 88 [1a–b].
8 Zhu Xi et al., Nanyue changchou ji 南嶽倡酬集 (e-SKQS). The poems about the cliff paintings appear at pp. 7b–8a of this single-juan work.
9 A certain ambiguity may noted as to whether this is an inscription executed directly on the living rock, or a free-standing stele. As Robert Harrist has pointed out in his study of the various stone inscriptions at the summit of Mount Tai, the Eastern Sacred Mountain, inscrip-
he had the man act as guide and lead him there. They passed by the Screen Concealing Truth, and then crossed one or two little streams, clutching at creepers and grasping vines, until they arrived at the location of the stele. This they found to be covered entirely with moss and lichens. When these were scraped away, and He Zhi could read the stele, he found over fifty characters written in an ancient seal script, and aside from the two words, "gui-you" (癸酉) [a cyclical date], all the others were very difficult to read. They were reminiscent of Han Changli’s [Han Yu’s] description [based on hearsay], “Like tadpoles curling up their bodies, or scallions hanging spread out, / Roc-birds soaring, phoenixes perching, tigers, dragons clawing.” Their forms were indeed strange and unique. The individual characters were perhaps five or so inches tall.¹⁰

Zhang also describes how He Zhi made a rough rubbing of the inscription with the materials he had at hand, and later presented it to an official surnamed Cao 曹. “From ancient times,” Zhang writes, “few have been those who have gotten to see the Stele of Yu, thus many have suspected that He Zhi got his [rubbing] somewhere else and used it to fool Cao.” Perhaps reflecting on several centuries of this sort of doubt, the Qing-dynasty editors of the Siku quanshu expressed two minds about He’s rubbing. In one place they call it “fake 偽,” and in another place included it among those items in Zhang’s book “entirely worthy of serious study.”¹¹

---

¹⁰ Zhang Shinan 張世南, Youhuan jiwen 游宦紀聞 (e-SKQS), 8 [8a–b].
¹¹ It is called “fake” in the comments on Mei Dingzuo 梅鼎祚 (1549–1615), Huangba wenji 皇霸文記 found in Qinding siku quanshu zongmu 欽定四庫全書總目 (e-SKQS), 189[30b]; the more positive evaluation is found in the tiyao summary immediately preceding Zhang’s book.
He Zhi’s claim, however, was not unique. It turned out to be one of several, down through the centuries, to have recovered the inscription of the “Stele of Yu” by means of a rubbing. But the most important and influential of these by far would be that of Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559; figure 6); Yang produced several documents dealing with the Stele, claiming to have obtained a rubbing of the text from a friend of his showing a total of seventy-seven characters, and it was through his efforts that this version would become quite well known. Yang himself tells the story most fully in his poem on the subject, and the lengthy prose preface to the poem. These are translated here in full:

*The Song of the Stele of Yu*

The Stele of Yu is on the utmost peak of Mount Heng 衡山. Han Wengong’s [Han Yu’s] poem says 禹碑在衡山絶頂韓文公詩云云 … (I leave out the Han Yu poem, translated above, which is quoted in full here.)

If we examine carefully the diction of this poem from beginning to end, we find that His Excellency had actually visited the spot, but had failed to find the stele. When he speaks of “the writing forms” of “greenish characters” on “reddish stone,” strokes like “tadpoles,” “roc-birds” and “phoenixes,” he is merely relating what the “Man of the Way” had verbally communicated to him. Had he actually gotten to see it, in his free wielding of the brush, would his praise for it have been inferior to that he lavished upon the Stone Drums 石鼓?

With the advent of the Sung dynasty, Zhu [Xi] and Zhang [Zhang Shi], together journeyed to this Southern Sacred Peak in search of the stele, but neither was able to find it. Huiweng [Zhu Xi] composed a “Study of Anomalies in the Writings of Han Yu” in which he stated that in actual fact no such stele existed in the mountain. On the contrary, he claimed that Han’s poem was based on false traditions.

We might further examine Liuyi’s (Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, 1007–1072) *Record of Collected Antiquities* (*Jigu lu* 集古錄), or Zhao Mingcheng’s 趙明誠 (1081–1129) *Record of Inscriptions in Bronze and Stone* (*Jinshi lu* 金石錄), or Cheng Yuzhong’s (Zheng Qiao 鄭樵, 1108–1166) *Epitomes of Inscriptions in Bronze and Stone* (*Jinshi lüe* 金石略) to discover that all three authorities present ancient inscriptions in clear and precise sequence, omitting none, and yet nowhere in

---

these works do we find the so-called Stele of Yu. Thus we realize that from ancient times, those famous aficionados of antiquity who have in fact managed to see this inscription have indeed been few in number.

Now Master Zhang Biquan 張碧泉 (Yang Shen’s close friend Zhang Su 素, or Jiwen 季文) has obtained a rubbing [of the inscription] in Chu, and has presented it to me as a gift. Caressing the scroll, I have put forth this effusion:

Alas! When His Excellency Han spoke of “The matter [being] strictly secret, the traces hidden,” he was, as it turns out, not really correct! How can it be that now, more than three thousand years after [the inscription was cut], it should surface in perfect completeness without the least effacement? Why its obscurity in antiquity, and now its emergence in the present era? While obscure, wherefore was it kept hidden? And now that it is available, wherefore has it been revealed? Heaven having conferred longevity on this precious object, and the gods having satisfied my craving to see it, I need no longer regret having been born into this world too late!

And so I have written my own Song of the Stele of Yu to record the matter.

神禹碑在岣嶁尖

The Stele of Yu the Divine
is on the very top of Mount Goulou,

祝融之峯凌朱炎

Where Zhurong’s peak
penetrates the sultry heat.

龍畫傍分結搆古

Dragon-like strokes unfold thereon,
the carving very ancient,

螺書匾刻戈鋒銛

Spiraling characters incised in the tablet,
points sharp as spear-tips!

萬八千丈不可上

Eighteen thousand spans high,
impossible to climb:
仙扄靈鑰幽以潜
There immortals have sealed it, spirits have
locked it, deeply hidden away.

昌黎南遷曾一過
Changli [Han Yu], sent into southern exile, once visited this spot;

紛披芙蓉搴水簾
Brushing aside hibiscus, cutting through watery curtains,

天柱夜瞰星辰下
From this pillar of Heaven gazing out at night, he saw the constellations below.

雲堂朝見陽輝暹
From the cloudy hall at dawn he saw the rising rays scintillating.

追尋夏載赤石峻
But when he set out in search of that towering reddish stone,
dating from the Dynasty of Xia,

封埋古刻蒼苔黏
Sealed and buried was the ancient carving, glued by moss and lichens.

“Curling tadpoles,” “hanging scallions”– these forms were somewhere near—

“Roc-birds soaring,” “phoenixes perching:” how exquisite his descriptions!

墨本流傳世應罕
But rubbings handed down in the world must be exceedingly rare;

The famed forms of those “greenish characters” have been sought in vain by men.

永叔明誠及夾漈
Yongshu, Mingcheng and also Jiaji [Ouyang Xiu, Zhao Mingcheng, Zheng Qiao]

集古金石窮該兼
Wrote their Collected Antiquities or Inscriptions in Bronze and Stone
exhausting all existing sources,

昬列箴銘暨欵識
Clearly, precisely listing all bamboo texts, bronze inscriptions, as well as engraved signatures,

横陳銅鼎和釜鍪
Laying out a plethora of tripods and mini-tripods, cauldrons, pots:

胡為至寶反棄置
How could it be that such a supreme treasure they would have ignored or rejected?

捃摭磨蟻捐烏蟾
Like selecting mere ants off a millstone to the detriment of the Sun and Moon!

又聞朱張逰岳麓
I have further heard that Zhu and Zhang [Shi] journeyed to these hallowed peaks,
ELUSIVE STELE OF “YU THE GREAT”

Clear weather or snow, winds whipping through heaven, splendid in robes with girdle-gems! They searched and sought everywhere they could for the wondrous treasure hidden, Churning out verses, knocking out “echoing” rhymes, writing poems without cease!

They spent seven days among the precipices, and indeed saw splendors there, So how is it that they neglected to get a rubbing of even one rich, fragrant word? Surely it was not because the craggy cliffs prevented them from climbing up: Assuredly, it was the vines and brambles obscuring any view of the hidden stele. And now, myself, lamenting that, a lover of the past, I have been born too late: I bow in gratitude for your gift, sir, deeply moved in my heart.

My aging eyes suddenly grow sharper, as if a veil has been removed; This big mouth of mine? My gums seem sealed, as if I have been gagged! Seventy-seven characters, “tigers, dragons clawing:” And these, for over three thousand years, enclosed by snakes and serpents! Let us recall, when Yang and Yin first produced primal Breath and Earth, The people were homeless wanderers, dependant on roots and fish-traps. The Lord lamented floods encompassing all, so issued his decree: “Sir, help with these raging floods, thus lessening my burning grief! Banks and islands, sunk together, cave-dwellings, encampments submerged;
Birds and animals—their tracks are left on roof-eaves of sunken structures."

So he traveled to the southern Cloud area, and to the Dream region in the north,

Exhausting the entire west, as well as everything that leaked to the east.

“Yellow bear with three legs—” he changed father Gun’s robes;

“White fox with nine tails,” they sang of his rich robes.

Then he ascended to Lake Bao, receiving the Jade Certificate,

Before him were arranged the sacred tortoise-scales [ran; edges of scale-patterns] revealed by the Luo River’s warm waters.

From then on, he spent all his time dashing about, ignoring the calluses that grew on his feet;

Covering the whole of Heaven and Earth, but still maintaining his humility.

Mounts Hua and Tai, Mount Heng as well he reverently secured in place;

“Exhaustion stifling his breast, dizzy with motion,” panting for breath like a fish!

And his writings, gloriously brilliant, sun and moon hanging above,

Wind and thunder protecting them, surrounded and screened by the Qian mountains.

Sir, do you not see?—From the plains of Zhou: the Stone Drums, now half effaced are they.

And the “Curse on Chu” sunk in the Pond of Qin— the whole thing’s perished now.

This present stele, although it survives, could it have been easy to track down?

Blocking it were mists and vapors, and craggy peaks and cliffs!

Crickets’ chirping cut it off, all blocked by weeds and beans;
Yang Shen here deploys a whole library of allusions related to the story of Yu. They are intended to lend gravitas to his presentation of the recovery of the stele text, convincing us that it is supported by the ancient historical accounts.

It should be noted that Yu’s father, Gun, who had failed at the task of draining the flood waters, and Yu himself, were both said to have transformed into bears, sometimes said to have had three legs, a statement which has puzzled many commentators. Yu adopted the nine-tailed white-fox robe, which was praised in contemporary song, according to accounts in the classics. As for the ran 螣, these might refer to the actual parts of tortoise carapaces, bearing the mystic “Eight trigrams” or early forms of the written characters, according to various versions of the myth, in which they appeared on the magical tortoise that emerged from the Luo River; or they may refer to special tortoise-shell designs on the official robes of the day, their breadth determined by rank according to sumptuary laws. Yang seems to be describing an investiture ceremony preceding Yu’s great hydrological undertaking.
Given that the editors of the *Siku quanshu*, as well as many other scholars past and present, regarded Yang’s version as a fake, there is a certain irony in what at first appears to be Yang’s embrace of Zhu Xi’s skepticism about the Stele. But by the end of the poem it has become abundantly clear that on the contrary, Yang has been leading up to the triumph, indeed the near miracle, of finally recovering this great monument, for which he hopes to be given proper credit, as great, perhaps, as that earned by Han Yu with his famous poem about the ten “Stone Drums” (figures 7, 8). The latter

---

*Figure 7. Old Rubbing of the First of Ten “Stone Drums”*

*Public domain website.*

*Figure 8. Opening Passage from the First of Stone Drum Texts*

*As rendered by modern calligrapher and painter Wu Changshi (1844–1927). This work is characteristic of the Qing-period revival of archaic calligraphy styles, including the “oracle bones” that were only discovered towards the very end of the Qing. From Anji Wu Changshi shigu wen, a facsimile reproduction published by Suzhou Yishi zhai, without date or any other publication information.*

---

13 The claim of the SKQS editors is found in the same passage discussed above; see n. 11.
monuments were believed to be of Zhou date, and the inscriptions on which Ouyang Xiu would describe as the earliest texts carved on stone recorded by him in his magisterial catalogue of inscriptions available in the Northern Sung Dynasty, despite his carefully formulated doubts about the authenticity even of these monuments.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, Ouyang’s views are mitigated by the mysterious petroglyphs discovered in Hong Kong in 1939 and after — some as recently as 1970. These are tentatively attributed by William Meacham to “a Bronze-Age people of the first millennium B.C. — contemporary with the Chou Dynasty period in North China.”\textsuperscript{15} As Meacham argues, these almost certainly do not constitute writing in the true sense, although some of them do bear an uncanny resemblance to early forms of seal characters. (See figure 9.)

In any case, certain it is that, despite the negative response of some well-known scholars, Yang’s version would become by far the most widely disseminated, re-engraved countless times on stelae all over China, including, of course, the one at Kuaiji seen by Gao Xingjian’s protagonist in \textit{Soul Mountain}.

The text recovered by Yang Shen through the efforts of his friend Zhang Su has been reproduced both in stone carving and in woodblock printed books numerous times. A good example of this is presented by Ma Su 馬驌 (1621–1673) in his \textit{Yì shì} 繹史 (History Unraveled), which

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修, \textit{Jíguò lù 集古錄} (e-SKQS), 1 [17a-b].
\item \textsuperscript{15} William Meacham, \textit{Rock Carvings in Hong Kong: An Illustrated and Interpretive Study}\end{enumerate}
attempts to narrate history from the earliest times to the foundation of the Han dynasty (figure 10).\footnote{16}

William G. Boltz, author of the finest study we possess of *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (published in 2003 by the American Oriental Society), in a private communication has noted that these characters bear no structural relationship to what we know today as oracle bone and bronze inscriptions. The scholars of Yang Shen’s day, of course, were not yet aware of oracle bones; some of them did see some vague resemblance to early forms of “seal script,” the so-called “large seal script” as it was known to them. But given the findings of modern archaeology, we must agree with Boltz, as well as with Stephen Addiss, who in a private communication wryly describes these characters as “artificially wriggly,” calling attention to a certain self-conscious archaism that he discerns in the calligraphy.

Still another perspective is added by the late Judith M. Boltz, who called attention to a certain similarity of this writing with the so-called “Cloud Seal-Script” in which allegedly heavenly scriptures of the type known as *lingbao* or “Numinous Treasures,” are recorded in various texts in the *Daoist Canon* (Daozang 道藏). In a private communication, she mentioned in particular *Daozang CT* 80, titled *Yunzhuan duren miao jing* (Wondrous Scripture of Salvation in Cloud Script, figure 11), corresponding to the first section (juan) of the 61-section *Duren jing*, “Scripture of Salvation,” dating from the late-fourth century AD.\footnote{17} This

\footnote{16} Ma Su, *Yi shi* (e-SKQS), 11 [8b-9a].

\footnote{17} For the historical background and later use of this text, see Michel Strickmann, “The Longest Taoist Scripture,” *History of Religions* 17, 3-4 (Feb.-May 1978), pp. 331-54.
script, or variants thereof, is also used for writing the Daoist charms (daofu 道符) that play such an important role in Chinese popular religion. The “cloud writing” appears to be a fabrication of the Six Dynasties period, when the lingbao scriptures and Daoist charms emerged and developed. One might also be reminded of the proliferation of faux-archaic writing systems in the same Six Dynasties period, primarily for decorative purposes.

If a forgery, it remains uncertain whether the text in question was executed by Yang himself, by his friend, or by yet a third party; also unclear is whether the forger drew upon such sources as the Daoist Cloud Script, was simply indulging in fanciful extrapolations from existing bronze inscriptions, or indeed had access to early stone carvings or rubbings now lost to us. Ding Fubao 丁福保 (1874–1952) called attention to what he characterized as Yang Shen’s proclivity for emending or even forging texts to support his arguments, while at the same time he praised aspects of Yang’s scholarship.

Once circulated, Yang Shen’s transcription of the text was, nevertheless, quite widely accepted. I give now the transcription and a tentative translation. The transcription takes into account various emendations suggested by contemporaries of Yang and also later scholars,

---

19 Ibid., pp. 203–4.
and introduces modern punctuation. The text is assumed to be spoken in the first person by Yu himself:

I received the Emperor’s instruction: “Ah, may you provide your aid and assistance to my ministers, climbing the banks and islands, and the gateways of birds and beasts [trying to avoid the flood]. Place yourself in the very midst of the vast floods, and put forth with enlightenment your inspiration.”

For long I travailed, neglecting my very family, resting in the hall at Peak’s-Foot Mountain, my wits at work, my body crushed, and my mind not failing to extend its reach to any point. Wherever I went, I sought pacification and stability—Sacred Mounts Hua, Tai, and [southern] Heng; in cases of clans being dispersed, I devoted myself to gathering them together. And in the leisure time left over from these labors, I offered sacrifice.

Exhaustion stifling my breast, dizzy with motion, to the southern River I tendered profuse offerings, such that forever there would be ample provision of foodstuffs well regulated, and the ten thousand lands would enjoy peace, driving off the Wu so they would forever flee.

We will leave to experts in early Chinese texts the task of determining how plausible this is as a supposedly archaic piece of writing by one of China’s sage emperors.

Further deepening the mystery, Yang Shen’s contemporary, the major Neo-Confucian thinker Zhan Ruoshui (1466–1560), reported the actual excavation of the stele, followed by his own examination of a newly-taken rubbing. Yang Shen makes no mention of excavation, and indeed implies throughout, without stating the point in so many words, that his friend had obtained an old rubbing, while the whereabouts of the stele itself remained unknown! In his “Preface on the Incised Stele of Yu the Divine” 副神禹碑序, Zhan is refreshingly precise:

21 I have used the version cited in full in Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, ed., Dai kanwa jiten 大漢和字典, vol. 8, p. 8652, yu bei s.v. This takes into account the most plausible later emendations and provides punctuation which I follow here.

22 Reading nandu yanxiang with Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–90), who dreamed that this correction to Yang Shen’s suggested text was presented to him by an immortal with the head of a fish! See his Yenzhou xugao 畿州續稿 (Continued Draft of Writings from Yanzhou) (e-SKQS), 166 [2a–b].

23 As cited in Huguang tongzhi 胡廣通志 (Comprehensive Gazetteer of Huguang) (e-SKQS), 102 [32a–33b].
The year after I arrived [in the capital] to become the Southern Imperial Secretary for the Ministry of Rites (in 1534), it was said that at Mount Heng the Stele of Yu the Divine had been excavated from the ground. I wished to go view it immediately, but was unable to accomplish the journey. In the autumn of the year after that — the year *yiwei* of the *Jiajing* reign-period (1535) — a scholar from the Chu (i.e., Hunan) region came and presented me with a rubbing of this Stele of Yu the Divine. In great joy I examined it with considerable care. The strokes of the characters were indeed unique and archaic, quite different from the strokes characteristic of the later [small] seal and *zhou* [i.e., large seal] scripts, but the actual stone of the stele was in eroded condition, such that even experts in ancient texts were barely able to decipher one or two characters. Thus one could not know what was said therein. But at the very end of the stele there were four characters written in small-regular 小楷 script: “Incised by the ancient Emperor Yu” (*gu di yu ke*)? The idea must be that long after [the stele was cut], some scholar of the Han or Tang dynasty saw this stele, was able to determine its identity through some kind of research, and on the basis of this inscribed these four characters.

Zhan goes on to relate that on the basis of old texts, Yu the Great most certainly did pass through the Mount Heng area and carve characters in the region, so that “this stele cannot be doubted.” He states that he does not find it strange that Han Yu and Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡 (?–842) — who also mentioned hearing about this stele in a poem24 — should not have actually been able to see it, for “divine objects in the cosmos are appropriately treasured by Heaven and hidden by Earth for many long years, after which they will inevitably reappear.” And Zhan boasts, like Yang Shen, that he has been “fortunate enough after several thousands of years to see it once again,” a blessing that was not vouchsafed even to Han and Liu.

It is hard to believe that Zhan Ruoshui and Yang Shen saw the same rubbing, or rubbings of the same version of the stele. Were there competing versions circulating in the Ming dynasty? What we can say is this: by 1637, when China’s greatest traveler and observer of topography, the redoubtable Xu Xiake 徐霞客 (1586–1641), undertook his own extremely thorough exploration of Mount Heng, he saw at least two versions of the “Stele of Yu.” One was in the Pavilion for Gaz-

---

Xu makes no attempt to adjudicate the authenticity of the monuments.

Given the ambiguity of these testimonies, one can only agree with the great scholar and littérature Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709) when, in a colophon “Written after the Inscription from Mount Goulou” 書岣嶁山銘後, after relating the bizarre history of attempts to recover the elusive Stele of Yu, he states that “skepticism and belief have run half and half”, while himself leaning towards skepticism.26

So where are we left? Clearly, the chances are against any of the existing versions of the stele being authentic. And given the robust skepticism of so many traditional Chinese scholars as far back as Northern Song times, when Ouyang Xiu expressed guarded doubts even about the Stone Drums texts which are today universally accepted as authentic, one might reach the same conclusion as Gao Xingjian’s protagonist – history is whatever one says it is. But surely, such a conclusion leaps way beyond anything in the writings of the scholars we have examined, who reasonably limit their conclusions to the specific problem before them, as scholars are meant to do.

Perhaps we might protest that, after all, the character in Soul Mountain is more a poet than he is a scholar. Well, let us then compare the

---

25 Xu Xiake, *Xu Xiake youji* 徐霞客遊記 (Travel Essays of Xu Xiake) (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe edn. of 1980 in 3 vols.), I, p. 195. See also the map in III, pp. 33–34, for an excellent schematic representation of the spatial relationships among the various peaks of Mount Heng.

26 Zhu Yizun, *Pushuting ji 曝書亭集* (Collected Writings from the Pavilion for Sunning Books) (e-SKQS), 47 [1a–2a].
response of poet Yang Wanli 杨万里 (1127–1206), who, like Sima Qian in the Former Han dynasty, once visited Yu’s Mausoleum at Kuaiji, and wrote a poem about what purported to be Yu’s Cave (figure 12), the depository for some of Yu’s ancient writing tablets.\footnote{Yang Wanli, Chengzhai ji 詩話集 (Collected Writings from the Studio of Sincerity) (e-SKQS), 6 [gb]. For an earlier version of my translation, in which I abbreviated the title, see Jonathan Chaves, Heaven My Blanket, Earth My Pillow (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 2004), p. 98.}

*Visiting the Mausoleum at Yongyou, and Then, on My Way Back, Stopping Off at Dragon-Omen Shrine to View Yu’s Cave* 謁永祐陵歸途遊龍瑞宮觀禹穴

我昔騎鳳超九疑  
Once I rode a phoenix over the Nine Doubtful Mountains;

今復御風登會稽  
Now I ride the wind up Mount Kuaiji;

禹穴下窺正深黒  
Yu’s Cave is dark and deep – I peer down,

地老天荒知是非  
But Yu lived so long ago – it’s hard to tell if he was really here.

好峰髙處偏薄霧  
Thin mists obscure the highest peaks.

秋熱苦時恰輕雨  
A fine drizzle lightens the autumn heat.

回頭卻望昭陵松  
When I look back towards the pine trees on the slope

雲氣成龍或成虎  
The clouds are turning into dragons and tigers.

Yang begins in skepticism, even recalling a former pilgrimage to the “Nine Doubtful Mountains 九疑山,” so denominated because the nine peaks of the range are difficult to tell apart, but associated with Yu’s predecessor Sage Emperor Shun. But as Yang departs, still uncertain as to whether Yu really had anything to do with this place, he glances back, and Heaven and Earth send him an omen – dragons and tigers forming from

*Figure 12. Mouth of the “Cave of Yu”*  
Shown as it appears today.  
Public domain website.
clouds. The possibility of true numinosity remains open, even for the skeptic Yang.

And perhaps as well we should be schooled by the wonderful insight of G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), incredibly as early as 1903, when he realized that there had come into existence a new trend in historiography, towards debunking what has been transmitted from the past, including such seemingly supernatural events as those associated with the figure of Alfred the Great. In *Varied Types*, he writes:

> Fable is, generally speaking, far more accurate than fact, for fable describes a man as he was to his own age, fact describes him as he is to a handful of inconsiderable antiquarians many centuries after. ... Men may have told lies when they said that he [Alfred the Great] first entrapped the Danes with his song and then overcame them with his armies, but we know very well that it is not of us that such lies are told. ... A story grows easily, but a heroic story is not a very easy thing to evoke. Wherever that exits we may be pretty certain that we are in the presence of a dark but powerful historic personality. *We are in the presence of a thousand lies all pointing with their fantastic fingers to one undiscovered truth.*"\(^{28}\)